

Consequences vs. Reactions: Parent "Deerly"

By Arleta James, PCC

Deer flee in an instant when frightened! One second they are calmly grazing in your front yard (if you live in deer country!) and the next, they are darting in every direction—seeking safety. This happens when there is no real threat—a branch falling, or when there is a danger—a hunter. This latter, has caused deer to be on perpetual "red alert." Deer are always wary of their environment.



Traumatized adoptees are similar to deer. They quickly enter states of "freeze", "flight" or "fight"—even when there is no visible threat or demand. This phenomenon stems from their early history of abuse, neglect, institutionalization and so on,

- The adoptee with a history of trauma arrives in the family with an overactive stress response system. The traumatic environment is stressful! The child must worry about whether or not he will eat, be fondled, be beaten and so on! The brain is consumed with survival. In this pre-adoptive environment of chaos, the brain over-develops in the areas of fear and anxiety. The brain is user-dependent—the repetition of experiences strengthens the brain's pathways. Thus, early experiences have disproportionate impact on how the brain will function for the individual's lifetime! These adoptees, upon joining their family, will enter states of "flight" or "fight" easily and often when confronted in a manner that the brain *perceives* is threatening. This phenomenon doesn't just always go away with enough love or time.
- While chronic abuse can result in the overactivation of the stress response system, neglect can result in other problems. Neglect means that the child's physical and psychological needs go unmet. In order for the brain and thus, the child, to develop, he needs stimulation and acknowledgement. If these elements are not provided, the basic neural pathways that were ready to grow through experiences with care givers, wither and die. Please refer to our previous post, *Neglect: There is No Such Thing as "a Little"* for a more detailed description of the impact of neglect on children's developing minds and souls. Overall, the child who isn't shown love, may not know how to have reciprocal, affectionate interactions. Again, the brain repeats what it learns. If all it learned is to be alone in a crib, then this is the pattern the formerly neglected son or daughter may re-play.

Certainly, the furthest thing from most adoptive parents' minds, when accepting a child into their home, is thinking about how their new son or daughter's brain is going to respond to their caring interactions and their discipline. Yet, today's adoptive families need to understand some "brain basics." In essence, adoptive mothers and fathers want to learn to "parent deerly." Angry reactions and lengthy time-outs, remind the brain of its abusive and neglectful past.

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

So, the adopted child responds differently to these “normal” parenting techniques than does a typically-developing child. For example, the formerly institutionalized child is happy in his room. He seeks to disengage from the family. When stressed, his brain wants to go into “flight.” Or, in an instant the child enters “flight.” Mom asks a simple, “Where is your backpack?” “Did you eat the last yogurt?” “Why did you take your sister’s necklace?” and the child shuts down or begins to yell! In return, Mom escalates, “I’m talking to you!” “Don’t argue with me!” Many parent readers can relate to this scenario!

In order to “parent deerly”, moms and dads need to leave the anger and the consequencing mentality behind. Parenting the traumatized child is about parent’s reactions. ***This is certainly more easily said than done! Yet, calm exchanges are essential to healing the child who experienced complex trauma prior to arrival in the adoptive family.*** That is, conflict sends the child deeper into flight or fight—more negative behaviors occur in these states! Calm, cool exchanges between the parent and child lend to less behavioral difficulties. ***Under these circumstances, the brain can begin to re-organize itself—the child heals! The family has a peaceful, emotional climate!***

Each parent needs to identify ways to reduce the intensity of their reactions toward their adoptive son or daughter. Tips for accomplishing this seemingly enormous task include,

- The adopted son or daughter often presents with a lengthy list of behaviors. You can’t work on changing more than three at one time. Letting go of various “battles” automatically makes you a calmer parent. Review, *Seeing the Forest Through the Trees: What to Pick?*
- Put reminder notes in conspicuous places, “I am helping my child learn to be more calm.” “I am learning to be a more peaceful parent.” “I live with a deer.”
- Contrived consequences aren’t all that helpful in changing the traumatized child’s behavior. He doesn’t have cause-and-effect thinking. This skill didn’t develop due to his abuse and neglect. Natural and logical consequences are the best route to forming the necessary logical pathways in your son or daughters’s brain. Natural and logical consequences are “quiet”—they occur with very little effort on the part of the parent. Again, this allows for more peaceful interactions between you and your deer-like child. See, “*Quiet Parenting Zone Ahead*” and *Getting Started with Quiet Parenting*.
- “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” Nice, nurturing interactions will get more (i.e., better behavior) than frustration, exasperation and fury! See, *Nurture: The Ring that Holds All the Keys—Part One and Part Two*. Lack of nurture created the problems in the first place. Providing nurture solves many day-to-day behavioral dilemmas. Are you up for the nurture challenge?
- Parental grief has a profound impact on parent-child interactions. Grief is profound for adoptive moms and dads. The child you expected is not always the child who arrives. Long-term, it is just so difficult to live with a child who isn’t functioning in normal ways. He and you miss out on all kinds of fun! Provide yourself opportunities to express this grief. Take care of yourself! Soccer practice can wait! A few dust bunnies under the bed aren’t going to hurt anything either! Review, “*Am I the ‘Right’ Mom for This Child?—Part One and Part Two*” and *Strengthening the Role of Adoptive Dads—Part One and Part Two*.
- Keep in mind, parenting a combination of troubled and typical children translates into “that’s not fair.” Reduce the hard feelings on the part of your birth and/or previously adopted children by “starting a habit” and having regular family meetings. Typical kids, kept in the loop, tolerate parenting methods that seem biased toward their adopted brother or sister.
- Lastly, anger simply isn’t good for you or your children! Chronic anger contributes to heart disease, heart attack, prolonged stress, diabetes, more frequent colds, and a host of other health problems. Again, take care of yourself! Just like you hear on an airplane, “Put the oxygen mask on yourself first!”

In conclusion, I’ll be putting forth other articles on “brain basics” throughout this year. So, stay tuned. Knowledge is healing power! In the meantime, keep in mind that I think “deerly” of you. If I can answer questions, respond

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with support, respond to a topic you think important, let me know – arletajames@gmail.com or www.arletajames.com