



# REACTIVE ATTACHMENT DISORDER IN THE ADOPTED CHILD

In the normal, healthy development of a child, a bond of attachment forms between the child and his or her parents. This bond allows the parents and the child to share love and enjoy the presence of each other. Attachment is extremely important in the development of a child and without it serious problems will result. Not only is attachment important but there appears to be a window of time that healthy attachment needs to be formed in order for proper development to take place. In general, the first few years of the child's life are critical for this to occur.

Reactive Attachment Disorder, RAD for short, can develop if proper attachment does not occur. There are many behaviors and issues that develop with this disorder that can impact a child in all aspects of his or her life including: behaviorally, mentally, emotionally, socially and physically. A healthy professional is the only one who can officially diagnose a child with RAD but there are some characteristics to watch for when evaluating a child. These include:

## BEHAVIORALLY

- Self-destructive
- Destroying property
- Lack of Impulse Control
- Aggression toward others
- Physically violent
- Passive-aggressive and manipulative
- Outlandish Lying
- Stealing
- Cruelty to animals
- Pre-occupation with fire, blood, and gore
- Hoarding
- Controlling
- Sleep Disturbances
- Demanding and clingy
- Inappropriate sexual conduct
- Difficulty with change

## MENTALLY

- Lack of cause and effect thinking
- Learning Disorders
- Perceives self as victim
- Sense of self-importance
- Lack of compassion and remorse

## EMOTIONALLY

- Not affectionate on parent's terms
- Intense displays of anger
- Inappropriate emotional responses
- Frequently sad or depressed
- Marked mood changes
- Lack of meaning and purpose

## SOCIALLY

- Superficially charming
- Lack of eye contact
- Affectionate with strangers
- Unstable relationships with friends
- Cannot tolerate limits and control
- Blames others for own mistakes
- Lacks trust in others
- Victimizes or is victimized
- Manipulative and controlling
- Accident prone
- High or low pain tolerance



As can be seen by reading the list, the effects of RAD can be significant and extremely difficult for both the child suffering from RAD as well as his or her family members. It is important to remember that not all symptoms need to be displayed to indicate RAD. Likewise, there will be some children who display some of these symptoms who do not have RAD.

For the family raising the children with RAD, often the most devastating result is the child's inability to give or receive love. This can take away the joy of parenting as all efforts appear to be wasted and make an already difficult job of raising a child almost unbearable.

All children who have suffered in some ways, which includes nearly every child who has had a relationship broken with his or her biological parents, will have some attachment issues. This results in issues that will need to be anticipated and dealt with to help an adopted child thrive in his or her new home.

The most significant attachment issues tend to be centered on the quality and type of care the child receives in his or her first few years. Some child adopted out of foreign orphanages were victims of poor quality care as well as a high child to care-taker ratio. Domestically, some children are shuttled from one foster care home to another and are thus unable to develop a secure bond of attachment to a family. In both cases, the common factor is the lack of opportunity for a child to form the bonds that are necessary to allow healthy development to occur. Even with that said, it is impossible to predict which children will end up with RAD. Every child's temperament is different and seems to affect the level of their ability to attach. However, adopting a child from an institution with poor quality care or a child who has never stayed with a family long enough to form a strong attachment will increase the likelihood of adopting a child with RAD. In addition, adopting an older child from a poor attachment forming situation only adds to the risk of problems with attachment.

If a family finds themselves with a child who shows evidence of RAD, steps should be taken to help their child. Many times parents will think that they can handle the situation or if they love their child enough it will solve all their child's problems. In reality, professional help is often required to rectify the damage that occurred prior to the adoption.

The first sources many people turn to are books, pamphlets and videos that give information about the issues. This is a very good step and will assist the adoptive family in becoming knowledgeable and thus better able to make good decisions about their child. The next step will probably involve finding a professional who deals specifically with attachment and bonding issues. The average family counselor or social worker in most cases does not have extensive experience dealing with these specific issues. In some cases, inexperience or wrong methods can do more harm than good. The end result could be frustration and the problems getting worse instead of better.

The most important thing to know for the family dealing with RAD or attachment issues in general is that help is available. The keys to a successful outcome are learning as much as possible about the disorder and finding the right professional to help in the healing of the child. The results can be significant when the right steps are taken and a child learns to attach and show affection. Love then flows between the parents and the result is a family that can grow and experience life together in joy instead of pain.