

Adoptive mother Jennifer says she often hears the phrase when talking about adopted children, 'They are fine, we don't see any problems'. Within this article she uses her professional insights to explain why 'not seeing' any problems doesn't necessarily mean there aren't any.

A COMBINATION of my personal journey and professional experience of working with children lead me to set up Inspired Foundations in 2011 with an aim of raising awareness of the needs of looked-after, adopted and vulnerable children. In order to do this I deliver services such as training, mentoring and consultancy.

My own adoption journey began nine years ago when I adopted two children. My youngest son William began to show difficulties immediately - he was hyperactive, obsessive, rejecting and aggressive. We were able to access local services fairly quickly as his needs were visible. My older son Darren was the opposite - he was quiet, well behaved and loving. You could argue that he was quite simply 'perfect'.

It wasn't until William's difficult behaviours began to ease that I started

their caregivers untrustworthy. Children will also develop an 'attachment style' depending on the type of care they received as infants. There are four different types of attachment styles - one secure and three types of insecure. These are typically characterised by the following types of beliefs and behaviours:

Secure attachment

Typically well-grounded children are keen to interact and feel happy that the world is a good place. When upset, they seek comfort from their primary caregiver, feeling confident that they will receive this.

Ambivalent insecure attachment

Do not trust that adults will keep them safe and therefore show attention-seeking behaviours to ensure they are noticed and their needs are met. Feel unable to depend on caregiver when

issues, I am often met with comments such as "We don't have any children like that at our school" or "Despite all the trauma and frequent moves, Sarah is fine and her behaviour is amazing". This can also be very true of parents, who just like me all those years ago, believe they have a 'golden' child. One that behaves all the time and never causes any fuss. My personal belief is that for many of these children, far from being 'fine', they are actually doing a great job because this is what they want you to think. They don't want your interventions, your help or support. The fact people are not noticing any issues is exactly what they are aiming for.

As well as learning the right things to say to keep adults away, such as "I'm okay" or "yes, I'm fine", children with an avoidant attachment style may show some of the following signs:

- Shows little reaction to praise or

to them is a very scary world. They will not readily give these up just because they are told that they are now safe, loved and wanted. They quite often don't want to, or don't realise they need to be helped. So how do we go about supporting the child who does not want to be helped?

Thinking out loud

Try commenting, or 'wondering' out loud about your child's behaviour to help them recognise the feelings they may be having e.g.: "I think you might be worried about going to school today because it is sports day. I think I will ask Miss Smith to sit close to you so she can help you if you feel nervous" or "I've noticed you look sad whenever I cook pasta. It's okay to look sad when I don't cook your favourite meal." It should be remembered that these are comments, and not questions, so do not expect a response as this can add pressure to their already anxious state.

Reduce questions

These children will often be described as 'not wanting' to ask for help but the reality could be that they can't because they are unaware they have a need to be

Connect before you correct

Many traditional behaviour approaches focus on rewards and sanctions - where praise and treats are conditional on good behaviour. Children with an avoidant attachment style will be unlikely to show many unwanted behaviours, meaning they won't require much in the way of sanctions. However, it is also unlikely you will see many exceptional praiseworthy behaviours. Instead, a middle of the road approach ensures that the child stands out for neither good, nor bad behaviour. Therefore, trying to use traditional behaviour strategies such as time out or reward charts will rarely prove successful. The lack of development in cause and effect thinking often means

behaved child. Therefore, try to support the professionals in understanding about avoidant attachment difficulties by suggesting they attend training, read books or download free leaflets (recommended resources available on request).

There is no doubt that trying to put strategies in place for a child with an avoidant attachment can be difficult. A child who is unable to express their feelings will not be able to tell you what might help them, and even when strategies are put in place they may appear quite unresponsive to them for some time. My advice to this is simple - do it anyway! Providing additional emotional support, security and nurture will not cause any harm to children, but not providing these could do. ●

“...children who experience poor care will believe they are bad, worthless and unlovable, and their caregivers untrustworthy.”

such techniques are lost on the child, but also for a child who already see themselves as 'bad', and 'unworthy',

helping the child who doesn't want to be helped

to look a little closer at Darren. By this time, he was aged five and it slowly dawned on me that he had never lost his temper - ever. He had never pestered me for a new toy or even asked for a packet of sweets in the shop. He would smile and hug me regularly but the hugs felt empty and the smile looked fake. My gut instinct told me something was wrong and I set about trying to gain support for him. It was then I found out how difficult it is to get support for a child that is 'too good'.

Almost all adopted children will have experienced trauma during their early years, which often results in their brains being on constant high alert for danger, even many years after the trauma occurred. In addition to this, many children will also have attachment difficulties. Attachment refers to how a child's early needs were met - or not - and the specific responses a child develops based on this. For example, children who experience good care will believe they are worthwhile, wanted, and lovable, and their caregivers are trustworthy. However, children who experience poor care will believe they are bad, worthless and unlovable, and

upset or frightened.

Avoidant insecure attachment

Often quiet and unassuming, appearing well behaved and compliant. Do not believe that adults can keep them safe so avoid having to rely on them whenever possible.

Disorganised insecure attachment

Often in a state of confusion with no 'coping strategies'. Can exhibit extreme behaviours, which show no real pattern. They often have a 'push-pull' approach to caregivers with the feelings of "I need you but I can't cope with you".

My experiences as both a parent and a professional has taught me that the children who exhibit 'ambivalent' and 'disorganised' attachment styles are often noticed much quicker, because they are often loud, hyperactive and attention seeking. They want people to notice them and often this is achieved. Whereas I am in no way minimising the difficulties faced by these groups of children, I do find myself worrying more about the avoidant children - the ones that no one really notices.

When talking to other professionals about children with avoidant attachment

- punishments
- Indiscriminate with strangers
- Avoids interaction with family or peers
- Hugs that feel 'empty' or 'fake'
- Does not 'pester' adults for things they want (e.g. toys, sweets etc)
- Unable to express emotions such as anger or joy
- Lack of cause/effect thinking
- Frequently complains of feeling ill
- Freezes or becomes tearful when feeling out of control
- Avoids eye contact
- Low self-esteem
- Poor short term memory
- Poor organisation skills

Whereas some of these signs may be present, they may also be very subtle. This means that supporting a child with an avoidant attachment style does require a certain amount of mind reading ability.

Another important factor in the case of children with an avoidant attachment style is that they are not waiting to be helped. In fact, these children, like most with attachment difficulties, will be strangely comfortable with the strategies they have for surviving in what

met. Asking a child what is wrong, what is worrying them or if they are okay will not work in this case. As well as the 'thinking out loud' technique above also try to give them other means to communicate such as using pictures to point at to choose where they want to go, having an 'anything book' (rather than a 'feelings diary' as it may add pressure) to write in, and having weekly family questions time where everyone takes turns to name their funniest moment or favourite food eaten that week. Also having fun quiz time, where you write questions down with a blank space such as 'My favourite toy this week was ___' or 'I felt angry this week when ___' can help your child share information in a way that feels safe.

Structure

Try to organise your days so that routines help build a strong sense of security and familiarity. Use visual schedules and reminders wherever possible to reinforce these routines and try to give as much notice as possible for any changes that will be happening.

If you would like to learn more about Jennifer Jones, or the work carried out by Inspired Foundations, please visit www.inspiredfoundations.co.uk

these strategies only prove to reinforce this image of themselves.

Instead, try recognising any negative behaviour as an achievement - they are expressing a need! It does not mean you have to ignore the unwanted behaviour, but use it to your advantage by letting your child know you understand - you get it - you can see how sad and upset they are. From this, you can help your child to put things right (e.g. fixing the vase they threw or saying sorry to their brother).

Teaching the teachers

Due to the nature of avoidant attachment it is often parents who first notice their child is having difficulties, and trying to explain this to professionals leads to the 'but they seem fine to us' type of comments. It is important to remember that professionals are often well meaning, and will be basing their opinion on what they see - which is often a polite, quiet, well

