

Implicit Memories: The Roots of Today's Behavioral Challenges

By Arleta James, PCC

"On our trip to Florida, we went whale watching."

"In first grade, I'll never forget Jean Marie winning the spelling bee."

These are declarative or explicit memories—events we can recall. We have a conscious ability to retrieve the memory and state the facts and events.



Nondeclarative or implicit memory operates very differently. Implicit memory systems store emotions, sensory experiences (sounds, smells, etc.) and expectations and assumptions about relationships based on prior experiences. Implicit memories form early in life prior to the individual having language. They cannot be recalled but they can be triggered (Briere & Scott, 2006). For example,

Tara and Danny parent their birth daughter, Mary Ellen, and their son, Chris, whom they adopted (at age 17 months), and who are ages 13 and 9 respectively. Chris is obsessed with food. He hoards food in his room. A trail of wrappers from candy, granola bars and cupcakes can be found in his locker, in his desk, under his mattress, in his backpack and in his closet. He constantly asks, "When will dinner be ready?" "Can I have a snack?" If told, "No, it isn't time for a snack" or "You just had a snack," he whines, shouts and cries.

While vacuuming, Tara found numerous wrappers and several empty yogurt containers behind the couch. She placed this trash on the kitchen counter. She stewed the entire afternoon. She was angry that Chris kept stealing food. "Why does he do this? We provide plenty of food. He gets plenty of snacks," she wondered. She was also mad that he wouldn't put the packaging in the trash can.

As soon as Chris entered the house from school, Tara confronted him. "Did you put this garbage behind the couch? Did you steal this food?"

Chris said, "No, Mom. Really, I don't know how those got behind the couch."

Tara responded, "You're lying."

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Chris again said, "No, Mom really, I don't know where they came from."

The argument carried on for about twenty more minutes. Chris was sent to his room "until your father comes home."

Danny arrived home about an hour later to find Tara still upset. He went to Chris' room and informed him that there would be "no snacks for a month." Hearing this statement, Chris swirled totally out of control. He had a complete meltdown. In the midst of this storm, Mary Ellen decided to go to a friend's house for dinner.

Chris dysregulates when he is told, "No, you can't have a snack." A current situation triggers his implicit memory of having little to eat in the orphanage. Lying in his crib, hungry, his brain absorbed the emotions associated with this experience, and his brain learned to expect that care givers are people who do not meet your needs.

Sleep difficulties and problematic car behaviors are other areas of struggles that often have their origins in the implicit memory. Nighttime can be scary in an orphanage or a dysfunctional birth family. This is a time when abuse is likely to occur. Or, a youngster awakens to find she is alone, which is frightening to a little child. The car can be a reminder of leaving the orphanage. The car can be a trigger for moving from foster home to foster home. The car may be reminiscent of the reunification visits conducted after the child is in foster care. Brandy's story provides additional insight into the workings of implicit memories,

Brandy is age 5. She was removed from her birth home at 14 months due to severe neglect that actually required a three week hospital stay before she could go to a foster home. Subsequently, she was transported to visit her birthmother every Wednesday. As time went on, Brandy physically fought the foster mom and social worker on Wednesday mornings. She would scream, hit, kick, head butt and bite. The two women had to physically restrain her to get her into her car seat. Even after she was buckled in, she continued screaming all the way to the visitation center. These visits upset her greatly. Because she could not talk, she used her behavior to demonstrate her anxiety about what was now occurring in her life.

Nine months passed, and Brandy was returned to her birthmother's care. The foster mother was assigned the task of driving Brandy to the birthmom's home and handing Brandy and her belongings back to the birthmom. Within a few days, the birthmother called the foster mother to come take her for the day. The "day" soon became a pattern—the foster mom had Brandy many days and some weekends. The foster mother provided this child care as she was afraid the birthmother would leave Brandy alone if she didn't take her. In Brandy's implicit memory this translated into, "My good mom keeps giving me back to the mom who doesn't take care of me. Neither of these moms seems to want me. I must be a bad baby. Sometimes I get good food and my diaper gets changed, and sometimes I am dirty and hungry—Moms can't be trusted."

Ultimately, Brandy was again removed from her birthmother and parental rights were terminated. The foster family adopted Brandy. To this day, the car presents various problems. Brandy won't stay buckled in. She screams and cries in her car seat. She throws objects if she can. She kicks the back of the driver or passenger seats. Brandy's implicit memory system remembers and reacts to her early experiences. Obviously, the entire adoptive family is disrupted by these behaviors.

In conclusion, some behaviors have their origin deep within the brain. So, behavioral change requires more than doling out consequences or earning rewards. We need to pull these pre-verbal memories out of the brain. Then, the behavior associated with the past trauma will wilt away. Part two of this blog, coming on Thursday, will provide the suggestions to accomplish this.

Implicit Memories: The Roots of Today's Behavioral Challenges – Part Two

Welcome to Part Two of our discussion about implicit memories. In [Part One](#) we learned that an implicit memory forms early in life prior to the individual having language. Implicit memory systems store emotions, sensory experiences (sounds, smells, etc.) and expectations and assumptions about relationships based on prior experiences. They cannot be recalled but they can be

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triggered (Briere & Scott, 2006). We exemplified implicit memory and its negative behavioral manifestations via the examples of Chris and Brandy.



Today we offer thoughts about reaching these deeply rooted memories. Dealing directly with the underlying problem will allow essential new growth. The traumatized child can then more fully branch out and connect to the family in a healthy manner.

Parental Self-Preparation: The Child's Past. Resolving implicit memories means dealing with your child's past. This will require reviewing the painful start of your child's life. It must be determined what types of early experiences—abuse, abandonment, lying in an orphanage, being left alone by a neglectful birth parent, and so on—are currently triggered by day-to-day situations. Thus, we must use empathy to uncover implicit memories. We must put ourselves in the child's place and think about how she interpreted her early experiences. Certainly, Moms and Dads may find themselves grieving for their adoptee with a history of trauma, and for themselves because that time together was lost. Parents are encouraged to take the time necessary to prepare themselves.

Parental Self-Preparation: A Parallel Healing Process. Parents need to examine the root of their reactions to negative behaviors. Ask, "Why is this behavior 'pushing my buttons?'" Often, the behavior is triggering a past issue. For example, in the case of Tara, Danny and Chris, Tara's father had an affair that ultimately ended her parents' marriage. Her father's lie destroyed Tara's family. When Chris lies, it triggers Tara's anger about her father's unsavory actions. Chris receives this stored anger as well as the anger for the chronic lying he commits in relation to his food issues. Once Tara was helped to see this, she realized that she needed to work at moving beyond her father's affair. In the meantime, she was able to manage her reaction to Chris better because she understood why his behavior so enraged her. Parents and their adopted children often experience a "parallel healing process" similar to Tara and Chris.

Consider the Impact on the Typical Children. Adoption often means that the resident children will be exposed to a sibling with very diverse life experiences. Certainly parents want to protect children from social ills—childhood should be a carefree time! Yet, the arrival of a child with a history of trauma will raise many questions and frequently, providing an understanding of the adoptee's past helps the typical kids accept their sibling more fully. Parents are encouraged to consider the topics that may need to be addressed in discussions with the children already in the family at the time the adopted brother or sister arrived.

Restructure Implicit Memories. The brain is truly amazing! It can take words—today—, connect this language to implicit memories and resolve the pent up emotions! Continuing with Chris, he would benefit from understanding that he whines and cries when denied food now because his brain remembers the time when he was hungry. Below is what I stated in therapy. Certainly, if you are the parent delivering this message, you will want to change Mom and Dad to "Dad and I", "We", etc.,

"You might have been hungry in the orphanage because there wasn't enough food. You might have been hungry because you dropped your bottle. You were too little to pick it up, so you went hungry. This was very scary when you were a baby. Now, when Mom and Dad tell you "no" your brain remembers this and you think you will go hungry now. Mom and Dad never run out of food.

Mom and Dad tell you 'no' because they want you to eat healthy. Too many snacks make it so that you won't have room for the good dinners your mom cooks."

Eventually, with repetition, Chris' brain will integrate the new message and his preoccupation with food will decrease. Thus, new growth will flourish. The family climate will move from stormy to calm and serene!

The "story" would be incorporated into Chris' lifebook—a truthful, chronological accounting of the events that led to the need for the child to be adopted. The "story" is also referred to as a "narrative." Children who experienced neglect, abuse or abandonment need to "see" and "hear" information.

Many behaviors have their roots deep within the brain. Processing the implicit memories is called for so that the adoptee learns to differentiate past from present care givers. Through this process his thinking normalizes, and he is taught how to express emotions. Children who enter the family via adoption benefit from being told the truth, and in fact, the whole family gains. As the adoptee makes sense of his past, he is able to cultivate deeper attachments to parents, brothers and sisters.