

Traumaversaries: Lessening the Impact of Adopted Children's Annual Triggers

By Arleta James, PCC

Anniversaries, “returning yearly”, are associated with happy occasions for many of us—birthdays, wedding days, holidays and so on! Yet, returning yearly can also lend to a downward spiral—behaviorally and emotionally—for children (or adults) who have experienced losses associated with moving, abuse, abandonment, etc. These *traumaversaries* can affect children adopted at all ages—infant to adolescents.



Dana was adopted internationally at 9 months of age. She arrived on American soil in the month of November. She is now age 10. Each year, in October, her behavior spirals downward. This year she has been argumentative and verbally mean to her Mom and siblings. She is sneaking candy from every source possible. Mom is already making plans to protect the typical kids' Halloween candy! She has stopped doing homework. She bursts into tears when asked to complete a chore! She has also regressed developmentally. There is baby-talk and a drive to play with her two-year-old cousin's toys.

Dana is experiencing a traumaversary. October triggers her implicit memory of moving to America. The implicit memory system stores emotions, sensory experiences (sounds, smells, etc.) and expectations and assumptions about relationships based on prior experiences. Implicit memories form early in life—prenatally, infancy, young toddlerhood—prior to the individual having language. ***They cannot be recalled but they can be triggered*** (Briere & Scott, 2006). Once triggered, the emotional response can be as strong as when the original event was occurring.

We have all had the experience of triggers. The most common is hearing a song on the radio, and finding ourselves thinking about a first love. Smells are also common triggers. We may enter a bakery and immediately the scent of freshly baked bread causes us to think of our grandmother. In such instances, we become emotional—happy, sad, angry, melancholy, depressed, frustrated, annoyed, etc.—a full range of emotions can result from a single trigger!

Adoptive parents and professionals are strongly encouraged to understand the role of triggered implicit memories in daily family life. Our previous posts, *Implicit Memories: The Roots of Today's Behavioral Challenges—Part*

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)

One and Part Two, and Why Love Isn't Enough—Part Five: The Impact of Trauma on Brain Development offer in-depth information about this topic and examples of the implicit memory system in action.

Declarative or explicit memories—events we have a conscious ability to retrieve and state—become traumaversaries as well,

Donna was placed in foster care at age seven. In therapy, seven years later, she stated, "Everything was about the drugs. The free food was sold to buy drugs. Any presents my birth aunt gave me for Christmas, were sold for drugs. The men she sold herself to were because of the drugs. When we had no heat, it was because of the drugs. The beatings were because she was high and so were her boyfriends. Everything that happened was because of the drugs. The social workers said they took me because of the hitting. Really, it was because of the drugs."

Each Christmas Donna deteriorates. Her actual memory of Christmas presents exchanged for drugs acts as a trigger for her life with her birthmother. Each holiday season as ornaments, lovely lit trees, nativity scenes and advertisements for Christmas shopping sales appear, Donna begins reviewing her neglect, physical abuse, the substance abuse and the many foster care placements she had prior to her placement with her adoptive family. The emotions for all her losses well up. Behaviorally she explodes!

Tramaversaries can wreak havoc in adoptive families. While they can occur at any time of the year, many coincide with the holiday season as we can see from the examples of both, Dana and Donna. Moms, Dads, brothers and sisters want to enjoy Thanksgiving, Christmas and welcoming the New Year. This can be challenging when the adoptee is regressed and acting out!

Following are ways to offset the impact of annual trauma-related anniversaries,

Identify Traumaversaries to the Best of Your Ability

In a datebook, record your adopted son's or daughter's date of abandonment (if different than his or her birthday), move to your home, move from one orphanage to another, termination of parental rights, separation from siblings, adoption finalization, "Gotcha Day", etc.—record as many important dates as you know. Also, record all family members' birthdays. Keep in mind, the adoptee's anniversaries and/or a month full of family occasions can contribute to the adoptee experiencing a traumaversary. For example, one family I know has four kids' birthdays in September. This amount of focus on family time and special celebrations triggers their adopted daughter's memories of the birth siblings from whom she is separated. Overwhelmed with grief, her negative behaviors escalate. Review your date book frequently. "Seeing" these potential triggers is easier than trying to remember them for the busy adoptive parent.

Recognize the Connection Between Traumaversaries and Negative Behavior

Children who have a history of trauma communicate primarily through behavior:

- They have little ability to verbalize their feelings. Trauma interrupts the process of developing this capacity. Once off-track, this is a skill that requires much work—often over a long period of time—to repair.
- Again, we must realize that much trauma occurs when children are young. They have very little or no language development. So, they don't have the words to express what has happened to them. The feelings for this trauma remain pent up until the words are made available.
- Children are often offered little opportunity to process their traumatic experiences. As adults, we prefer to wait for the child to tell us what happened to him. Or, we are waiting until she is "old" enough to

process the trauma. Or, we expect that children will simply “get over it.” Somehow, on their own, they will process being physically abused or neglected, or why their birth parents’ chose substance abuse as a way of life, or why they were housed in an orphanage. We seriously need to re-think all of these adult misperceptions!

Thus,

1. The trauma is triggered.
2. The child is flooded with grief.
3. The child acts out behaviorally.
4. The behavior is the expression of the grief.
5. Their hope is that we will recognize their messages, via their behavior, and provide the example—role-model—to talk about feelings and profoundly overwhelming experiences.

Regression May Accompany a Trigger

Triggers are causing the child to remember painful, frightening events—consciously or unconsciously. This is stressful. Children—stressed—often return to earlier developmental periods. They especially return to the developmental age at which the trauma occurred. Thus, in the example of Dana, who moved when 9-months-old, her baby-talking was indicative of the age at which she flew from her orphanage to her American home. Rather than discourage the behaviors of the regressed child, parents are encouraged to step back and recognize the source. There is no harm, to the child, in allowing this “young” behavior. In fact, regression can be a wonderful source of healing. If we nurture this “young” child in the same manner that we would a child at this “actual young chronological age”, we fill in the void left by the trauma. We solidify the adoptee’s development. Once your child’s development is on more solid footing, the annual trigger’s impact is lessened.

Review Progress and Dieting: The Two Have Much in Common for more information about the healing effects of regression.

Trigger Management—Talk About “It”

The Ripple Effect

About two weeks before the identified potential or known traumaversary, Mom or Dad, can use “trigger management” to offset the impact of the event with the ***ripple effect***—an idea is put forth as to what the problem may be and eventually the child realizes the idea is a safe topic. Thus, conversation occurs. For example, in Donna’s case, her parents could state,

“Christmas is almost here. I think about your birthmom around the holidays. If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be your dad. I know she hurt you and I am sad about that. I am also happy to have you for a daughter. I notice that your behavior gets worse around Christmas. I wonder if this is because you are thinking about her too. I’m sure that when you think about her it causes you to have a lot of feelings. We can talk about them.”

The parent has established that the birthmom is a safe topic. He has acknowledged that there is hurt. He has identified a potential feeling, and he has expressed feelings of his own. He *modeled* talking about feelings. Kids do learn from their parents!

In Dana's case, we would proceed in the same manner. We can restructure and alleviate implicit memories via verbalizing the memory,

Dana, every October you seem to have some problems. November is the month you came to live with us. As a baby, I think you must have been so sad and scared. You hardly knew Dad or me. Riding on an airplane for the first time was probably frightening. When we landed, everything was different for you. There weren't any familiar sounds, smells or people you knew. Let's get your lifebook out and review the trip.

Providing the words to an implicit memory is referred to as *cognitive feeding*. We are feeding the implicit memory system the information it needs to release the grief associated with its memories. Once the words are stated, the feelings connect and the traumaversary should subside.

Keep in mind, you may have to put forth a few ripples before your son or daughter becomes willing to participate in a conversation. However, the sooner you give this a try, the sooner you are on your way to reducing the swells of emotional backlash involved in these yearly occurrences.

Professionals can participate or take the lead in trigger management during the course of therapy as well.

Rituals

Trigger management may also include rituals. Many adoptive families create *rituals*, symbolic ways to remember and reflect. Adoption has often been steeped in rituals for celebrations, such as "gotcha day," as well as in rituals to acknowledge loss. A candle may be lit or a helium balloon released to acknowledge the birthmother on Mother's Day. A small box can be decorated and called a birthmother, birthbrother or birthsister box. At times when birthfamily members are missed, the adopted child can draw a picture or write a letter which is added to the contents of the box. The "Readings and Resources" (right) will provide sources for further information about adoption-related rituals. If your family has developed any rituals, we'd love to know about it! Please leave us a comment!

Carrying out rituals opens the door for the child to express his or her thoughts and feelings about those missed.

Seek Professional Help

If traumaversaries occur year after year, it is time to seek professional help. This means that your adopted son or daughter is "stuck" in the grieving process. The child is not working through his or her pre-adoptive experiences. As always seek the help of a professional knowledgeable in trauma, attachment and adoption. The Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children offers a state-by-state listing of such therapists.

Unresolved grief harms children long-term. Children who are not provided opportunities to grieve are at risk for:

- Decreased social, emotional and cognitive developmental growth
- Regression to earlier stages of development for an extended period of time
- Inability to concentrate—impaired academic progress
- Physical difficulties—fatigue, stomach aches, appetite changes, headaches, tightness in chest, shortness of breath, low energy, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Withdrawal from friends or extracurricular activities.

In conclusion, there is much parents and professionals can do to minimize the impact of "returning yearly" to the grief associated with traumatic experiences. This post offers numerous suggestions. Chapter 10, Brothers and Sisters in Adoption, provides a detailed six-step trigger management plan that is useful for adoptees as well as any member of the adoptive family who is adversely affected by traumaversaries. Helping grief flow—away—improves each day of the year in adoptive family life!

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