

LEARNING TO LOVE AGAIN TREATING REACTIVE ATTACHMENT DISORDER

By James A. Kenny, PhD

All love ends in tragedy. People leave. People die. But not to love is the definition of hell. Some people are so devastated by loss that they “decide” that love is not worth the risk. One or two broken hearts are all they can handle. They “turn off” their yearning to give and receive affection. This is especially true of young people with minimal life experience. Even moreso, this is an occupational hazard of foster children.

All of us must deal with the dilemma of loving. To love and be loved is the paramount human experience. None of us are sufficient unto ourselves. We need one another. In fact, we were “made” by an act of love. In addition, the ability to feel love protects us from harming others. We have “com”passion, we feel “with.” For these reasons, most of us decide that loving is worth the pain of loss.

This dilemma is endemic to foster care. Children are shifted around, drift back and forth to birth home and to other foster homes. No matter how cogent the reasons and how careful the explanations to the child that a move was unavoidable, the child’s elemental feeling is one of rejection. “If you really loved me, you would keep me.” The way a large number of foster children handle this is by not caring, by being unable or refusing to attach.

We foster parents also have a dilemma. Of course we get attached. I would not give a nickel for a foster parent who did not. Yet this poses two problems for foster parents. First, the child may be resistant to attachment no matter how hard we try to reach out to him. This is called “Reactive Attachment Disorder” or RAD. And second, if we do become closely attached, are we setting the child up for another rejection when he or she is moved?

Before going further, let’s understand a few common terms. “Attachment” is a general term that indicates connectedness of one type or another. “Bonding” is a significant reciprocal attachment which both parties want and expect to continue, and which is interrupted at considerable peril to the persons involved. Bonding is more colloquially known as love. In one sense, the difference between attachment and bonding can be compared to the difference between liking and loving.

How do we humans bond? All of us, children and adults, bond the same way, by sharing over time important events in daily life, such as eating, sleeping, and playing together. The research shows that bonding is likely after three months of daily contact, probable after six, and almost certain after twelve months. Unless you are a foster child with RAD. Then it may not happen at all.

Some naïve people believe that a child who has bonded well with one family is a “good bonder” and will do equally well if moved. It may even happen that the child is pleasant, compliant, and shows no overt signs of distress. This is a form of RAD, and is rightly called pseudo-bonding. It reflects the opposite of bonding. The compliance is often a superficial veneer covering a lack of attachment, which may well erupt in adulthood as psychopathology: an adult who lacks the ability to feel compassion. A psychopath.

Humans do not bond nor love generically. We bond to a specific person in a specific place. Suppose you have been happily married for two years when the kind and well-meaning person in charge of your life tells you: “Tonight you will be going home to a new husband. You will like him. He is a very nice man and lives in a very nice place.” Crazy? No more so than telling a foster child that he or she will be happy moving to a new placement.

What can we do? How can we treat RAD? The best “therapy” for RAD occurs in a permanent home. The therapy occurs naturally. Families with small children will play the game of peekaboo” as a fun preventative. “Now you see me, now you don’t, and here I am back again. Get used to it.” The small child laughs, but learns that loved ones can go away but it will be all right in the end.

What can be done for the unbonded child, the one suffering from RAD? Since bonding is a natural and normal human experience, the therapy as well should be natural.. A wise therapist will realize that the cure is in the home and will guide the family to persevere. Here are six obvious and common sense steps:

1. Do everything you can to find and support a **permanent home**. Every placement should be made with the intent and hope that this will be the last and final one. Every child has the right to a permanent home. Sooner rather than later. This is critical.
2. **Be patient**. Realize that bonding takes time. Re-bonding takes more time. It will not happen overnight. It will not happen in a therapist’s office. It may take a year or more. The unbonded child may show his lack of compassion in many ways, by not caring, by hurting other children, by being cruel to animals. Discipline these problems as best you can by preventing them. You will be tempted to judge him and even to give up. Don’t.
3. **Don’t force him**. He may resist a personal relationship for a long time. He may be quiet, appear bored, act as if he doesn’t care. He may not respond to your love or show remorse for misbehavior. Continue to make overtures of caring and affection but do not overdo it. Let him attach at his own pace.

4. **Pass the tests.** He will put you to the test. He may misbehave or destroy things that you value to see if you really love him. Again, prevent this if you can. Tell him this has hurt you. But do not hurt him back. He needs your discipline but he also needs your unconditional love.
5. **Be as good as your word.** If you say you will do something, do it. If you tell him you will be home at a certain time, don't be late. If you get delayed, call him. Against the backdrop of regular letdowns, he needs to learn to begin trusting again. Consistency is key.
6. **Be there.** Don't worry too much if you lose your temper once in awhile or think you have made a mistake. We all do. Be present. Be available. In word and in touch. He needs to learn that you are his forever parent. No matter what he does, how much he strikes out, he needs to realize that you will always be there.

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