

Promoting attachment in the early years

I have always been drawn to accounts or documentaries about people's experiences of being adopted. As I prepared to adopt my daughter Mei Mei, I remembered how many adoptees described a lack of closeness in their relationship with their adoptive parents, a sense of separateness, a lack of intimacy. I wondered how much this "lack" had to do with difficulties in early attachment? How sad and lonely seemed the idea of being so distanced from primary attachments. How sad too for us as adoptive parents to feel that distance which can tap into all our uncertainties about our entitlements as parents.

Attachment literature has always reinforced that the more emotionally and physically available the parent the more secure the attachment. The literature also reinforces the importance of the development of an attachment to primary caregivers in the first 12 months of a child's life. This early relationship is critical to all aspects of a child's development, breathing life into the child and creating the foundation from which future relationships are formed. Children whose fates have them made available for adoption have usually experienced little or no opportunity for attachment to a primary caregiver or have had traumatic loss of attachments. Whilst longitudinal research following up children adopted even after severe deprivation shows that given a normal family environment most children do well it was apparent to me that I would need to do more than just "mother" my daughter. Because she would have had experiences of real failure to have her needs met over a long period while in the orphanage as well as the later loss of her foster mother she was likely to have come to defend herself against the pain of experiencing an unmet need by shutting down and becoming self sufficient. I would need to be proactive in putting strategies in place to promote our attachment, to create opportunities where dependence and intimacy could be fostered and enhanced, making a foundation for her later self confidence and independence.

On the 18th August 2002 my daughter Mei Mei and I became a family. It felt that I had been waiting for that day all my life.

I was seemingly well prepared. I was very confident with babies - I loved them and they easily engaged with me. All my 25 years of professional life, first as a paediatric occupational therapist and then as a psychotherapist had been working with families and their infants, toddlers and children helping them build better relationships and as a result hopefully more secure attachments. I had been to the seminar with DoCs. I had read books on adoption of toddlers. I'd taken my daughter's medical to my GP and Early Childhood Nurse. I'd carefully selected calming music (Enya) to play in our room because I knew my daughter (aged 10 months) would be frightened, upset and grieving having just left her foster family with whom she had been for 4 1/2 months.

I knew it all intellectually but was really challenged by the emotional reality of how devastatingly sad it really was for her to be plucked from a family whom she had come to love and trust and to suddenly find herself with a total stranger who was so different in every way to all that she had known before. It was so hard that there was

little I could do to comfort or reassure her. She protested loudly and rejectingly if I made my presence too apparent by speaking to her or seeking eye contact. All I could do in the first day or two was hold her, facing away from me and gently offer my assistance and care, telling her that I understood how much she missed her foster mother, and how much they must be missing her. Her grief at her loss was overwhelming and unrelenting, moving from angry protest through to deep despair.

Whilst not all children would necessarily experience such intense grief at the point of adoption particularly if they have not yet had an opportunity to attach to a previous caregiver I am sure they will all be quite shocked with the huge changes in their circumstances. I found the experience very challenging, and struggled with terrible feelings of guilt that she should be so distressed, but it was also a very immediate first opportunity as a new parent to be emotionally available to Mei Mei, to help her feel her distress was accepted and responded to. It required that in particular that I understood her need to reject me and to not take it personally, to not give up or leave her alone with it.

Of course amidst all this sadness I was also feeling profound joy and fulfilment like the moment on the third day when we were standing in the shade of a big tree with her snuggled against my chest in the Hug-a-Bub sling. It felt for a moment that we were "together" enjoying the cooling breeze that was blowing over the lake. I held my breath at this first shared moment and then her head dropped down onto my chest as she drifted off to sleep. In fact, on this third day, she had begun to solemnly gaze at me when I spoke to her and later in the same day Mei Mei first began to smile and play and show more of her true delightful self.

On our fifth day together we met with Mei Mei's foster mother, a day I approached with great trepidation. Mei Mei had had only just begun to accept me but I knew it was going to be so important both for her and her foster family to have an opportunity to say goodbye. It was very apparent after this meeting how much more settled Mei Mei and the other babies were. Some took bottles for the first time from their new parents and others like Mei Mei began to eat.

Over the first 12 months I was really struck that a process occurred between Mei Mei and me, which mirrored the normal attachment cycle. Through my meeting her needs over and over again just like a newborn she came to recognize that I was reliable and learnt to depend on me, rather than approaching whomever was closest in an indiscriminate way. Having come to understand that I was her mother she began to be more anxious about losing me and for a while became more clingy in new situations. By accepting her need to be very close eventually she became confident that I was there for her. She uses me well now as a safe base and is able to separate easily in familiar situations like day care trusting that I will return. I have noticed this same process of normal attachment over the first year or so with other adoptive families that I know. No matter what the child's chronological age they still need to begin at the beginning emotionally and gradually by experiencing their parents reliable care come to understand that these are their parents.

Strategies I have used to promote our attachment have included:

- encouraging regression (like continuing bottle feeding for as long as she wanted it which means she still has a couple of bottles a day)
- using a baby carrier (Hug-a-Bub) to maintain physical proximity as I did chores around the house, for her daytime sleeps or as we arrived at new situations like playgroup

- lying with her to go to sleep and having her sleep in my bed. I was really struck by how profoundly important this was to our relationship. Something about the relaxation needed in letting go to go to sleep that allowed Mei Mei to first begin to allow greater intimacy in the form of long gazes, lying face to face, holding my hand and seeking cuddles. It is also during the relaxation of sleep that grief emerges and being close to comfort her was vital.
- spending time playing on the floor where she could come and go from me and very much lead the play rather than doing anything too structured.
- making a big fuss any time she hurt herself as she was unlikely to register pain or ask for comfort.
- creating and using any opportunities for eye contact.
- paying particular attention to times of "transition" like getting dressed and undressed, going to sleep and waking up, changing activity, going out, arriving at new places - all times when she was likely to be more stressed and in need of support, telling her what was going to happen, avoiding rushing her and providing my physical containment whenever she needed it.

I have found that staying emotionally and physically available is not always easy. Life becomes busy with housework, social events and eventual return to work. However by continuing with these strategies I find I am still seeing gains even two years later. It has been so rewarding to experience the change in the quality of her cuddles shifting from clinging to real expressions of affection, to see the quality of her eye contact change from fleeting glances to long trusting gazes, and to see her blossom in every way, knowing that fundamental to that is our now very close and intimate relationship.

Anon