

# Impact of Abandonment and Rejection on Children's and Youth's Mental Health

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Impact of Abandonment and Rejection on Children's and Youth's Mental Health.

### 1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify the impact of abandonment and rejection on mental health, how it presents clinically, how to support children through separation, and implications for therapeutic intervention, and
- Describe the nature and therapeutic value of life books, loss boxes, journaling, bibliotherapy, and other tools that facilitate reflection about losses and the grieving process, and build readiness for new relationships.

### 1.3 Impact of Abandonment and Rejection

An important role for you as the clinician in helping a child or youth deal with issues of loss, grief, abandonment and rejection is to facilitate conversations in a sensitive, empathic, and timely way.

As we learned in earlier lessons, children and youth moving into adoption and guardianship are dealing with ambiguous loss and unresolved grief, and they cannot move forward while in a state of limbo.

Feelings of abandonment and rejection are additional issues inherent in the adoption and guardianship process, and, along with guilt and shame, impact their self-esteem and overall mental health.

## 2. Developmental Processing of Abandonment and Rejection

### 2.1 Developmental Processing of Abandonment and Rejection

Children will process their adoption developmentally. We will now explore these dynamics.

## ***2.2 Abandonment and Rejection: A Complex Clinical Issue***

Some children will feel that they were “taken” or “given away,” and that they, and/or their parents, were wrongly treated. In addition, if they are placed with others than their birth family, they may resent the fact that family members did not come forward to parent them or were passed over or prevented from parenting them.

As we discussed earlier, this realization usually occurs when a child is approximately 6-12 years old and can last long into adulthood. As you work with children of this age, and older, in your practice, be aware that this is a complex clinical issue that should be addressed even if the child or youth is not bringing it up.

## ***2.3 Facilitating Discussion with the Child or Youth***

As the clinician, you can facilitate discussion with the child or youth and parents about the child’s separation from their birth family, with as much honesty about the child’s story as possible, and at the appropriate developmental level.

It’s important to understand that, as the child comes to a deeper understanding of their relinquishment, they will still struggle with feelings of rejection and abandonment.

## ***2.4 Facilitating Discussion with the Child or Youth***

Some children and youth feel responsible for their own abandonment, believing that, *“If I were a better person...”* or *“If I were more lovable, I wouldn’t have been abandoned or rejected.”*

These feelings often lead to a sense of guilt and shame about being “less than” or “damaged.” This is especially true in situations involving abuse or neglect.

## ***2.5 Symptoms of Abandonment and Rejection***

Common symptoms of a sense of abandonment and rejection might be depression, poor self-esteem, feelings of being unlovable, fear of abandonment, clingy behaviors, avoidance of intimacy, poor attachment, general sadness, and expressions of grief.

Some become “people pleasers” to be sure that they ingratiate themselves, but at a cost to their own interests, while others wear a mask of self-reliance and keep people at a distance. Some suppress sadness by becoming angry and lashing out.

There might be other reasons for these behaviors, but as an adoption competent therapist, you should always explore the possibility that the child or youth is holding feelings of abandonment and rejection and address them openly.

Click the images to hear how three youths' experiences reflect these different perspectives.

1. 14-year-old April, who was adopted from China at the age of 20 months, said, *"I'm known as a good friend, as someone who is always there for others ... but now I realize that what I'm really doing is making sure that people like me ... want to be with me ... won't leave me."*
2. 16-year-old Antonio, who was adopted from foster care at the age of 7, said, *"I don't trust people ... keep my distance emotionally ... if I expect too much from them, I'll just be disappointed."*
3. 13-year-old Chayton, adopted from foster care at age 8, said *"I don't feel like I fit in anywhere. I don't look like people at school or at home. I wish I had the ability to be connected to my tribe."*

## **2.6 Identity, Abandonment, and Rejection**

It's important to recognize that the more layers of identity a young person has, the greater the potential risk. For instance, a youth who faces hatred or unjust treatment due to their physical or social characteristics and who *also* is adopted will often face additional potential areas of rejection or unjust treatment based on each of these characteristics.

The feelings of abandonment or rejection may be magnified and multiplied with potentially significant consequences, including:

- Bullying
- Harassment
- Family rejection
- Higher levels of depression and attempted suicide
- Use of illegal drugs

## **2.7 Impact of Abandonment and Rejection on Relationships**

If not addressed, and placed in proper perspective, children and youth will carry their feelings of abandonment and rejection into future relationships, causing difficulties, including sabotaging relationships to prove that they are unlovable or unworthy of lasting commitment, or to reject the relationship before they are rejected.

This is especially common in the adoptive parent-child relationship and is often what brings families to therapy for help in forming, or repairing, attachments.

When children or youth feel that they were wrongly taken from those who love them, they may fiercely hold loyalty to their loved ones.

Eight-year-old Hope, who was adopted from foster care said, *"I know that my mom has problems but my Papa took care of me good. They wouldn't let me live with Papa because they said he was too old."*

## ***2.8 Triggers for Feelings of Rejection and Abandonment***

As with feelings of loss, feelings of rejection and abandonment can be exacerbated by what might seem to be small triggers. Not being picked for a team, or not being invited to a birthday party, can elicit a strong reaction if the child or youth sees that incident as a trigger to his feelings of poor self-esteem, and sense of rejection, even harkening back to, *"My birth mother didn't want me."*

As we said earlier, breaking up or having a good friend move away can trigger a deep depression and should be regarded more seriously for youth who are dealing with a sense of abandonment and rejection. These reactions may also be layered on top of abandonment experiences in early life, for example, being left alone, or moving frequently.

## ***2.9 Children Placed at Young Age***

As discussed in the models of grief, the goal for your work with children and youth around abandonment and rejection is to help them formulate their story and understand how they came to adoption or guardianship so that they can integrate the reasons why their birth parents could not, or did not, keep them.

Please note, children placed as infants or at a very young age may not have conscious memories of their relinquishment but will still need your help to process feelings of loss and grief.

## ***2.10 Intercountry Adoptions***

Children and youth adopted from other countries may have additional abandonment issues, if their story includes being left anonymously some place where they were certain to be found; or, if they stayed in an orphanage for an extended period of time with rotating caregivers, and little opportunity for meaningful attachments to adults.

It is helpful to have a conversation about the economic and societal circumstances in the country of origin, and gather information about their placement, when possible, to help them make sense of their story.

The lack of certainty about their beginnings can impact children and youth throughout their childhood and adulthood, so as a clinician, it is important that you work with them to establish an integrated narrative.

## **2.11 Intercountry Adoption Video**

Here is a video of Meredith, who is an Asian American adoptee, talking about feeling different.

[Video Transcript]

*The natural inclination for an adopted person is to attribute everything bad that happens to them as a part of their adoption. Like, "Oh, that person didn't want to be friends with me; it must be because I was adopted." You know, that that's just what's in store for me. Or there's a certain fear like, "Oh, maybe there's just something about me that my mother or father or family"--however the relinquishment happened--"saw that I can't see, and what if other people see it?" And so it's kind of this double-blind.*

*I mean, children don't really understand why they're relinquished and put up for adoption, and of course, in that developmental stage your world is just you and everything revolves around it, hypothetically speaking. So if the world revolves around you, then of course, you caused everything that happened. In an isolated situation with just me, myself and I, yeah, as a child I might say, "Yeah, that makes sense. I agree with that and that's what makes sense to me." But we all learn as we get older that no, there's a lot going into everything that we experience from moment to moment. From our environment, from how we're feeling, from our interactions with other people.*

*And so if you're dealing with a adoptee that feels really down and it might be very likely that they're thinking, "Oh, well, this is just part of me being adopted, because I'm one of those people that aren't wanted or are not acceptable. And of course that's not true but I mean, that's the--I mean, even I still feel tempted to feel that way.*

[End of Video]

Video obtained from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAhAucpC2-0>.

## **3. Guilt and Shame**

### **3.1 Guilt and Shame**

Children and youth in adoption and guardianship often feel guilty because they believe they were responsible for their placement and ashamed because they were rejected by their birth family.

### **3.2 Youth's Reaction to Guilt and Shame**

Click each number to learn how a youth might react to feelings of guilt and shame.

1. Feelings of guilt and shame can lead to low self-esteem and sometimes result in self-destructive behaviors. These behaviors could be a clue for the adoption competent clinician that issues of abandonment and rejection should be explored with the adoptee, even if they are not presented as concerns by the child or youth.

2. Some youth will display perfectionist tendencies, achieving excellent grades and excelling in activities, in order to be valued and praised, but also becoming emotionally distressed when not achieving the goals they set for themselves. Underlying all of this is the fear of being given away again for not being good enough.
3. Some youth feel guilty when adopted into a family with greater means than their birth family. This is exacerbated when there are siblings who do not have the same advantages, like when the birth family is still living in poverty. These youth often assuage their guilt by giving away possessions.
4. Feelings of shame about being rejected by the very people who should have cherished them are common for adoptees. In addition, they might be ashamed of their family of origin, and carry additional shame because they identify with that family.
5. Some youth may internalize myths and misinformation about their community or heritage, leading them to feel (often unconsciously) that, in some way, they are inherently not as worthy, capable, intelligent, beautiful, or good as people outside their group.

### **3.3 Youth's Expression of Guilt**

Listen to 18-year-old Jerome, who was adopted from foster care at the age of 5:

*"I've thought about others in my birth family a lot recently. ... I've had so many opportunities in my life because I was adopted ... I've traveled a lot with my parents and sister ... gone to sleep away camp when I was younger ... have all the latest video games and an iPhone ... and now I'm going to college ... I doubt I would have had most of these things if I wasn't adopted ... I doubt that people in my birth family have what I have and done what I've done ... I feel kind of mixed up about everything ... grateful for what I have, but sad that my birth family doesn't have it, too."*

### **3.4 Assistance Needed by Children and Youth**

Children and youth need assistance with expressing anger and shame at what has happened to them, feelings of helplessness about the decisions made on their behalf, and ways in which they can grieve these losses so that they can move forward.

Remember that they will need to revisit these same issues again as they move through developmental stages.

## **4. Tools for Helping Children Express Their Feelings of Loss and Grief**

### **4.1 Tools for Helping Children and Youth Express Their Feelings of Loss and Grief**

Now let's look at some creative tools that you can use to help children and youth express their feelings of loss and grief.

## **4.2 Toolbox**

Helping children and teens process their loss and grief will require you to be flexible and creative in the strategies, tools, and approaches you use along the therapeutic journey. Remember that many children, because of early adverse experiences, may be at a different place chronologically than where they are developmentally.

Talk therapy has its place, but it is far more effective to use creative activities to help children and youth process grief and loss. Working with them at a sensory level is more productive than talk alone, especially if some of their trauma and loss occurred at a pre-verbal stage.

Click each of the tools from the toolbox to learn how you can use them to help children and youth with their feelings of loss and grief.

## **4.3 Loss Box**

In the book, *Being Adopted*, Dr. David Brodzinsky talks about grief and loss for child and youth adoptees by using a metaphor of keeping losses in a box.

Sometimes you can keep the box closed and go on with your daily routines, while not fully forgetting what is in it. However, sometimes life circumstances occur that make you return to the box, open it up, and explore the loss once again. After some consideration, you can put it back in the box for a while. It is always there, but not always foremost in your mind.

To help a child or youth express and contain loss, you might use this metaphor and have them make a physical loss box.

This is especially helpful for teens who are often overwhelmed by the loss of people, places and things that have been ripped away from them. Many are diagnosed with anxiety disorder, PTSD, or a mood disorder, when they are actually suffering from unresolved and disenfranchised grief because nobody has helped them to mourn their losses.

The use of the loss box allows the youth to acknowledge their losses, honor them, gain mastery over them, and ultimately offers a way to find symbolic closure and move forward.

*Loss box image provided with permission from Irina, age 15*

## **4.4 Making A Loss Box**

A shoebox works well. The youth can decorate the box using cutouts from a magazine, or personal photographs, drawings, sequins and feathers, or other materials that can be glued to the box.

Loss boxes can also reflect the heritage of the child using symbols and colors of their birth community. Once the box is to their liking, the youth can begin to create items that symbolize their loss using clay, poetry, photos, or other items that are important to them. They can also add notes and stories to the box.

*Loss box image provided with permission from Irina, age 15*

#### **4.5 Loss Box Reflection**

What kinds of things do you think a youth might put in a loss box? Name 5 possible items.

*Loss box image provided with permission from Irina, age 15*

#### **4.6 Loss Box Response**

These can be items of importance, such as a copy of a birth certificate, jewelry given by a birth parent, an award, photographs of significant people or pets, a button off a favorite dress; or it can be something symbolic of a loss like a drawing, a stone, a feather, or a cut-out picture.

Telling the story of each item and why it is important is a way to process that loss and to keep the memory in a safe place to be revisited at any time.

#### **4.7 Narrative Therapies**

Dr. David Brodzinsky discusses narrative therapy in the book, *Understanding and Treating Contemporary Families*, and his chapter is included as a handout in the Resources tab.

Now let's look at a few examples of narrative therapies. Click each box to learn more.

#### **4.8 Writing a Letter to Birth Parents**

No matter the underlying circumstances, it's important to present birth parents in a positive light without falsifying information. If parents are only presented in a negative light, that is all that youth have to connect to, which impacts their sense of self and identity. Whether they know their birth parents or not, children think about them frequently and may not talk about them. We want to create the space where they feel empowered to bring their birth parents into their life.

For some children and youth, writing a letter to the birth parent can be very helpful.

Click each number to learn more.

1. Regardless of whether the letter is sent, the act of constructing the letter with whatever they want to say or ask, can be very therapeutic.
2. The letter may be written over several therapy sessions, and it may be edited and changed many times. It is always good to keep each version so that the process of

writing the letter can be followed and reviewed as the sentiments and questions may change.

3. Letters can be kept in an envelope or a file folder that the child or youth can refer back to or scanned to a computer for safe keeping.
4. If there is an open relationship with the birth parent, the letter can be sent with the possibility of an answer.
5. Letter writing with therapeutic support can provide the child with an opportunity to share their feelings openly and honestly with their birth parents, and gain insights surrounding their relinquishment. For some children, this could be a process of forgiveness.

#### **4.9 Case Study: Natalie**

Let's look at the example of Natalie to see how writing a letter to birth parents can be helpful. Click to hear Natalie's story at each age of her life.

Age 10: Natalie came in to foster care at the age of 10 years old, and she was with her foster and adoptive family from the beginning. She had lived with her birth mother off and on for the first 10 years but was passed around to relatives when her mother was periodically arrested for drugs and prostitution. She knew that her birth mother was going to be incarcerated for a long time and that her parental rights had been terminated.

Age 14: At the age of 14, Natalie was well integrated into her adoptive family, but she also had some loyalty to her birth family, which was creating anxiety. Natalie wanted to correspond with her birth mother, who was still in prison. She wanted to know what kind of relationship she could have with her birth mother. She was pulling away from her adoptive parents, as she felt conflicted about her loyalty. In therapy, she explored the possibility of writing to her birth mother in prison to attempt to re-establish her relationship. Her parents were supportive of the contact, given that she was in therapy.

Age 16: At the age of 16, Natalie started corresponding with her birth mother in prison, and at first, she was very excited about the budding relationship and had high hopes for a successful reunion. While she received letters back, she learned quickly that her birth mother wanted things from her, like money and cigarettes, but she didn't really have an interest in Natalie's life, accomplishments, and meaningful relationships. With the help of her therapist, Natalie was able to talk about what she had hoped for, but also was able to look realistically at who her birth mother was and understand more fully why her birth mother was unable to parent her. Her therapist helped her process the boundaries she wanted to set with her birth mother. Natalie's adoptive parents reported that Natalie was drawing closer to them again. They were relaxing and they were grateful that she had resolved this inner conflict.

Age 18: When Natalie turned 18, she visited her birth mother who was still in prison, and she met with a few other relatives. She was able to forgive her birth mother for not being able to care for her, and her anxiety dissipated as she moved toward adulthood and college.

#### **4.10 Natalie's Letter Reflection**

As her therapist, what kind of preparation would you help her with? What is it that Natalie wants to communicate to her birth mother? How would you help her to process the potential responses from her birth mother?

#### **4.11 Natalie's Letter Reflection**

You may have thought of the following:

Share something about her life in the letter and let her birth mother know that she is okay. Maybe include questions like: *"Do you ever think of me?"* *"Would you like to have contact with me?"* or *"Would you be willing to write me a letter?"*

Be clear about what she wants from her birth mother – a letter back, answers to specific questions, a possible meeting in the future.

What if her birth mother did not write back? How would she feel? What if she wrote back and said she did not want to stay in touch? What if she wanted more than Natalie was willing to give?

#### **4.12 Role Play**

A variation of letter writing is a role play writing exercise.

The child or youth writes a letter to someone, such as a birth parent, saying whatever they want.

The child or youth then pretends that they are the birth parent who has received the letter and writes one back.

The child or youth then responds to the "birth parent's" letter; and the process continues.

This allows them to explore the possible dialogue with that significant person, and helps to reveal what they are hoping for, or are fearful of, in that person's response, or in a possible relationship.

You will find a description of this process in Dr. Brodzinsky's chapter handout, *Understanding and Treating Adoptive Families*.

#### **4.13 Artistic Expression**

There are many forms of artistic expression that can be used therapeutically with youth. Collaging, journaling, and poetry are all vehicles for revisiting losses and telling the story about them. These activities allow for experimenting with changing the narrative, seeing the loss in a different way, and making sense of the loss. The process of writing stories or poetry, making a collage, and arranging the story in pictures can assist in the grieving process.

For some youth, the creation of traditional forms of artistic expression from their community of origin can be used to symbolize their losses. These creations can be used in groups for sharing of stories and can help youth reclaim pieces of their identity.

#### ***4.14 Storyboarding***

The use of storyboarding allows the child or youth to tell a story over several sessions using large poster boards as a backing and pictures that they can draw or cut out of magazines.

This is especially helpful for children or youth who like to draw and/or write stories.

Click each image to learn more.

The story might or might not be related to their own, but they can talk about the story in a less personal way, making up characters to depict situations that can be revealing of their own experiences.

The pictures can be tacked to the poster board so that they can be moved or changed until the story is complete.

They can be gathered into a book when the story is finished and referred to later to see if it has changed. New storyboards can be created at any time.

#### ***4.15 Art and Music Therapy***

Art and music therapy are very powerful in processing grief by using a different part of the brain. Playing music, singing, motion like dance, drumming, molding clay, drawing, painting, and other forms of art and music help to access deep emotion and often work to bring forward buried feelings and old losses.

These approaches offer an opportunity to explore forms of expression from the child's or youth's community of origin which may resonate with them. Engaging in activities like creating artwork or composing a song can also serve as a powerful way to process grief.

#### ***4.16 Sand Tray Therapy***

Sand tray therapy allows the child to use a sand tray and miniature figures to express feelings and emotions non-verbally by creating different scenes that can be changed over time.

One creative way to use sand tray therapy is to help the child tell their story using the miniature figurines, beginning with figures representing birth parents and family, adding new figures with each move the child has experienced, and setting aside those people no longer in their life in a corner of the tray. By the end of the storytelling, it is very clear how many people the child has lost.

It's important to note that, for some, the term "no longer in their life" does not apply because they believe that important people, places, and things continue to be carried in the spirit of the person.

The figures that the child chooses to depict people in their life can be revealing, as well, as they may indicate the child's feelings about them. Choosing a princess figure for one person expresses as much as choosing a dinosaur for another person.

Including the parents in this exercise as the child tells their story can help parents to really understand visually the many losses the child has experienced and gain an appreciation for the child's grief.

#### **4.17 Group Therapy**

Group therapy is especially helpful for teens, as we have mentioned before. A group of teens can:

- Participate in psychodrama, writing scripts that they can act out together
- Write stories together with each teen adding a chapter
- Make a video on a particular topic that they have in common
- Create digital stories
- Have drumming or talking circles

Sharing their experiences and losses can help to normalize the grief process and can help them realize that they are not alone in their experiences.

#### **4.18 Group Therapy Example**

The following script for a short skit set to music was written by the Teen Group at Camp PAKK in California. Everyone in the group contributed to the theme and the script, and it was performed for parents, staff and other children attending the camp. It is a wonderful example of collaboration on an adoption theme. It is called *The Rhythm of Adoption*.

##### *Betty Bithem*

*Everyone has their own rhythm. So too of course did Betty Bithem. Her beat, so to speak, was very unique and went "Boo cha pa-koo ba-ka B-them."*

*This rhythm was set before Betty was born, and while still in the womb she danced up a storm. So comfy was she and why wouldn't she be? For you see this was young Betty's norm.*

*Now this rhythm inside her might guide her it's true. But the loss of her parents was painfully new. And the rhythm they'd paired was no longer shared; yet inside her it still continued.*

*So this cadence she vowed would remain, and she'd never feel such loss again. This tie deep inside would never subside, and Betty could steer clear of pain.*

*Well, she soon found herself in a new home, where Betty felt shy and alone. The rhythm she knew was different it's true from everyone else she had known.*

*This family and she weren't the same. So although she had taken their name, she'd never conform to her new family's norm, and let them extinguish her flame.*

*So Betty was forced to decide, how to deal with this rhythm inside. After all, what to do, when your beat is askew? So her true rhythm Betty did hide.*

*But having no rhythm to share, Betty found. Made it hard to get close to the others around. The answer was clear, and in fact it appeared she should mimic. This gimmick was sound.*

*And it looked like it worked on the outside. But no matter how hard Betty tried. Denying what's real and pretending to feel left her quite a bit unsatisfied.*

*So finally young Betty Bithem. Confided and shared her true rhythm, with her sister and brother and father and mother and went "Boo cha pa-koo b-ka B-them."*

*Surely the damage was done and could never again be un-spun. How indeed would they feel, now that Betty'd revealed, her true rhythm to them all, everyone?*

*But strangely they all seemed all right; no one laughed or put up a fight. So once more, to be sure, from her core, she let roar and this time she used all of her might.*

*Feeling quite exposed and scared, Betty glanced, at the family with whom she'd taken this chance. Meanwhile a lone smile appeared, and another, and again, and again...and they danced.*

*Image obtained from <http://www.kinshipcenter.org/about-kinship-center/news-and-events/breaking-news/families-build-skills-and-connection-at-therapeutic-camp.html>.*

#### **4.19 Animal Assisted Therapy**

The use of certified therapy dogs or other animals in therapy can be effective in processing loss and grief.

Telling the story of how a dog was part of a litter of puppies, but had to leave his mother, brothers and sisters, can prompt the child or youth to empathize with the dog and see the similarity of their story.

This can facilitate conversation about the people left behind.

Animals can provide unconditional comfort because they can be held and cuddled or sit quietly with the grieving youth. Additionally, some youth talk more freely to an animal than to a person.

## **4.20 Equine Therapy Video**

Equine therapy is very powerful and requires special training, especially in working with youth and teens. Take a moment to watch the following video on the benefits of equine therapy for adopted children.

[Video Transcript]

*THERAPIST: The girls that I typically work with share in common a certain background. They have experienced sexual molestation, physical abuse, perhaps even having witnessed a great deal of domestic violence in their home settings. All of which creates a certain adaptive response that ultimately affects their behaviors. It affects their ability to maintain their progress academically, much less socially.*

*ADOLESCENT 1: What I've experienced here is that, like, animals are just like human beings. And, like, we can't just treat them like crap and the very next day expect them to come back to us. They having feelings just as well as we do. They know that we love them and they know that we care about them. And they know that we are here to help them, not hurt them.*

*THERAPIST: We have a number of adolescents who were referred to us because they're engaged in self-harming behaviors. And when interviewed these students will typically tell you that the physical harm is actually preferential to feeling or even identifying the emotional pain that they've experienced as a result of their traumas.*

*ADOLESCENT 2: This is the best therapy that I have ever experienced in my life. The horse that I worked with, his name was Uno. And Uno made me realize that I'm looking for someone to care or someone to just point me in the right direction.*

*THERAPIST: There may be some criticism--or at least some misunderstanding--of why equine therapy, why could this possibly be a benefit? In traditional psychiatry settings the aspect of individual--and certainly, at times, group therapy--can be fairly intimidating for victims of trauma. The use of an alternative setting, as well as nonverbal communication, has significant advantages for those persons who find that they aren't able to articulate what they're thinking, what they're feeling.*

*ADOLESCENT 3: This is my third time at the ranch, and I noticed that every single time I come out here it gets better and better. More than going to some guy who's going to give me medicine and talk to me about how my emotions are, ever would.*

*THERAPIST: It's quite a privilege to be a part of an equine-assisted therapy program, because this is something that motivates the girls in their treatment.*

*ADOLESCENT 4: Equine therapy has been the best therapy of my life. Any therapy before this was just nonsense to me; I never really got it.*

*THERAPIST: The use of equine-assisted therapy, I think, is very influential in terms of helping people connect with that intensity of emotion, which has in many cases impaired their functioning up until the point in which it can be processed and expressed in a healthy way.*

[End of video]

Video obtained from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLd28F9AaRA>.

#### **4.21 Tools Reflection**

Can you think of other tools that you have used to help children and youth talk about or process their grief and losses? List them here.

#### **4.22 Tools Reflection**

You may have thought of these things:

- Memory Lantern
- Memory Candle
- Grief Journal
- Memory Bracelet
- Memorial Garden
- Timelines
- Goodbye Letter

Please note, there are other tools, such as cinematherapy, bibliotherapy, and lifebooks, that have been discussed in other lessons. Also, a quick internet search can provide some additional resources.

## **5. Supporting Youth Through Transitions**

### **5.1 Supporting Youth Through Transitions**

In this last section, we will discuss some strategies for supporting a child or youth with a transition from one family to another, whether from foster care to an adoptive family, or from a disrupted placement to a new family, setting the stage for a successful transition is essential to the child's ability to separate from one family and engage with another.

### **5.2 The Good Goodbye**

As we mentioned in a previous lesson, the child or youth will grieve the loss to the degree that attachment exists.

For many children and youth, the sense of rejection may erode their sense of self and a positive identity.

In the book, *Promoting Successful Adoptions*, the authors cite the work of Kay Donley, a pioneer in the field of adoption practice. Her formula for a “good goodbye” remains as a best practice.

### **5.3 Four Disengagement Messages**

Kay Donley posited that a child or youth needs to hear four disengagement messages from caregivers to whom they are attached but are leaving to be able to move on to a new attachment to a foster, adoptive, or guardianship family. These messages are:

- I am loved...I am an okay person.
- It's not my fault that I cannot stay with you.
- I will always be remembered.
- I am wished well, and it is okay to love someone else.

In addition, the child or youth needs to be helped to accept that they cannot return home or to their previous family. They also need support to overcome feelings of self-blame and responsibility.

Too often they are entangled in a web of self-blame, taking responsibility for things over which they had no control.

### **5.4 Engage the Caregivers**

The ideal situation is for the child or youth to hear these messages directly from the parent or caregiver they are leaving in a personal visit.

If that cannot happen, the parent or caregiver can join with the clinician to find alternative ways for the child or youth to hear these messages.

The parent or caregiver can share the message in a virtual meeting or through a recorded message. The parent or caregiver can write a letter to the child or youth, which can be read and incorporated in their lifebook.

It may be valuable for other relatives or previous caregivers to give the message to the child or youth.

If the parent or caregiver is in therapy themselves, you might collaborate with them to write a letter or prepare for a visit.

It is important not to underestimate how valuable it can be to incorporate these personal messages. When children have these opportunities for direct communication to explain what is happening, it reduces their sense of anxiety, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

### **5.5 Letter Written by Birth Parent Reflection**

What would be important to include in a letter written by a birth parent or other caregiver? Write a paragraph that you could use as an example for such a letter.

## **5.6 Letter Written by Birth Parent Response**

Here is a suggested paragraph within a letter from a birth mom:

*I want you to know that I am so very sad that you cannot stay with me, but I cannot take care of you and keep you safe.*

*I want you to have a good life with parents who can keep you safe, take care of you and love you. Please believe that you did not do anything that caused me to give you away.*

*I have problems and can't care for you. You are a lovable child and you deserve good things. It is not your fault that you cannot stay with me.*

*I will not forget you, and as time goes by, I would like to hear about how you are doing.*

*It is okay with me for you to become a part of your new family, and to love them. You can love many people in your life.*

## **5.7 In-Person Visit**

When possible and safe, in-person "good goodbye" visits can be valuable for all parties. Click on each number to hear about the important components of the in-person "good goodbye" visit.

1. **Understand the Purpose:** All the parties must be prepared and understand the purpose of the visit. Regardless of the nature of the move or who the child or youth is leaving, you can help the parents communicate their positive feelings for them, the reason for their separation, and the parent's desire for them to be happy in a new family.
2. **Clear Messages:** The child or youth must be given the clear message that the separation is not their fault.
3. **Everyone is Valued:** As the clinician supporting an in-person visit, it will be important to acknowledge all parties' feelings in relation to the separation. It's hard for everybody.
4. **Emotionally Challenging:** This is an emotionally challenging meeting for all concerned, but it helps the child to understand what is happening to them and why and leaves no room for ambiguity. The adoptive parents or guardians can then reinforce and remind the child or youth of the four points and help them maintain their self-esteem in the face of such a profound loss.
5. **Preparing for Unexpected Outcomes:** There are times when what the youth's expectations from the visit are not met. It is important to explore with the youth ahead of time some of the potential outcomes of the meeting so they are better prepared for disappointment. This includes not getting the information they are seeking, the explanation isn't satisfying, or the person doesn't come to the meeting.

## **5.8 Brian**

Let's look at the example of Brian.

Brian, age 10, has been in his foster home with the Davies family for 2 years while his birth mother, Denise, has been in and out of recovery.

She has been unable to stay clean and sober despite being given several extensions by the judge to try to accomplish this goal.

She has had periodic visitation with Brian when she's been clean and sober for short periods of time.

The court decided to terminate her parental rights and allow Brian to be adopted by his foster family. Future visitation will be considered by the adoptive parents, if Denise can maintain her sobriety, but for now that is not an option. An in-person visit has been arranged so that Denise can give permission to Brian to commit to his adoptive family.

## **5.9 Preparing Brian Reflection**

How would you prepare Brian for this meeting and what would you tell him?

## **5.10 Preparing Brian Response**

Some suggestions might be:

- Talk to Brian about how his visits with his mom have been over the 2 years that he has been in foster care and remind him of how difficult it has been for her to remain sober enough to see him on a regular basis.
- Explain to him that his mom is still struggling to take care of herself and remain sober, and she is not able to take care of anyone else, so the judge has decided that Brian should stay with the Davies and be adopted.
- Help Brian understand that he needs a family who can take care of him, keep him safe, make sure he goes to school and can do all the fun things that boys and girls should be able to do while they are growing up. He needs a family who can let him enjoy being a child without worrying about who will take care of him.
- Ask Brian questions about how he is feeling about the meeting with his mom and what questions he wants to ask her. Help him practice asking those questions.
- Validate for him that he has a right to feel whatever he is feeling, and that you will help him through this difficult time.
- Use lifebooks to facilitate conversations.

## **5.11 Preparing Denise Reflection**

How would you prepare Denise for the meeting?

## **5.12 Preparing Denise Response**

Some suggestions might be:

- Validate for Denise this extreme loss and her feelings of sadness and defeat. She may be angry with the court and you should let her vent her anger.
- However, it is important to help Denise look at the visit as something positive that she can do for her son, Brian. He needs to have her permission to join his adoptive family, and he also needs to know that it is not his fault that Denise cannot parent him.
- Help her practice saying the things that will help him to begin to make that shift:
  - *I love you and I want you to be safe and happy with the Davies.*
  - *It's not your fault that you cannot stay with me. I cannot be a good parent to you while I am trying to get well myself.*
  - *I do not know how long it will take and you need to have a family right now to help you grow up.*
  - *I will always love you and think of you.*
  - *It is okay to love other parents.*
- It is important that Denise not make any promises about the future, even though she might know that the Davies will consider visitation if she can maintain her sobriety.
- Prepare her for possible questions that Brian might have for her.

## **5.13 Open Door for Transitioning**

When children and youth have the opportunity to have a good goodbye, it helps to lessen the ambiguity, provides a process to share their feelings of loss, and alleviates their sense of responsibility, thereby opening the door for transitioning to a new family. Your role is a critical factor in ensuring these outcomes.

# **6. Wrapping Up**

## **6.1 Wrapping Up**

In this lesson, we talked about how you as the mental health professional can support the child or youth in addressing abandonment, rejection, guilt and shame, and discussed tools you can use to facilitate the processing of loss and grief.

## **6.2 Your Journal**

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

## **6.3 Journal Reflection**

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

### ***6.4 Journal Response***

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

### ***6.5 Conclusion***

Congratulations! You have completed Impact of Abandonment and Rejection on Children's and Youth's Mental Health. In the next lesson, we will discuss how to prepare parents to support their child's grief.