

"I Am a Terrible Parent!": Not! Absolutely, Not! Parenting the Traumatized Adoptee

By Arleta James, PCC

"Have we made our son's problems worse?" "Is our daughter's attachment disorder our fault?" "I have failed as a parent!" "Our daughter isn't better. We must be doing something wrong!" These thoughts and questions, and even others like, "Perhaps I was infertile because I really can't parent", are put forth daily by Moms and Dads parenting adopted children with histories of trauma — abuse, abandonment, orphanage residence, etc.



The fact that parental love and consistency did not “fix” the child post-placement causes parents to believe that they have failed! “Our son or daughter isn’t better because we can’t parent.” Or, “We have done everything wrong!”

Certainly, friends, extended family, spouses and professionals may contribute to this undermining of adoptive mothers’ and fathers’ self-esteem. For example, in [*Strengthening Families and Communities: An Approach to Post-Adoption Services*](#), a Casey Family Services White Paper,

“Professionals who work with adoptive families and their children must appreciate the role of the birth family and the adoptive family in the child’s life. They must also view the needs of children and their adoptive families from a strengths-based, as opposed to a pathological, perspective; provide services in a supportive manner, as opposed to “blaming” adoptive families for the needs of their children; and recognize and respect the strengths and culture of children and families, providing services in a culturally competent manner.”

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)

The full report is an excellent and comforting read for struggling adoptive parents.

If you are a parent feeling “terrible” about your parenting skills, read the following to help yourself regain solid footing in your parenting abilities!



- “You are a good parent!” I want you to say this out loud right now! Post this statement in a conspicuous place! **Trauma—abandonment, abuse, neglect, institutionalization—renders even the most magnificent parent ineffective!** Recently, with the increase in the amount of information related to the impact of trauma on the brain and heart of the child, we are learning just how complex healing the traumatized son or daughter can be! My series of articles, *Why Love Isn’t Enough* makes this point clear! Healing will occur with hard work, multiple services, strong advocacy and new parenting tools!
- Yes, new tools! Again, you are a good parent! You simply were not informed how to parent a child with a history of trauma. Growing up, most of us learn to parent from our own parents. Once we become mothers and fathers, we replicate the parenting we were exposed to as children. (Of course, there are also adults who lacked effective parenting models.) Whatever your childhood experiences, the fact is that parenting traumatized children requires a very different parenting skill set. In fact, many Moms and Dads feel like they have to learn to parent “backwards” in order to facilitate positive change in their adoptive son or daughter. Time-out must become time-in. Rewards and positive reinforcement must become natural and logical consequences. Warnings, lecture and choices must shift to “quiet” parenting — a less talk, more action approach. So, stop beating yourself up because you didn’t learn to parent totally opposite of what you need to help the traumatized arrival!
- Getting help is easy. **Getting the correct help can be very difficult!** Finding adoption and trauma competent professionals requires leaving no stone unturned! Pre-adoptive training is often lacking as well. So, pre-adoption and post-adoption, locating adequate partners for your adoption journey compounds your abilities to help yourself, your troubled son or daughter and your typical kids. Yet, it is even common in this area for parents to blame themselves. I often hear, “Why didn’t we know about this attachment stuff?” “We should have recognized we needed help sooner.” Really, how could you expect to know about [Sensory Integration?](#) [Reactive Attachment Disorder?](#), etc. If you aren’t pointed in these directions—long before the

child arrives—how would you know? The needs of the traumatized child, and the types of services required aren't usually mainstream parenting topics.



- Hindsight is a wonderful thing! It would have been nice to know 3, 5 or more years ago what we know now! However, we didn't! Don't get stuck here. Don't think it is ever too late. Even in very late [adolescence](#), children can make positive gains! Thus, what is really important is accessing appropriate services as you become aware.
- Learn to evaluate your competence by reflecting on accomplishments other than the progress of your traumatized son or daughter. Likely, if you have appropriately-developing children, they are doing great. They are off on play dates, involved in athletics, making the honor role, helping out in the community and so on! You made possible these successes! Obviously, you have the skills to parent! Even if you don't have other children, you have nieces, nephews, kids next door and so on. Review these interactions. These children probably adore you and look forward to spending time with you. A couple, childless prior to adoption, didn't live in a vacuum. Likely, such parents can count many times in which they contributed positively to a child's life. Use these proud moments to bolster your self-esteem, and to revive your knowledge of yourself as a good parent! What about your accomplishments at work? Or, how about your volunteer efforts in your church or community? When you doubt yourself, look around or sit with a piece of paper and a pen. List your accomplishments. I feel certain you will see yourself more positively!

In conclusion, I want you to think about the fact that you really need to be giving yourself kudos! Few really understand the impact of living with a child who daily discounts you, your rules, your values and your morals. It requires great self-control to walk away from your son or daughter's constant barrage of rejecting behavior, and from others who criticize your parenting. Pat yourself on the back each time you give yourself a time-out. Only a "good parent" —like you—can do this, and can do this on a repeated basis!

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