Brothers and Sisters in Adoption
Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family

Part I: The Adoptee

The Child with Complex Trauma Joins the Family

What is complex trauma? What does it mean?

Complex Trauma - Reference

Complex trauma in children and adolescents
http://www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/edu_materials/ComplexTrauma_All.pdf

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
http://www.NCTSNet.org

Cook, Alexander
Blaustein, Margaret,
Spinazzola, Joseph
van der Kolk, Bessel

Complex Trauma
(Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola and van der Kolk, 2003)

Definition
Children’s experience of multiple traumatic events that occur within the care giving system
Involves simultaneous or sequential occurrences of child maltreatment—that are chronic and begin in early childhood

RESEARCH INDICATES:

Prospective Domestic Adoptees:
- The incidence of emotional, behavioral and developmental problems among children in foster care (including depression, conduct disorders, difficulties in school and impaired social relationships) was 3 to 6 times greater than the incidence of these problems among children not in out-of-home care.
- A study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 27% of the children in foster care were emotionally disturbed.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics estimated that 30% of children in foster care have severe emotional, behavioral or developmental problems.

(The Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice)
RESEARCH INDICATES:

**International Adoptees:**
- 30% have several serious problems (IQ is less than or equal to 85, insecure attachment, severe behavior problems, ongoing stereotyped behavior)
- 35% have a few serious problems but are making progress
- 35% have made wonderful progress

(University of Minnesota, International Adoption Medicine Program)

**Complex Trauma**
(Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola and van der Kolk, 2003)

**Areas of Impairment**
- Attachment
- Affect Regulation
- Dissociation
- Cognition
- Biology
- Behavioral Control
- Self Concept

ATTACHMENT

- Attachment is the process by which an emotional connection develops between an infant and his/her caretaker
- This process organizes the infant physiologically and psychologically
- Attachment becomes the basis for how he/she will relate to the world, learn and form relationships
- In addition to the basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing, the infant needs emotional care which is essential for his/her development
- Attachment grows through daily interactions between caretaker and infant
- Smiles, nurturing touch, eye contact, mutual play build trust and security in the child
- This first relationship becomes the blueprint for all future relationships
- It is also the origin of conscience development, empathy, self-esteem and cause and effect thinking
- Insecure attachment patterns seen in 80% of maltreated children

ATTACHMENT - What does this mean?

- The adoptee arrives with a continuum of attachment problems
- Experiences have distorted their thinking about themselves and care givers
- Possible delays in all domains of development
- "I think you will abuse me."
- "I think I am moving somewhere else."
- "I think you are another orphanage."
- "I am unlovable."

Cognitive

Problems with...
- Irrational cognitions
- Sustained curiosity/initiative
- Processing new information
- Focusing and completing new tasks (hypervigilence vs. hyperactivity)
- Understanding own contribution to what happens to them (cause-and-effect thinking)
- Object constancy
- Orientation with time and space
- Learning disabilities
- Abstract thinking

Cognitive - What does this mean?

- Possible Special Education services/tutoring
- Learning/homework is challenging
- Inability to accept responsibility,
  - "I didn’t do it!"
- Easily frustrated
- Lack of cause-and-effect thinking
- Pre-conventional moral development
  - "I want it I take it." "If it feels good, I do it."
- Language delays/Speech Therapy
**Biology**

Problems with:

- Experiences impact brain development
- Lifelong reactivity to stress
- Problems with coordination, balance, body tone
- Somatization
- Analgesia (inability to feel pain)
- Hypersensitivity to physical touch
- Wide variety of medical problems: pelvic pain, asthma, skin problems, autoimmune disorders
- Sensory Integration Dysfunction

**Sensory Integration Dysfunction**

- Impairs ability to fully participate in many family activities – a trip to the zoo, Christmas shopping, parties, vacations, etc.
- Further exacerbates social and emotional delays
- Requires Occupational Therapy

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**AFFECT REGULATION**

- Difficulty with emotional self-regulation
- Difficulty describing feelings and internal experience
- Problems knowing and describing internal states
- Difficulty communicating wishes and desires
- Predisposed to earlier onset of affective problems, which is associated with more episodes and poorer outcome

**DISSOCIATION**

- Distinct alterations in states of consciousness
- Two or more distinct states of consciousness
- Hyperarousal vs. Dissociative
- Begins as a protective defense mechanism and then is utilized more frequently as trauma continues

**AFFECT REGULATION - What does this mean?**

- Child arrives with unresolved emotions
- Child acts out behaviorally
- Parents’ own unresolved issues are triggered
- Child and parent engage in negative emotional interactions.
- A Negative Emotional Climate is Created

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**Behavioral Control**

- Poor impulse control
- Self-destructive behavior
- Aggression
- Self-soothing behaviors
- Sleep and eating disturbances
- Substance abuse
- Excessive compliance or oppositional behavior
- Reenactment of traumatic past

**Behavioral Control - What does this mean?**

- Increased conflict
- Renders coping skills ineffective
Self Concept

- Lack of coherent sense of self
- Disturbance of body image
- Low self-esteem
- Poor sense of separateness

Self Concept – What does this mean?

- Challenges become a source of frustration
  - “I can’t.”
- Difficulty finding solutions
- Plagued with negative self-thoughts
  - “I am stupid.” “I can’t do anything right.”
  - “I don’t deserve a family.”
- Few, if any, interests

Video Segment

The typical children:
- 14 typically-developing children ages 8—23
- 10 are adopted and 4 are birth children

The adoptees:
- The adopted siblings arrived in the family at ages 2 through 12 (most joined the families under age 5)
- The families have been formed via adoption on average of 5 years (3½ years to 12 years)
- All have mental health issues (AD/HD, PTSD, ODD, RAD, Sensory Integration Dysfunction, Mood Disorders, etc.)

From the video we can begin to glean:

- Time and energy shift to meet the needs of the adoptee with mental health issues
- Family fun is impaired
- Behavioral difficulties are problematic for the whole family—chaos!
- Changes in all relationships - nuclear family, extended family, peers, etc.
- Coping is difficult/conflict tends to increase
- Expectations are unmet - grief emerges

Research

Vineland Adaptive Behavioral Scales

Research

The Vineland Measures Development...

- Communication Domain
  - Receptive
  - Expressive
  - Written

- Socialization Domain
  - Interpersonal Relationships
  - Play and Leisure Time
  - Coping Skills

- Motor Skills Domain
  - Gross
  - Fine

- Behavior
  - Internalizing
  - Externalizing
RESEARCH INDICATES:

- The stability and satisfaction with foster care and adoptive placements are impacted by the children – birth and/or adopted – residing in the home at the time another child enters the family system.
- Disatisfaction with a foster child was first voiced by a biological child, then followed by the foster child's removal, and that biological children influence their parent's decision about continuing fostering.
- The adoption of a child with special needs may be more likely to disrupt when the parents believe the toll the placement is taking on their birth/previously adopted children is more than they can manage.
Trauma, by definition...

A single experience or an enduring or repeating event or events, which completely overwhelm the individual's ability to cope—consumption and depletion of coping skills.

There is frequently a violation of the person's familiar ideas—expectations—about the world, and the person is put in a state of confusion and insecurity—cognitive dissonance.

This is also seen when people or institutions depended on violate or betray the person in some unforeseen way—Isolation.

It usually involves a feeling of complete helplessness in the face of a real or subjective threat to one's life or to that of a loved one's life, integrity and sanity—losses.

There is also an inability to integrate the emotions—grief and negative emotional climate—involves with the traumatic experience.

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

- Expectations
- Cognitive Dissonance
- The Consumption and Depletion of Coping Skills
- The Emotional Roller-Coaster
- Isolation
- A Sea of Grief

Solutions

- No “one size fits all families”
- No one “magic moment”
- Aren’t always ideal
- Require life style changes
- Require prioritizing

Expectations

- I want to help a child in need
- I am unable to have children
- I heard an ad on the radio
- Love will be enough
- I know what they have been through
- My spouse or partner wants to adopt
- I thought a child would strengthen our marriage
- A relative’s child needs my help
- I want my children to have more siblings
- I want to adopt a young child
- I don’t want to deal with birth parents
- I didn’t expect to adopt (foster parents)

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

- Expectations – Additional Layers

I expect ...
  • my partner to support me
  • parenting to resolve past issues
  • my faith to remain strong
  • my extended family and friends to be supportive
  • to be supported by professionals
  • to be supported by society at large

Expectations about Sibling Relationships

I expect my children to...
  • be playmates/companions
  • Offset loneliness (only child)
  • Create opportunities for healthy competition
  • Have a close relationship

Influenced by:
  • Past experiences
  • Role
  • Birth order
Brothers and Sisters in Adoption  
NYSCCC Healing Connections May 7, 2011

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System  
Expectations about Sibling Relationships

- What are my expectations about sibling relationships?
- Did I always get along with my brother and sister?
- Did I willingly share friends with my close-in-age sister?
- Did I willingly babysit my younger brother?
- Did I feel resentful or angry when my sibling “got away” with a behavior for which I was certain I would have received consequences?
- How are my sibling relationships at present?
- What was my role in the family?
- Do I have expectations of the roles my children will assume?

ATTACHMENT- What does this mean?

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The Dynamics of the Complex Family System  
Expectations

Typically-Developing Children

“I expect to have a playmate”

Expectations and reality collide

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System  
Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive Dissonance

➢ is defined as inconsistencies between expectations and experiences. As humans, we do not like inconsistency.

➢ the greater the inconsistency, the more motivation there is to reduce it.

(Festinger, 1957)

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System  
Cognitive Dissonance

Perhaps the greatest source of cognitive dissonance is the invisible quality of mental health issues.

“Why can’t anyone see his problems?”

“Why are they always blaming us?”
Adjusting Expectations – Achieving Cognitive Consonance

In evaluating expectations and experiences, our goal is to draw conclusions. We must decide:

- which expectations need to change because they have no rational basis
- which expectations have created losses that need to be grieved
- which expectations need to change because they cannot be fulfilled
- which expectations are valid and can be fulfilled

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

That’s Not Fair!

Adjusting an Expectation...

Expectation:
“We expect our parents to consequence each child for the same types of behaviors.”

Experience:
“Our adopted brother gets away with a lot more than we do. He lies, steals, won’t wear his seatbelt, interrupts, etc. etc. Mom and Dad would never let us get away with the things he does! Why don’t they give him more consequences?”

Adjusting an Expectation...

Dissonance:
- Mom and Dad love him more.
- Mom and Dad feel sorry for him.
- Mom and Dad can’t manage him.
- He acts the way he does because Mom and Dad don’t do more to stop it!
- I wish Mom and Dad would send him back!

Consonance:
Children with mental health issues present with a lengthy list of behaviors. Parents must select only a few to work on at one time.

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

Parenting a combination of typically-developing children and children with mental health issues will require parenting each type of child differently.

Different won’t always be fair!

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

Adjusting Expectations - Achieving Cognitive Consonance

Reflection
Education
Professional assistance
Review accomplishments
Family meetings
"Nothing works!"
"We've tried it all!"

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

**Ineffective Coping Styles - Parental**
- Punitive
- Accommodating - "I give in"
- Making Extraordinary Efforts
- Emotionally Withdrawn
  "Yes, but..."
- Split

**Ineffective Coping Styles - Healthy Kids**
- Withdrawn
- Self-Sacrificing
- Acting Out
- Regressed
- "I'll Cover for You"
- Victim

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

**Ineffective Coping Styles – Repeating the Patterns**
Trauma Reenactment or Compulsive Repetition

Children who have experienced trauma alter the dynamics of the adoptive family in a manner that causes a repetition of their abandonment, abuse, neglect, deprivation or life with a drug addict. Their trauma is reenacted, albeit on a smaller scale, within the adoptive home.

(van der Kolk, 1989)

All children need the presence of strong attachment figures — adoptive parents

The Dynamics of the Complex Family System

**Effective Coping Styles**

Alter coping and attachment styles &
Provide New Parenting Tools
Parenting Pearls…
Control, Control, Control
- What you want to control
- What you need to control
- What you can control
- What you should not control
- What you cannot control

Pick and choose carefully
Avoid control battles
Win the ones you take on

Parenting Pearls…
Developmental Parenting
“Developmental interruptions result in delays that leave the individual developmentally immature”

Developmental Delays
Cause and Effect Thinking
Problem-Solving Skills
Moral Development
Social Skills

Ineffective Parenting Tools
- Rewards
- Incentives
- Removal of Privileges
- Time Out
- Grounding
- Isolation

and Effective Coping Skills
- Natural and Logical Consequences
  - Paradox
  - Joining In
  - Choices
  - Time In
- Praise – “Global” vs. “Specific”
  - Prescribing Symptom
- “Consistent” vs. “Unpredictable”
Ineffective Parenting Tools

Less Talk

- Threats
- Reminders
- Warnings
- Bribes

More Action!

Parenting Pearls...

- Too much talk causes too little listening

NEW! and Effective Coping Styles

- Tick, Tock: Making Time
- Acknowledgements

NEW! and Effective Coping Styles

Restoring Family Fun

NEW! and Effective Coping Styles

- Backtracking to the social and emotional age
- Assign ways to be helpful
- Set the timer
- Short increments
- Parties, play dates, vacations
- To go, or not to go?
- Parents are in charge of fun
- Electronics

NEW! and Effective Coping Styles

- No Batteries Needed!
The Emotional Roller-Coaster

The Impact of Stress on the Adoptive Family

Child arrives with unresolved emotions

↓ Child acts out behaviorally

↓ Parents’ own unresolved issues are triggered.

↓ Child and parent engage in negative emotional interactions.

A Negative Emotional Climate is Created

The Emotional Roller-Coaster

Triggers

Triggers are identifiable situations or events that can create emotional upheaval.

The Emotional Roller-Coaster

Triggers

- Mother’s/Father’s Day
- Birthdays
- Holidays
- The anniversary of the adoption
- Anniversary of removal from birth family
- Illness or death of adoptive parent
- Divorce
- School-related projects and classes

- Airplane rides
- Visits with birth siblings
- Birth or adoption of a child
- Kindergarten or first grade
- Beginning and end of each school year
- Puberty
- Questions/comments from strangers

The Emotional Roller-Coaster

Triggers

- “You’re adopted and I’m not.” The anger could be rooted in the changes that have occurred in the family. Or the resident child may be angry that her adopted brother was in her room for the hundredth time! The negative behavior is a reminder that, “I had more privacy before you came.” The feelings of being robbed are compounded by the loss of the family as it was.
- “Can you really want me as a brother or sister?” Just as the adoptee wonders how his adoptive parents can want him when his own birth parents didn’t, he perceives he is unlovable to his new brothers and sisters.
- “They are so lucky to live together.” The adoptee’s grief for the birth siblings living elsewhere is triggered by observing brothers and sisters in the adoptive family.
- “I asked for a brother or sister.” It is my fault that Mom and Dad aren’t as happy as they used to be?
- “You look different. You’re not even from America.” I look at you and “see” that our family is different. I long for the old family. I am tired of people looking at us when we are out in public. I hate it when people ask me, “Is that your sister?”

The Emotional Roller-Coaster

Triggers

- Typically-Developing Siblings
  - I want to “unadopt” him.
  - He is so hard to play with.
  - I wanted to teach her things.
  - I’m the one that wanted a brother or sister.
  - You’re adopted and I’m not.
  - You look different. You’re not even from America.
  - If I’m not good will I have to move?
  - I hate being told that I have to set the example.
  - I am tired of babysitting.
  - Why wasn’t I enough for Mom and Dad?

Adoptee

- “Can you really want me as a brother or sister?”
- “I wish my brothers and sisters would play with me the way they play with each other.
- “My brothers and sisters are so lucky to live together. I want to live with my birth siblings.
- “I look different from everybody in my family.
- “They are having friends over again.
- “They are going out with their friends again.
- “They act so ‘perfect.’
- “Mom and Dad love them more because they were born to them.
- “My brothers and sisters get more, and get to do more, than I do.

Facing Frustrations

Avoid Approaching Storms

Reduce Angry Reactions
Parenting, healing forming strong attachments, etc. are about reactions, not consequences.

Grief—the emotional response to loss—is perhaps the most significant dynamic to develop within the adoptive family parenting a child with mental health issues. When it comes to the experience of loss, the primary distinction between death and mental illness is that mental illness is not broadly and publicly recognized as a significant loss, when in fact, loss may be the primary trauma for family members during the course of mental illness (Johnson, 1994).

Although losses abound, there is one central loss. That is, the loss of the person that their adopted son, daughter, brother or sister could have been. Additionally, in families with persons with serious mental health illness, there is no difference between parents and siblings in their level of grief (Miller, Dworkin, Ward, and Barone, 1990). Grieving is a chronic—persistent and lasting—process.

Losses and feelings contribute to sibling rivalry

- Loss of parental time and attention
- Loss of privacy
- Loss of family resources
- Loss of a peaceful family
- Loss of space
- Loss of a safe environment
- Loss of happy parents/happy emotional climate
- Loss of the family as they knew it
- Loss of the brother or sister they expected
- Loss of peers, extended family members
- Possible loss of birth order
- Loss of learning about the “world” in a developmentally appropriate way
Coming Ashore: Letting Grief Flow

Facilitate feelings - all feelings are valid
A time to grieve
Talk about "it" - Ripple Effect
Don't hide feelings
Validate feelings
Grief flows - over and over
Trigger management

Isolation

- Support system shrinks
- Marital tension
- Time demands
- Chaos
- Behaviors (socially unacceptable)
- Financial strain
- Diminished family fun
- Lack of services

Creating Support

Informal
Formal

Positives - Adoptees

- More likely to complete high school or the equivalent
- More likely to attend and complete college
- Less likely to become teen parents
- Less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol
- Less likely to have mental health problems
- Less likely to be arrested and incarcerated
- More likely to be employed
- More likely to have adequate incomes
- More likely to have health insurance

Positives – Typical Kids

- COMPASSION
- MATURITY
- AWARE OF CONSEQUENCES
- MAKING THE BEST OF A DIFFICULT SITUATION
- VOCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
- THE MEANING OF FAMILY

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