

# Canary in the Coal Mine... Foster and Adoption Truths

By Stacey Gagnon

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You know that moment when your kid is freaking out in public? The moment that you see the sideways glances and hear the whispers? I think that as parents we all will experience that epic Wal-Mart freak out, or theme park meltdown. It's part of the reality of parenting, but sometimes it's attached to a bigger fear. Within the foster and adoption world, there's often more tied to these situations.

I'll never forget when one of my kids was in a moment that one could best sum up as an epic rager. It definitely did not look like something a normal three-year-old would do. In fact, it was so explosive and violent that a trusted friend looked at me with worry and said, "Do you think he'll end up in prison like his dad?" At the time my child was 3....and already there was this nagging fear that nature would beat out nurture.

While teaching inmates in our county jail about trauma-informed parenting, the very thing the general public doesn't ask, was asked. One of the male inmates hesitatingly raised his hand and asked, "Don't you worry that your adopted kids will turn out like us?" The room went pindrop silent and every face was turned to mine, waiting for an answer. I measured my words, because I have learned that I can build or destroy people by words. But I have also learned that I cannot lie to an inmate, because they are masters of sniffing out lies and untruths. Many have grown up in hard homes, so reading human behaviors was imperative to survival.

"Yes", I answered. "I used to worry that my kids would turn out like you."

And their faces fell a bit, as I continued on. Because the other truth about the inmates that I work with, is that they cling to hope. Hope that someone will see a shred of worth in them. Many of the men and women I work with were smoking, snorting or shooting up illegal drugs before the legal driving age. This means that they had turned to drugs during a time that the brain is developing; the time it is most vulnerable to influence. And each of them had turned to drugs for a reason. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) report that more than a third of adolescents with a report of abuse or neglect will have a substance use disorder before they reach their 18th birthday.

"I spent a lot of nights scared of behaviors I witnessed in my kids, and I wondered with each rage or scary behavior, if this was a precursor to their future. I want my children to live a life free of drugs, incarceration and trauma. I want my kids to be adults who don't end up here."

***"Inmates never, never argue or question the effects of childhood trauma."***



“I may not want my child to end up incarcerated, but do not think for one moment that I look at you and hope my kids don’t turn out to be you. Because each of you has taught me everything I understand about childhood trauma and behaviors. I see in this group love, kindness, gentleness, wisdom, bravery, and courage; and I hope that my kids grow up to have these qualities.” And then I told them what they had taught me about behaviors and addiction, and childhood trauma.

The inmates have taught me that my ability to control or extinguish my children’s behavior did not mean that they were emotionally and mentally well. Behaviors are like the proverbial canary in the coal mine. A canary in a coal mine is an advanced warning of some danger. The metaphor originates from the times when miners used to carry caged canaries while at work; if there was any methane or carbon monoxide in the mine, the canary would die before the levels of the gas reached those hazardous to humans. My kid’s behavior is the indicator that something is amiss, and what I should not do, is sit deep in the darkness of the mine trying to resuscitate a canary. The canary is an indication of an issue that needs addressed. **IT’S NEVER ABOUT THE CANARY!**



I have been teaching this class about trauma and how it is passed from generation to generation. And the absolute beauty of teaching inmates, is that they are blunt and brutally honest in their questions and thoughts. They are the easiest adults that I teach,

as they understand on an intimate level, exactly what trauma does and how it affects the brain. **A hurt or unmet need is at the center of all addictions. If you look at the human brain, it develops under the impact of the environment. The potentials are genetically set, but which genes are turned on and off depends very much on the environment. The behaviors of addiction are just symptoms, they are not the core.**

It boils down to “nature vs. nurture”. As a foster or adopt parent, you see a scary behavior in your child, and your mind leaps to “nature”. The reality, is that many of our children have come from genetics that are overflowing with trauma, addiction and abuse. We understand that trauma bleeds into future generations, and this is called “nature”, but deep inside, we hope to overcome this with the powerful hope of “nurture”.

The longer I work and live within the system of brokenness and trauma, the more I have come to understand that it has never been “nature vs. nurture”. It has always been “nature dancing with nurture”. All of us are genetically predisposed to certain character traits and behaviors, but at the end of the day, these traits (desirable or undesirable) are actually turned ‘on’ or ‘off’ by our environment. Healing and hope are found in relationships and environment. And just as trauma can be passed on from generation to generation; hope and healing may be passed on as well. We need to pour these into our children, and fill them up with encouragement.



Researchers have been studying the connection between trauma and addiction in order to understand why so many drug and alcohol abusers have histories of traumatic experiences. Data from over 17,000 patients in Kaiser Permanente’s Adverse Childhood Experiences study indicate that a child who experiences four or more traumatic events is five times more likely to become an alcoholic, 60% more likely to become obese, and up to 46 times more likely to become an injection-drug user than the general population. Other studies have found similar connections between childhood trauma and addiction, and studies by the Veterans Administration have led to estimates that between 35-75% of veterans with PTSD abuse drugs and alcohol. (aces too high)

Most of the inmates in my program had forever been damaged by the trauma of their childhood. Their brains were doing the best they could, in their own way, to survive, and find relief. The trauma sustained as children compelled them to unwittingly develop an identity, value system, long-term behaviors, and a moral compass that was often skewed. This means that their perception of events, their understanding of the world and relationships is shaped by their early childhood traumas. They see everything different... people, events, choices, themselves. No one showed them that people can be trusted, that the world is predictable, and that they have value.

"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view-"

"Sir?"

"-until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

-by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 30

Dr. Bruce Perry tells about a young woman with a terrible trauma history, who had been able to cognitively learn how to 'do relationships' later in life, but because she'd missed out on early life experience of nurturing care, Bruce said she would never 'speak the language of love without an accent.' I truly believe that there are children who will always behave – with an accent. Our job as parents is to understand and learn to speak their language of needs. **I have found the hardest part for me as a parent, when I am sitting deep within the darkest moments, is to ignore the canary.**