

Adoption today: Kids move from sad to glad: All children who are adopted will have experienced loss, some of it really painful and traumatic, which leaves them reacting with anger, withdrawal or terror. So how can adoptive parents help them deal with this?

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Angela Robson

The black bin-liner, smelling of petrol, came with three broken dolls, half a can of deodorant and a plastic coat hanger. When Donna prepared her two youngest children for fostering, she also threw in two dirty teddies and a bag of peanuts.

Savannah and Billy shouted and kicked and wouldn't leave their mother. Neighbours came running into the street to see what was going on.

Billy and his three sisters had experienced severe neglect. When unannounced visits were made by Stockport social services, the youngest children were usually naked and filthy. All four had chronic tooth decay. Regularly beaten, they were left alone at night when their mother, a single parent, worked as an escort. Billy and his oldest sister, who was seven, often went out thieving for food.

Theresa, who became their foster mother and has now adopted them, was alerted the previous day that a boy aged four and a girl of six would be arriving. "Social services literally had to peel them off Donna," she recalls. "She had put the fear of God in them and said they'd be starved and beaten if they were taken away. Donna didn't want her children but she didn't want anyone else to have them either."

Savannah, a pretty child with long mousy hair and an anxious grin, was Donna's favourite. When her mother put her on her knee, Savannah would taunt her siblings. Billy, small for his age with brown hair and glasses, would become incensed.

"Donna told them she didn't like them, that they were 'rubbish'", says Theresa. "Billy seems to have got it worse. When he got into a rage, she would lock him in a cupboard under the stairs."

One evening before the children were removed, Billy and his oldest sister came home in a thunderstorm to find the door had been locked as a punishment. Billy, who was terrified of the dark, later told Theresa that he'd been so frightened that his sister, who normally fought with him, had put his head under her T-shirt and told him to sleep the night on her belly.

"All foster and adoptive children have experienced loss of some kind or another," says Andy Bibby, who works as a senior practitioner in a therapeutic support team for Liverpool children's services. "Many are traumatised by abuse or neglect in their early life and are primed for fight or flight. For potential adopters, it's a minefield."

"The common misperception is that all you need to do is place children with new loving families, but traditional parenting and disciplinary techniques are often ineffective," he says. "They can even have a negative effect on adoptive children."

Although Billy cried when he was separated from his mother, social services told Theresa that he sang all the way to his foster home. "Billy raced around the house like a wild child," Theresa remembers. "It was like he was bouncing off the walls. He kept saying it wasn't a 'stupid' home after all. But when he heard a loud noise, he would run into a corner and cover his ears."

Savannah was subdued. Theresa initially thought that she had no vocabulary. "She hid behind the sofa if anyone knocked at the door." Both children shunned any physical or eye contact. For the first few months the children had nightmares.

"Early experiences often lead to problems with attachment, severe behaviour difficulties and social and development needs," says Dr Renee Marks from the organisation Attachment in Action, made up of a growing number of therapists working in the field of attachment and trauma.

She describes attachment as the enduring bond that develops between a child and his/her primary carer. This development takes place pre-natally and during the first two years of life. A secure attachment pattern is characterised by a responsive, reciprocal, empathic and trusting relationship between the child and the primary carer.

Secure attachment

"Research has shown that a secure attachment greatly influences all aspects of positive further development of the child into adulthood," Marks says. "The assumption is that children with traumatic early histories develop a deep-seated sense of confusion, distrust, fear and anger with regard to primary carers or significant others."

Dr Bruce Perry, an internationally recognised authority on child trauma and a specialist in child neurodevelopment, believes that experiences of childhood act as primary architects of the brain's capabilities throughout the rest of life.

"During the first three years of life, the brain organises in a 'use-dependent' way, mirroring the pattern, quality and quantity of the infant's experiences," says Perry. "Roughly 85% of the core brain structures are 'organised' by age three. The brain will activate a set of adaptive responses designed to help him survive when exposed to any threat. Chaos, neglect and violence in early childhood result in a disorganised, under-developed brain."

Savannah and Billy have now been with Theresa and her husband for two years as foster, and now adoptive, children. "In the early days, Billy's outbursts - when he'd punch or bite me or my husband - would leave us physically shaken," says Theresa.

Theresa says she's since learned "holding techniques" and is able to restrain Billy securely until he calms down. She also regularly attends adoption support groups, training days and coffee mornings run by her local authority. "I go there because it gives me the strength to keep working with the problems. Also just to get a feeling of what everyone else is going through and what we might have to face in the future."

Lesley Ryan from Adoption NCH Yorkshire, says she prefers to call adoption "re-parenting". NCH Yorkshire trains prospective adopters to parent the children in the local

authority looked-after system. These are predominantly children who have been deemed at risk of significant harm and have suffered some form of neglect or abuse.

"We believe that reparenting is about reconnecting or rebonding with a child. Abuse and neglect teaches children that dependency on adults is not to be trusted. Reparenting is about recognising this and remaining persistent despite the child's negative reaction to the love and care they are being offered."

Although Savannah and Billy couldn't cope with even casual physical contact when they first came to her, Theresa would try other strategies, like reading a book next to them on a sofa. "When they've had a bath, they now let me wrap them in a towel and I'll sing into their ear. At times they'll go back to basic stuff. They'll want to be fed, or have a dummy."

The biggest challenge, besides outbursts, Theresa says is jealousy. "Billy is always waiting for Savannah to be favourite." Her other concern is Savannah's inability to express herself. "Savannah doesn't seem to be able to remember anything before the removal. She's blocked it out. She still has nightmares but can't recall them the next day."

"Billy has so many loving feelings, but he can't always regulate his other emotions. But he makes a huge effort to express himself." In the first year, during a contact visit with his birth mother, he challenged her about hurting him in the past.

Lesley Ryan is keen to point out that adoption unaided does not, in itself, heal the traumatised child. "Adoption plus appropriate interventions provides greater opportunity," she says.

When Theresa finally went through the bin liner that came with the children, Billy told her that the plastic coat hanger had been his only friend and ally and that he needed to keep it. He's since learned to put everything he was fearful of in an imaginary place called "Billy's World", periodically raging around this sphere as the superhero, conquering all.

"I don't know if the children will ever forget. I think they will always have issues," says Theresa. "What we tell them is that the past has happened; we can't wipe it out, but let's look at life now. And they are both going from strength to strength."

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