

The Importance of Reflective Parenting

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One of the ways to significantly impact the mental health and development of children is to ensure their caregivers have the traits that generate secure attachment in children. It has been well researched that children who have insecure attachment have poor well-being outcomes as they age, including higher risk of mental health issues, behavior problems, poor relationships and issues with substance abuse. Additionally, children with insecure attachment often have parents who have an equivalent “insecure attachment” designation on the Adult Attachment Interview. It has become quite clear that attachment (much like trauma) is intergenerational, transmitted from parent to child.

Modern attachment research has been trying to discover HOW parents transmit that attachment security to their children. Clinical researchers at the Anna Freud Centre in London have been working on this exact question for a number of years. They have found some solid evidence that it is a parent’s ability to be reflective with their children, their ability to mentalize, which plays a huge factor in transmitting this attachment from parent to child. Mentalization involves the ability to look inside the mind of another (while simultaneously looking inside your own mind) and understanding behavior in relation to mental states such as thoughts, feelings, desires etc. It is the skill of being able to see yourself from the outside and your children from the inside, and is an essential component of being a sensitive, therapeutic foster or adoptive parent.

By supporting parents’ ability for reflective parenting and mentalization, they are gaining the ability to not only regulate themselves, but also regulate the emotions and behavior of their children. Foster children, in particular, can significantly benefit from learning to recognize and reflect on their feelings in a more conscious and regulated way. Teaching foster/adoptive parents about this helps them understand their foster children and their behaviors better, and helps them interact with them in a more sensitive and reflective manner.

One factor not given much consideration when recruiting or training foster parents in the U.S., is their state of mind regarding attachment or their mentalizing/reflective parenting skills. Studies have shown that parents who have been given a designation of “insecure attachment”, are poor mentalizers and are more likely to be triggered negatively by their children’s attachment needs and behaviors. As a result, this will likely activate childhood anxieties, traumas and defenses of these parents. Unfortunately, this prevents them from being able to successfully attune to their child and challenges their sensitivity. Maltreated children who are placed with such foster/adoptive parents have an increased risk of placement breakdown. Ensuring parents have such skills is especially relevant given that maltreated children who have been removed from their homes display higher rates of insecure attachment, emotional and behavioral

challenges, relationship problems and poor social skills. Having a parent who is good at mentalizing helps prevent such issues in children and is thought to be a protective factor.

Recently, a short-term psycho-education intervention for parents was implemented with foster parents in central Texas. The Family Minds program was found to have a significant positive impact on parents' mentalizing skills as well as lowering parenting stress. If you are interested in the Family Minds intervention, please contact tina.adkins@austin.utexas.edu.

Dr. Adkins who has spent her entire career working with traumatized children and their families. She began as a Child Protective Services worker and went on to become a counselor and then a researcher, specializing in the areas of child trauma, parenting, attachment and child development. She went to London and obtained two of her graduate degrees from University College London and the Anna Freud Center. Dr. Adkins presently works for the Texas Institute for Child and Family Wellbeing in the School of Social Work at The University of Texas at Austin, and specializes in developing trainings and interventions for parents. Recently, Dr. Adkins started a non-profit parenting center to support education and research efforts around interventions foster and adoptive parents (www.familyminds.org).