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Adoption and self esteem

Our early experiences shape our view of ourselves, those around us and our world. Children develop a sense of self as they grow and develop. Positive experiences and relationships help to boost a positive sense of self. Armed with this positive sense of self, individuals are better equipped to build and maintain relationships, problem solve and cope with adversity.

In contrast, negative early experiences can have the opposite effect, and a negative sense of self will have a knock on effect on relationships and life skills. Children adopted from the care system often have issues with self esteem due to the impact of early neglect or due to their understanding of the circumstances of their adoption. Often this low self esteem is so deep rooted that the normal approaches to boosting self esteem can backfire.

Even without the impact of early neglect, sometimes questions around being good enough come from being unable to stay with the birth family. This extract from a brilliant article published in the Guardian illustrates the long lasting impact of adoption:

In the years since, Toby started to see a counsellor, which helps, he says. Kate is now considering it too. "I have sadness within me all the time, and I have done all my life." She suddenly, for the first time, looks on the brink of tears. "We're a very positive story, there are no real issues and we are really lucky. But there is that other element to your life – [being adopted] does have a lasting effect on you."

Toby agrees. "When you are adopted, you never feel quite good enough. I have found relationships hard; I sometimes end up wanting to give everything to someone else because I feel I somehow wasn't good enough to belong"

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/23/toby-anstis-adoption-birth-parents>

Add to that the impact of early trauma and neglect and it's not surprising that children who are adopted or fostered need support in developing a healthy self esteem.



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Shifting the negatives

Our natural reaction is to praise a child when they do something well to help them build a positive view of themselves. For some children who have this deep rooted, negative sense of self, rather than accept the praise offered, they will stop what they're doing or destroy whatever you were complimenting them on. They seem unable to accept that you thought what they were doing was good and so self-sabotage any attempts at praise.

So before working on the positive messages, it's important to address this underlying low sense of self. I've found Dan Hughes' model (<http://www.dyadicdevelopmentalpsychotherapy.org/>) and the "Connecting with Kids through Stories" approach, developed by the Family Attachment and Counselling Center of Minnesota (<http://www.familyattachment.com/>), helpful in helping shift the negative self image.

By understanding your child's perspective and helping them to shift this view of themselves, you can then gently trickle in those positive messages and help build their self esteem.

Written by Fiona Strachan

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