FAMILIES CAN HELP CHILDREN WITH ATTACHMENT PROBLEMS
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One of the biggest challenges for adoptive families and foster parents who care for neglected and abused children is helping them overcome the effects of attachment problems.

In child development, attachment refers to the unique bond that forms between an infant and mother or other primary caregiver through loving interactions – holding, stroking, hugging, rocking, smiling, laughing, cooing, attentive feeding – during the first few years of life. Chemical activity in the brain stimulated by these repeated interactions builds the brain structures necessary for us to form and maintain emotional relationships with other people. Without those early bonding experiences children lack a sense of safety and security and the ability to experience trusting relationships.

It’s not surprising that a large percentage of foster children have attachment problems. The majority of attachment problems are due to parental ignorance of child development rather than abuse, according to Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D., a leading expert in childhood trauma. Neglect tends to be transgenerational; neglectful parents were most likely neglected children. They parent the way they were parented. In many cases neglectful parenting is associated with addiction.

Some children who experienced severe neglect will have profound and obvious problems. Others will have subtle problems and do not appear affected by neglect. It depends on the degree and length of neglect or abuse and the age of the child when it occurred.

Children who experience severe emotional neglect often have developmental delays in motor skills, language, social and cognitive development the result of restricted experiences, poor nutrition and prenatal influences. Odd eating behaviors are common. Children will hoard food, hide food and eat as if there were no tomorrow, long after they experience regular meals. Emotional problems are common including depression and anxiety.

Another common behavior is indiscriminate affectionate behavior – hugging strangers, for example. This is seen by child development specialists as a remnant of safety seeking. Lack of empathy and poor impulse control can lead to aggression or cruelty to other children or animals. Children without a secure emotional attachment don’t understand the effects of their behavior on others.

Parenting a child with attachment problems can be frustrating and emotionally trying. It is hard to do without a loving connection with a child. But with time, patience and concerted effort, attachment disorders can be repaired. Professional resources are available to support parents through the process.

The Henderson County Department of Social Services (DSS) provides specialized post-adoption services through contracts with private agencies. In our area Children’s Home Society is the provider. Two full-time Clinical Social Workers experienced in working with traumatized children serve families that have adopted foster children in Buncombe, Henderson and Rutherford Counties. They make home visits to counsel, teach and support families. They also set up and lead parent support groups in areas where there are enough parents to form a group.


Several behavioral health agencies in the area offer intensive in-home intervention programs to help parents manage difficult behavior problems. They are available to foster families as well as adoptive families. They are not specifically designed for children with attachment disorders.
Families who adopt young foster children with special medical, educational or emotional needs, or foster children over six years old, can continue to receive monthly support payments from DSS. Children with special needs continue to qualify for medical assistance, also known as Medicaid, after adoption. Those children are also eligible for payments up to $2000 annually for necessary equipment, therapies or special camps not covered by regular medical assistance.

Lead adoption social worker at Henderson County DSS, Julie Sprouse, is the contact person for referral to post-adoption services. There is no cost to families for authorized services. Contact Julie at sprousej@hendersoncountydss.org.