

the impact of toxic parenting

It is a truth rarely spoken, that many adopted and fostered children had "toxic birth parents". As adopters we are terribly 'nice' about our children's birth families, highlighting their strengths in an effort to balance their weaknesses.

Within the adoption world we have a tendency to mythologize birth parents, we seldom acknowledge, just how deeply damaged and damaging many birth parents are. We see and honour their difficulties, their problems, their tragic circumstances; we recognise they 'love' their children, but often fail to truly recognise their children's stunted emotional growth and distorted identity.

I recently read two books which I wished I had read before my children arrived. They would have helped me personally and as an adopter. I hope that by sharing some of their content, professionals and parents can gain another viewpoint, because the more perspectives we have, the deeper our insights.

Both are self help books written by therapists for adults who had abusive or inadequate parents. Both include stories and case studies of adults who had troubled childhoods. Both therapists ran many workshops for adults struggling to make sense of their unpredictable or explosive behaviour; their chaotic lives or feelings of deep inadequacy.

One of the most challenging tasks of an adopter is to really step inside the shoes of the child. To see their map of the world, their beliefs and so understand their behaviour. These two books give an insight into the world of the traumatised child from an unusual perspective – from the adult's inner child. Hence I would recommend them to adopters, social workers, child therapists, decision makers and prospective adopters as a way of broadening our thinking.

In this article all quotes in italics are from *Toxic parents - overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*; first published in 1989 and reprinted frequently.

To quote the back cover "Susan Forward PhD, draws on case histories and the real life voices of adult children to help you free yourself from the frustrating patterns of your relationship with your parents – and discover a new world of self confidence, inner strength, and emotional independence".

Dr Forward noticed a common emotional blind spot in thousands of her clients. Few made the connection between their parents and their current problems.

Throughout her book, adults tell their tales of childhood abuse, neglect and intolerance with a surprisingly matter of fact delivery; as if their experience was normal. Sadly some of these experiences are all too common and they occur in many homes; not just "those known to social services". Many of us would have preferred a modified and more positive parenting experience

ourselves. We all have "baggage". None of us had a perfect past or perfect parents!

What is a toxic parent?

No parent can be emotionally available all the time. "A toxic parent has negative patterns of behaviour which are consistent and dominant in the child's life . . . The adult children of toxic parents suffer similar symptoms – damaged self-esteem, leading to self destructive behaviour. . . They almost all feel worthless, unlovable and inadequate". I see this with coaching clients, often high achievers who lead apparently normal lives, yet whose inner world is polluted by difficult childhood experiences.

Toxic parenting exists in rich and poor homes, in villages and cities, in all religions. It is not confined to the poverty stricken

underclass. Bullying parents can be in any playground throughout the land. Emotionally unavailable parents smile out from glossy magazines, maybe with an infant perched on their hips.

Sometimes an entire society, country or community are unable to provide adequate parenting due to wars, earthquakes, a tsunami or simply a lack of adults. Imagine the impact on tens of thousands of children evacuated from London in World War Two or communities

with many adults lost to AIDS.

Susan Forward categorises six different types of toxic parents.

"The inadequate parents: constantly focussing on their own problems, they turn their children into "mini adults" who take care of them.

The controllers: they use guilt, manipulation, and even over helpfulness to direct their children's lives.

The alcoholics: mired in a denial and chaotic mood swings, their addiction leaves little time or energy for the demands of parenthood.

The verbal abusers: whether overtly abusive or subtly sarcastic, they demoralise their children with constant put downs and rob them of their self confidence.

The physical abusers: incapable of controlling their own deep seated rage they often blame their children for their own ungovernable behaviour.

The sexual abusers: whether flagrantly sexual or covertly seductive, they are the ultimate betrayers, destroying the very heart of childhood – its innocence."

When the book was written in 1989, drug addiction was rarer and not included. Although the characteristics of alcohol and drug using parents are not identical many traits are similar.

Adequate parenting means protecting children from harm (physical and emotional); providing for their physical needs, providing love, attention and affection and giving moral and

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ethical guidelines. To parent adequately; nourishing, comforting, consistent behaviour is required. Without it children feel unloved.

Put simply – toxic parents are focused on themselves and their needs; adequate parents are focused on the child's needs.

The infant perspective

Babies believe their parents are perfect. So do infants. So do toddlers. So do preschool children. If our parents are perfect we feel protected. *"Children soak up both verbal and non verbal messages like sponges – indiscriminately . . . The things they learn at home about themselves and others become universal truths engraved deeply in their minds."* This imprinting occurs in the first seven years of life, during the next seven years we model – primarily our parents.

With adequate parenting infants believe they are OK, they matter, they can trust the world and the people who care for them.

Adequate parents understand that the two-year-old saying 'no' is asserting their independence. The three-year-old climbing on to the chair on his own is developing his unique identity and self will. Even though this behaviour may be inconvenience an adequate parent sees it as a step on the journey towards healthy growth and independence.

"Toxic parents aren't so understanding. From toilet training through adolescence they tend to see rebellion or even individual differences as a personal attack. They defend themselves by reinforcing their child's dependence and helplessness". This has ramifications. Curiosity is seen as either 'naughty' or wilful disobedience to be criticised or punished.

In my experience birthparents who have their children removed are toxic parents . . . Who had toxic parents . . . Who had toxic parents . . . Who had toxic parents. Hence, without intervention, the cycle continues; generation after generation.

If, as adopters, we can get inside our children and understand their world, we can reduce their pervasive, toxic shame and so avoid some of the adult angst discussed in the book.

How does a child interpret abuse?

Although Susan Forward gives a chapter to each category, she recognizes that there are many overlapping characteristics (denial, guilt, shame etc.) resulting from different types of abuse.

"Incest victims often become very skilful child actors. In their inner world, there is so much terror, confusion, sadness, loneliness, and isolation that many developed a false self with which to relate to the outside world, to act as if things were fine and normal."

This false sense of self explains why some children on placement may behave differently. It may also account for children who 'seem normal' despite known horrendous experiences.

"Abused children have the cauldron of rage bubbling inside them. You cannot be battered, humiliated, terrified, denigrated, and blamed for your own pain without getting angry. The battered child has no

way to release this anger. In adulthood that anger has to find an outlet."

Adopted Children may show that anger to their adoptive parents and/or the world. Moving them from the original abusive environment opens up a chink through which the rage can vent. It does not remove or change the negative beliefs, fractured identity or pain. These will only change with significant therapeutic reparenting and input from therapists skilled in trauma work.

"It is abusive to launch frequent verbal attacks on the child's intelligence, appearance, competence, or value as a human being." Those wounds don't show, can't be placed on a court report yet are profoundly damaging.

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In my next article I will expand the impact of trauma and toxic parenting at different ages, primarily using the work of John Bradshaw in his book *Home Coming*. This explains beautifully our children's frequent issues with trust, guilt, feelings, competence, independence and confidence

which are linked to specific child development stages.

Healing Tools and Systems

In the second half of her book, Dr Forward offers processes and tools to help adults heal and also addresses the family system. She explains how the inner workings of a family system is barely visible on the surface. However their spoken and unspoken beliefs and rules dictate many basic assumptions about life.

"Toxic parents resist any external reality that challenges their beliefs. Rather than change they develop a distorted view of reality to support the beliefs they already have . . . As children of toxic parents grow up, they carry their parents' distorted beliefs unchallenged into their own adult lives."

If a child is adopted they bring this 'distorted view of reality' into their new home. That view will not change just because you are 'nice', feed them well and appear to consider their feelings. They 'know' it's just an act, because adults can pretend to be nice, sometimes for ages. They know adults are unpredictable and can't be trusted. You are no different.

Sometimes adopted children impose their family system on you. Siblings in particular, have a well established way of being. They operate as a team. As their new adopters you are the outsiders. The kids know far more about family life and their system than you – even before they have words.

Dr Forward is a believer in short term therapy and believes *"therapy is most effective when it proceeds down the double track: both changing current self defeating behaviour and disconnecting from the traumas of the past"*. Right on!

Should we not be providing these tools for healing in childhood rather than waiting until the child is middle aged?

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