

Progress and Dieting: The Two Have Much in Common

By Arleta James, PCC

Mary, age 9, had been participating in therapy for eight months. She was adopted when she was 18-months-old. As a toddler she was prone to screaming for hours at bedtime. She just couldn't settle into sleep until the wee hours of the morning. As she grew, the screaming fits occurred when told "no." She habitually took food from the cupboards and refrigerator. The wrappers and empty containers were stuffed under her mattress. She was frequently verbally mean—Mom was referred to as "stupid" when things didn't go Mary's way. Homework was a struggle each evening. Lying was common.

Once Mary entered therapy, her behaviors improved. Gradually, over the eight months, there was less "stupid" and more hugs and cuddles. The temper tantrums were much shorter, and they were occurring less often. The entire family was able to relax a bit and enjoy some calm family time.

Then, without notice, all of the behaviors returned. Mary's parents were frustrated. What happened? "Why wasn't therapy working?"

"What happened" is that Mary regressed. Progress is really a process of taking two steps forward, then several steps backwards. There are also periods of plateaus—times in which there appears to be no change occurring.



Making progress with children with a history of complex trauma is akin to dieting. You first assess how much weight you want to lose. You take stock of your cupboards and refrigerator. You then alter the contents of each with a greater quantity of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and so on. You search the Internet and your cookbooks for healthier recipes. Usually, for several weeks, you consume fewer calories. You step on the scale and are proud as the needle settles at a lower weight. Then, the pace of life or an unexpected situation occurs. There isn't time to cook. A favorite fast food will have to do. This starts a downward spiral—

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the diet goes by the wayside until there is time to “get back on the wagon.” Several attempts at dieting must occur until your eating habits change permanently, and you maintain your desired weight.

Children will “get on the diet” and “fall off the wagon” several times before permanent and lasting behavioral change occurs. It is no easier for children to change their behavior than it is for an adult. Actually, children have less coping skills than do adults, so making positive changes may be even harder.

As you work to heal your son or daughter with a history of abuse, neglect, institutionalization, abandonment, etc., keep in mind the following food for thought about regression, plateaus and progress,

Don't Regress with the Child: Typically, the change that occurs during therapy is a combination of the therapeutic interventions and providing the parents new parenting tools. For example, perhaps you have been trying some of the suggestions in my articles, *Throw Away the Stickers: A Perspective on Reward Systems*, *Shhh: “Quiet” Parenting Zone Ahead* or *Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?* Progress occurred and then seemingly vanished. So, you stopped using the new parenting strategies. In essence, you regressed along with the child. Instead, work through your frustration. Take stock of what tools were actually working. Begin applying them again. It is important during regression to keep doing what was working. This will help the child move through the regression more quickly.

Regression Means “Younger:” When children regress, this means that they have returned to an earlier developmental stage. They are now “younger” than their actual chronological age. The previously traumatized child can lose years of development during a period of regression! This is because the trauma has so fragmented their development before they arrived in your home.

This may mean altering your expectations temporarily. Rather than saying, “He is just manipulating!” or “He can do it when he wants to!” acknowledge that your 12-year-old is now really like a 4-year-old. Help him clean his room or take out the trash. Acknowledge that this is why he is wetting the bed again. Gather your son or daughter and the sheets, and head for the washer calmly. Be flexible about homework. Learning algebra is difficult for a 4-year-old! He will catch up when the regression passes.

Regression is Mother Nature's way of Creating New Development: In reality, “normal” children regress as they gain new skills. For example, as toddlers learn to walk, they lose the capacity to talk. Yet, it seems we don't notice in our excitement of our son or daughter taking their first step! Once walking happens, the talking returns and usually the vocabulary is even greater!

Your traumatized adoptee will heal in this same manner. There will be days when his or her development appears solid and he or she is able to “act your age.” There will be days when this is simply not true. Thus, regression means that Mother Nature is actually creating new development within your child. When she is finished, the child will not only enter a good period, this good period should reflect gains in cognitive, social, emotional and/or physical skills. ***The end result of regression is the progress you so seek—progress requires regression!***

Gains Should Result from Regression: Piggybacking off the above point, once the child moves into a better period, you should notice gains. Likewise, each period of regression should be less intense or shorter. That is, the “good” periods should be getting longer and include more ability on the adoptee's part to

function at a higher level. The regressions should be shorter and the adoptee should not regress as far. This is reflective of actual, genuine progress. If this is not occurring, you are simply stuck in a loop. Frequently, I receive phone calls during the regressed period. A Mom or Dad calls feeling the need for services. Yet, the family chooses not to schedule. Rather, they decide to “wait” it out. The regression passes and the parents believe “everything is okay.” Then, the child declines and another phone call is placed. I have talked to families on and off for two years or more before they actually decide to come in for an assessment!

My point is—don’t wait! An assessment isn’t really much of your time. However, to lose two years or more of services—when needed—is a huge amount of time when we are talking about making developmental gains. Creating growth in social, emotional and cognitive skills can take time. Early intervention is the key to the long well-being of your family—you, your typical children and your adoptee. Visit the Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children today to locate an adoption and trauma competent therapist.

In conclusion, it is also helpful to understand “normal” child development. Knowing the skills and behaviors children should possess at various ages make it easier to recognize regression and growth.

Good luck with your child’s healing (and your diet)! Hopefully, the above food for thought—calorie free—will help you gain the knowledge needed to shed your child’s past trauma residue. He or she will emerge shapely in all areas of development!