

"I'm Not Lazy!": The Development of Initiative in Traumatized Adoptees

By Arleta James, PCC

He is so lazy!" "She has a whole room full of toys and she doesn't play with anything!" "I have to tell him what to do all the time. Otherwise, he would just sit!" Such comments are common from parents who have adopted a child with a history of neglect, abuse and abandonment. Likely, the child isn't lazy; rather this adopted son or daughter has yet to develop **initiative**. This two-part blog about initiative is designed to explain the development of initiative and to offer ideas about how to build this skill.



The Development of Initiative

Initiative develops during the pre-school years, starting at age 3. The development of initiative is credited to Erik Erikson. Overall, Erikson created an eight-stage model of "normal" development. For those of us in adoption and foster care, his model offers a wonderful guide. We can review Erikson and learn what should happen developmentally. Then, we can compare "normal" development to that of our "traumatized" child. Trauma interrupts development; traumatized children don't meet developmental milestones in accord with appropriately-developing peers. Once we understand where the child who has experienced institutionalization, physical or sexual abuse, or neglect is delayed, we can intervene to facilitate developmental growth. Fortunately, physical, cognitive, social and emotional development can be stimulated at later ages!

Initiative, in the Erikson theory, follows Trust vs. Mistrust and Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt. We'll learn a bit each of these first two periods as they set the stage for initiative:

Trust vs. Mistrust: Infancy to 18 Months. The major emphasis is on the care giver's concern and love for the infant. If the infant and young toddler is provided for—physically and psychologically—her experiences of adults are that they are loving, kind and trustworthy. "I can depend on adults." "Adults are reliable." "The world is a safe place." The infant who does not experience the parent or care giver as consistent and caring becomes frustrated. His

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needs are not met, and he develops a mistrust of adults. Thus, the quality of care giving—in infancy— sets the stage for the child's entire view of the world. Those parenting children with attachment difficulties are still working to help the child complete this year one developmental milestone.

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt: Ages 18 months to 3 Years. In this period, the child answers the question, "Can I do things for myself or must I always rely on others?" During this stage, children begin to master tasks for themselves. Boys and girls learn to talk, walk, feed themselves, wash and dress themselves, etc. This is the age of "no" and from this the son or daughter begins to learn right from wrong. The accomplishing of these tasks builds autonomy. Children learn they can do things by themselves and for themselves. The child expresses "me do." Children who are shamed during this stage, who are not offered the opportunities to learn skills or who are pushed to achieve "too much, too soon" may instead develop shame and doubt about their ability to handle problems, and about their capacity to attempt new situations and challenges. The most significant relationships during this period of growth are still with parents.

Initiative vs. Guilt follows the two developmental stages described above. In particular, it builds on autonomy. It adds to autonomy a quality of undertaking, planning and attacking a task for the sake of being active and on the move. The goal of initiative is to answer the question, "Am I good or bad?" In this stage of initiative, the child is learning to master the world around him. The child wants to begin and complete her own actions for a purpose.

Initiative includes:

- Strong identification with parents. In essence, children experiment with the blueprint for what it means to be an adult. Play is often geared to understand, "What type of person will I become?"
- There is a creating of new games and stories, and imagining solutions to problems. This is the age of talking on toy phones, miniature cars, playing house, pretending to shave and cook and so on. Fantasy play flourishes as does creative thinking.
- Learning to cooperate with others—learning to lead as well as follow
- Asking "Why?" about everything!
- Learning to plan and organize, setting a goal and acting in a way that allows for achievement of the goal.
- The beginning of greater self-understanding and awareness of self—self is now described in terms of physical characteristics, material possessions and physical activities. "I am taller than Sally." "I am different from Sam because I have brown hair and he has black hair." "I have a bike and Peggy doesn't."
- Self-conscious emotions appear—embarrassment, guilt, shame, pride. Girls tend to show more shame and guilt than do boys. In addition, children begin to control their emotional reactions to situations. They strive to meet social standards in this area. There is a shift to verbalizing emotions. Children also comprehend that people respond differently—emotionally—to the same event. Children who remain moody and emotionally negative experience greater rejection by their peers.
- A broadening of moral development. Children learn what happens when they steal a cookie from the cookie jar or tell a lie. They develop an inner voice. They believe rules are unchangeable. They judge behavior by consequences, rather than intentions. Spilling a gallon of milk accidentally is worse than spilling one glass on purpose.

Overall, initiative is a time of lots of activity and a surplus of energy! By its conclusion, children have a broader social world. During initiative, the family is still the main relationship. If children have parents that give them the independence to think, to encourage them and to teach good behavior, the child feels like a "good person." If the care giver is harsh, punitive, or ridicules the child's play or makes the child feel stupid about asking questions and his activities, the child feels bad about himself. He develops guilt instead of initiative and he will continue to hang onto adults, resist interactions with other children and in essence, feel as if he is a failure. This negative sense of self may persist through the next stages of development.

In Part Two, , we'll look at some ways to improve children's development of initiative. Ask yourself some questions in preparation:

- Does my child display initiative?

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- What type of care giving did my child receive in her early years?
- Does my child set goals and work toward the goals?
- Has my child passed through fantasy play?
- Has my child had the opportunity to dig in the sandbox, finger paint, draw and color, mold, shape, build, and so on?
- Does my child depend on me too much? On his siblings?
- Does my child have poor peer relationships? Sibling relationships?
- Does my child manage his or her emotions?
- Can my child occupy his time himself?
- Can my child plan and organize?
- How does my parenting influence my child's development of initiative now—negatively and positively?
- Is my child attached? Be honest in this area even if difficult to think about the possibility that your son or daughter may have signs of attachment problems. Attachment is the blueprint for all subsequent relationships, and a healthy attachment facilitates cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Without a strong attachment, all domains of development suffer. Utilize these checklists to help you—Signs and Symptoms of Attachment Difficulties in Children Ages 0-5, and in Children 5 and Older – www.abcofohio.net

Part Two

Welcome to Part Two of this article about initiative. As we learned in Part One, children develop initiative in the pre-school years—ages three to five. Initiative is the third stage in Erik Erikson's model of human development. It is a time of great activity and a surplus of energy! It is also the time of questions starting with "Why?"—which everyone who has parented a typically-developing pre-schooler likely remembers! During the development of initiative, we see children begin to plan, organize, and set goals. Emotional regulation advances as does moral development. Fantasy play flourishes and play reflects adult themes of life. Children want to study adults immensely—especially their parents—to decide, "What type of adult will I be?", and "What type of person am I—good or bad?" Children who are encouraged to play and be curious will pass through this stage with flying colors. They will broaden their social world. Children who experience shame, ridicule, punitive consequences or being thought of as silly, will stagnate. They will continue to rely on adults, hesitate to join a group of peers and feel guilty about themselves through later stages of development.

Unfortunately, a child who lacks initiative is often perceived as lazy, uncooperative or irresponsible. "He can clearly see the dishes need to be done, but he just sits there." "She relies on me to entertain her. She knows what she could do." "He is so lazy. He won't do anything to help out." "He has a whole room full of toys. He won't play with anything until I tell him." Hopefully, this blog will help parents and professionals view children labeled in this manner differently.

In order to facilitate initiative, consider the following,

Play, play and play some more! Play is the "work" of children. Play is as essential to the pre-school age child as food, water and nurture is to any human. Do you remember: marbles, hopscotch, digging in the sandbox, coloring, learning to draw, following your Dad around with a Bubble Mower®, jumping rope, singing nursery rhymes, pretending a cardboard box was a house, wearing your Mom's shoes and make-up, finger painting, using a stick as a horse, to play cowboys and Indians, molding homemade clay and on and on! Many children adopted—at older ages—from the child welfare system or foreign orphanages have never had these opportunities. Many children—in general—raised from infancy lack the types of play of a generation ago. All of this play had meaning and purpose. We were required to play with others of an array of ages—parents, siblings and kids from the neighborhood. The play itself, in combination with being facilitated by adults and children of mixed ages, contributed significantly to advancing all types of developmental skills—negotiating, compromising, establishing and following rules, joining a group already in action, learning to lead and to follow, and so much more. The kids who stomped home shouting that the play was "not fair" were back the next day to play again; they learned that to stay in the group means managing those emotions. Many of the elements of initiative are present in these interactions. So, if you want your adoptee with a history of trauma to develop initiative, turn off the television, Game Boy and the Xbox! Go outside with your child. Gather the neighborhood kids and play!

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Create Opportunities for Your Child to Play with Younger Children

This suggestion relies on your adopted son or daughter being safe among younger children. If safety is ensured, follow this family's example:

Colleen lived in an abusive birth family for five years and then a South American orphanage for the next five years. Adopted by Sue and Howard, at age 10, she exhibited a social and emotional age of a two-year-old.

Sue, Howard and Colleen belong to a church with a large congregation and so there are many Sunday school classes. They made arrangements for Colleen to be a "helper" in the classes with children ranging in age from toddler through pre-school. They simply presented the idea to Colleen in terms of the teachers needing some assistance. Colleen has received the benefit of playing with children who helped her skills—in many areas including initiative—mature, and the Sunday school teachers have appreciated having a reliable assistant. Colleen is proud of her contributions to the church. Over this past year, Colleen has mastered many social tasks and so, has now moved on to be the volunteer helper in classes for five and six year olds.

Reduce Reminders. Children who develop guilt and shame, rather than autonomy, purpose and initiative remain overly-reliant on adults to do their thinking for them. The day starts with waking the child up, and then reminding him about everything from his back pack, breakfast, brushing his teeth, getting dressed, going out to catch the bus, the permission slip for the teacher and so on! Once home, this pattern of reminders starts again! If you are in this cycle, begin to reduce the reminders. Yes, the child may forget his math homework the next day. However, unless the child fails sometimes, he can't succeed! Initiative requires learning to think for oneself. Keep in mind the words of basketball superstar, Michael Jordan, when carrying out this recommendation,

"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed."

Letting go of managing the child's responsibilities is explained in detail in our posts, "*Shhh!: Quiet Parenting Zone Ahead and Getting Started with "Quiet Parenting."*

Facilitate Grief. Grief is one of the greatest contributing factors to developmental delays in traumatized children. Grief causes,

- 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 extra curricular activities.

Initiative will be more readily achieved if the child is helped to process the grief resultant from his trauma. The life book, children's books, professional assistance and simply having conversations with the child about his birth family, orphanage residence and abuse, will help the child express his feelings of anger and sadness for his pre-adoptive experiences. Once the grief flows, so will cognitive, social, emotional and physical gains.

Evaluate Your Parenting Style. Traumatized adoptees move into the family and as time passes parents frequently find themselves angrier than they thought possible. This phenomenon is called inducement. Conflict becomes the norm! Consequences are doled out in great quantities! Punitive and angry interactions thwart attachment, autonomy and initiative—the three major foundational developmental tasks essential to healthy interactions throughout life. If you see yourself described here, you need to make changes. Seek professional help if need be. The ATTACH organization offers a listing of adoption and trauma competent therapists.

Adjust Your Expectations. Trauma interrupts development. The adoptee with a history of abuse, neglect and institutionalization is “younger” than his or her chronological age. This is described in more detail in several previous posts, *Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?*, *Having Fun in Adoptive Families: Not an Oxymoron*, “*Act Your Age: The Vineland Adaptive Behavioral Scales and I’d Like to Trust You, But Can I?*” Parents need to educate themselves about “normal” child development (see Readings and Resources to the right). Once you realize that your child is “little” well into his teens, then you will be less angry. You will have the patience to invest more time in teaching the child the skills she needs.

The expectations that “love will be enough” and he or she “will grow out of it” also need to be shed. Developing initiative won’t just happen on its own! You have to take the initiative and make it happen for your child!

Involve the Typical Kids. If your family is comprised of typical children, let them help advance the development of their traumatized sibling. Frequently, their expectations of a “fun little brother or sister” or “someone to teach things to” are dashed post-placement. They too had expectations that their new brother or sister would “act his age.” When this doesn’t happen, parents soon here such statements as, “Do I have to play with him?” “I want to go to my friend’s house without him!” “Does he have to be at my birthday party?”

Turn this situation around. Start with a family meeting with an agenda to educate your healthy kids about initiative. Let them generate some ideas as to how they can help their adopted brother or sister develop this most important life skills. In one family I work with, each of the five typical children decided they could devote 15 minutes of their time, one day per week, to help their adopted brother move forward developmentally. They worked on playing board games, molding play doh, imaginary play, creating solutions to problems and so on! After nine months of consistent work, there was much success! Their brother could actually suggest activities, and he could occupy himself for about 20 minutes! Wow! What can your family accomplish? You won’t know until you get started!

Balance Parent and Peer Time. Today, we have a tendency to believe that peers are better teachers than parents, and academic learning is the ultimate key to success. Starting at very young ages, children are involved in an array of organized sports and enrolled in educational settings. ***In actuality, from birth through the pre-school age years, children’s primary reference for development is their parents. They can’t develop if they aren’t with you!*** Provide your children ample opportunities to spend time with you! Balance the time spent with peers and in academics. Keep in mind the words of national trauma child trauma expert Bruce Perry and his co-author, Maia Szalavitz,

“Our educational system has focused nearly obsessively on cognitive development and almost completely ignored children’s emotional and physical needs. Only two decades ago elementary schools had both significant lunch periods and recess times. Homework rarely took more than an hour to complete each night and children were thought to be capable of remembering deadlines and meeting them on their own.

“In our rush to be sure that our children have an environment as ‘enriched’ as that of the neighbors’ children, we are actually emotionally impoverishing them. A child’s brain needs love and friendship and the freedom to play and daydream. Knowing this might allow more parents to resist social pressures and begin to push schools back in a more sensible direction” (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

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