

When Love is not Enough – Foster Care and Adoption

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When I first entered the foster care arena, I actually thought I could save a child. I thought that I could pour love into a poor, little child and their lives would be fixed. I thought LOVE could fix anything and I also thought I was a pretty good parent. And then, we started to receive placements.

I'll never forget the moment I realized that sometimes love isn't enough. He was 4 years-old, small and wiry; his eyes darted nervously around my home. He had watched his newborn brother be beaten to death and his little sister, molested. The neglect was heavy, they lived in an apartment and when the neighbors were interviewed, no one knew that three children had resided there. They were kept silent in a back bedroom with a mattress on the floor and a few toys strewn about. This would be my first experience with a child where I would realize the limits of my resources, my knowledge and my efforts. ***Because despite our best efforts and intentions, sometimes love is not enough.***



I had this idea that as a foster or adopt parent, I could make up the deficits. I mentally calculated and added up the neglect and abuse. It was easier to swallow, if I could assign or create a number. If the child in my home missed out on 15,000 hugs or 789 goodnight tuck-ins, then I could pour into those deficits and we'd come out even. If I could gently hold or touch more times than a hand, beat or slap, I held onto the hope we could spackle over the trauma with love. And if my adopted child was loved by family more days than he lived in an orphanage, we would see healing. What I completely failed to realize, is that these cracks cannot be filled and to think I could balance the trauma equation was naive.

Trauma in children is not a balanced equation; it is never linear and we can never use an "equal" symbol. There is no undoing the trauma, there is never a way to

bring it back to balance. You have to rewrite the equation with stability, consistency and trust. And you also have to accept that you cannot undo what has happened; you can never undo the past. The brain is a historical organ and it keeps records and memories; and scientifically this record-keeping begins in-utero.

His first few weeks in our home were tough and truly we expected this. He was off the wall hyper and hard to manage in public. But slowly he settled down, but then the really hard behaviors seeped to the surface. I was at a loss on how to respond or help. He was going to therapy, but even his counselor ended up quitting.

"I don't speak his language" explained the play therapist.

I asked, *"What language do you think he speaks?"*

"He speaks Spanish", he explained. I walked away feeling very unsupported and scared.

The boy did not speak Spanish, nor English, he spoke gibberish words; but mainly he spoke through his behaviors. Loud and scary; an outpouring of pain and fear. A language that I did not speak either.



Language of Trauma

Foster care and adoption are not romantic. It can look stunningly beautiful from the outside, but let us not forget that it is steeped in brokenness and loss. Your family was not the original intent for this child. You are not the first choice, the original design; somehow their story got derailed and you are stepping in to walk along a path of healing. I learned quickly that I can never forget that a loss of great magnitude has occurred.

I realized that my treatment plan was as ridiculous as providing hugs and kisses to a broken arm. A broken arm must be fixed by an appropriate treatment and

once the treatment is given it takes time for the bones to mend. You can't see the healing, you must trust that it's happening. And even when it is considered treated, there is still an arm that was once broken.

We learned that the psychological trauma is infinitely worse than a broken body. And our treatment plan of hugs and kisses was not going to fix or heal everything. The normal treatment we were using to raise our biological children, was in no way sufficient for the children coming into our home.

In hindsight, I should have prepared myself to listen and respond to a language called trauma.



As his behaviors escalated, our discipline response matched. He would soil himself at will, break things, rage, scream and yell. He lied to us, even when he held the evidence in his hand. He had perfected the thousand-yard stare when confronted with any type of uncomfortable situation. Timeouts didn't faze him and neither did any logical consequence. He turned our lives upside down and my family was reeling in a sea of turmoil. I struggled not to mete out harsh discipline or to yell at him. Each day was exhausting and seemed worse than the day before; I didn't know what to do.

They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. I will tell you there were days I felt insane. There were days I wanted to call the caseworker and tell them to come get him from my home. I remember the night that it finally dawned on me that maybe *we were the problem*.

I received a call from the case manager that I had to take him and his sister for an exam to confirm abuse. As I lead his sister back to the exam room, she started to shriek in terror. Her primal screams reverberated around the empty physician's office and there was no calming her down. The exam was not easy, but she finally quieted in my arms and it was done. During her screaming, I was concerned that her brother would be worried. When the exam was complete, I quickly walked back to him. He'd been sitting with my mom. I asked if he was okay. "He didn't even notice, he never stopped playing with the truck" I looked down at him as he rolled the truck back and forth; I saw the stare. This boy had completely shut down and on his face was the thousand-yard stare we had seen over and over again in our home. I realized in that moment, he was sitting in a state of survival and it dawned on me that every behavior had been a means to communicate. His cry for help was in the form of horrible behaviors and my responses to his behaviors were putting him into a state of fear. I went home and began to do my homework.

"The responses of traumatized children are often misinterpreted...Because new situations are inherently stressful, and because children who have been through trauma often come from homes in which chaos and unpredictability appear "normal" to them, they may respond with fear to what is actually a calm and safe situation. Attempting to take control of what they believe is the inevitable return of chaos, they appear to "provoke" it in order to make things feel more comfortable and predictable. Thus, the "honeymoon" period in foster care will end as the child behaves defiantly and destructively in order to prompt familiar screaming and harsh discipline. Like everyone else, they feel more comfortable with what is "familiar". As one family therapist famously put it, we tend to prefer the "certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty"."

— [Bruce D. Perry, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook*](#)

All behavior arises from a state of stress. Even his lack of response to his sister's screaming was due to the stress he was under. He was living in a constant state of survival; a scared boy who had witnessed horror and lived when his baby brother did not. Everything he did was colored by his belief that he must do everything in his power to survive. Children from trauma often believe that in a stressful situation, the worst thing that ever happened to them may happen again. They use their behaviors to avoid death.

He was a child that had watched the most horrible things happen and acting out was the only way he knew to express his fear and needs. He needed structure, reassurance and safety. Instead I had dealt out isolation through timeouts and solidified his shame when I became exasperated and yelled. I struggled to control my feelings of anger and through my research, I learned that this is what he was looking for; to him it represented "normal".

We learned to ignore the behavior, not the child.

We began time-ins and made pointed efforts to connect. It became months of consistency and exhaustive follow through. He was held and loved even when he was the most unlovable. We learned to ignore the behavior, not the child. We learned to listen to this language called trauma. A language that was spoken through external, visual behaviors and was a daily reminder of a life story derailed. It became our job to understand the language. When you are living this, it can be terribly lonely and it is HARD!

*"It is not you against this child. It is **YOU AND THIS CHILD** against this child's history. It is not a personal attack on you." Dr. Karyn Purvis*

The most challenging part of this, is that the cure is exactly what he struggled to accept and what I struggled to give. The cure for his trauma was to connect with a person who cared for him. He was like hugging a porcupine and while I couldn't always see the outward effects, we pressed on. We worked so hard for over a year, and I can't say that the broken healed. Yes, we had started the process, but it would soon be turned over to a relative. We met with his relatives and explained in depth the children's trauma and they told us that these children were "young and would not be affected by what happened". "They probably don't even remember it", they said. These statements caused us great concern, but they were the children's family and we had done everything we could. A year later, we learned the children were removed from the home because behaviors had escalated. They were moved to an elderly grandmother and we lost track of them after that. I'll always wonder how they have managed.

He had taught us so much about love; but mostly he taught us that love is the cure. And as is often the case, to dole out the correct medicine is difficult. I needed support and help. I needed to realize that *my capacity to love the unlovable was finite*; and this is what I mean when I say that sometimes love is not enough. Sometimes we have to be honest and reach out for help and education. Here are some resources that have helped me, you are never alone and this road is hard.

- [Children from Hard Places and the Brain](#) – this video should be a mandatory foster care and adopt piece. It helped me a ton!
- [The Connected Child](#) by Karyn Purvis
- [Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control](#) by Heather Forbes
- [Ted Talk by Nadie Harris](#) explaining childhood trauma across the lifespan.



“Fire can warm or consume,
water can quench or drown,
wind can caress or cut.

And so it is with human relationships;
we can both create and destroy,
nurture and terrorize,
traumatize and heal each other”

— [Bruce D. Perry](#)