

# toxic shame: how to the wonderful inner

**THIS piece links with Helen Oakwater's August 2008 article in *Adoption Today* 'The Impact of Toxic Parenting'. In this article the perspective is reversed and considers the long term consequences of inadequate caregiving on children at specific developmental stages. The aim of both articles is to connect infant experiences to subsequent adult behaviours (20 or 30 years later), and equip adopters with a framework to link the past and present to the future. As with all Helen's articles, it offers another perspective on the complex task of parenting traumatised children. Readers may also find her article 'Expectations, Reality and Time Travel for Heroes' a useful adjunct.**

*'I couldn't believe I could be so childish. I was 40 years old and I had raged and screamed until everyone – my wife, my stepchildren, and my son – was terrified. Then I got into my car and left them. There I was, sitting all alone in a motel in the middle of our vacation on Padre Island. I felt very alone and ashamed... It was as if I'd gone into an altered state of consciousness. I hated myself! What was the matter with me?'*

In the opening chapter John Bradshaw explains how he came to realise that his vacation behaviour was a spontaneous age regression. Throughout his bestseller *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child*, first published in 1991, he demonstrates how current adult behaviour is linked to unmet childhood needs and stages of development.

I think this knowledge is enormously helpful for adopters as it's another method of getting inside our children's heads.

Bradshaw's father was an alcoholic, and as a child, John learnt to stay quiet, and not express his anger. Then over the years, 'my anger festered in the mildew of my soul. Like a hungry dog in the basement, it became ravenous and turned into rage. Most of the time I guarded it vigilantly.'

Bradshaw suggests that, 'when a child's development is arrested, when feelings are repressed, especially the feelings of anger and hurt, a person grows up to be an adult with an angry, hurt child inside of him. This child will spontaneously contaminate the person's adult behaviour.'

Adopted children will have festering anger, deep sadness and feelings of worthlessness, acquired when their needs were not met in infancy and beyond. In the adoption world, we talk about these features, the early trauma, the disturbed attachment cycle, the learned helplessness, the distortion of self by abuse, yet we rarely project their consequences into adulthood.

Children traumatised in infancy (whether adopted, fostered or remaining with birth family) often grow into rage filled teenagers and angry young adults. That's why understanding these principles and projecting likely behaviours forwards into the future is essential for new, experienced and prospective adopters. It is hard to imagine your toddler being 31, but it will happen. A 'toddler tantrum' when six foot tall and 15 stone, could result in a long prison sentence. Is that what you want?

John Bradshaw (like Susan Forward, author of *Toxic Parents*,

featured in my last article) is a therapist who has run many workshops for adults with persistent problems such as addiction, depression, troubled relationships and chronic dissatisfaction.

John's experience is not just theoretical; he is a recovering alcoholic, who honestly shares, without self indulgence, his life experiences, as a tool to illustrate issues and healing processes.

The book explains how the 'wonder child' (a term coined by Carl Jung) became contaminated. Bradshaw explains that, 'children are naturally filled with wonder, are spontaneous and live in the now'. They are 'wonderful' where each letter stands for one of the natural traits, which need to be nurtured and encouraged – something a 'toxic parent' finds very difficult.

**Wonder**

**Optimism**

**Naivety**

**Dependence**

**Emotions**

**Resilience**

**Free Play**

**Uniqueness**

**Love**

When any of these traits are squashed, dented or violated; the child is wounded, hurt or deadened. Their growth is distorted. Emotional milestones are not reached; masks are used by the child to protect and hide their true self. The child's Inner Working Model and view of themselves and the world incorporates stress, fear, rage and distrust.

*'Caretakers need to be patient and understanding. Lacking these qualities, the parents will expect far too much from the child. In most of the physical abuse cases that I'm familiar with, the abusing parent believed that the child was deliberately being malicious. They expected him to be much more mature than was possible for his age.'*

This lack of understanding and expecting too much from a child is commonplace with children who come into care. Their parents can interpret curiosity as wilful disobedience, experimentation as naughty and crying as a personal affront. They are unable to put their child's needs ahead of their own.

Bradshaw uses the mnemonic 'contaminated' to explain how the wonderful inner child became wounded and links these classifications to developmental stages and healing strategies.

He suggests that some adults are run by their inner child. We expect people to behave in line with their chronological age, yet their level of functioning may be significantly younger. This is a common trait seen in parents who are involved with Social Services. Because their own developmental needs were not met, they can't adequately care for the children to whom they give birth. It is like asking a four-year-old (in a 25-year-old body) to look after a three-year-old.

This is how 'Toxic Parenting' evolves. Some parents are actually children within an adult's body. A parent may not deliberately set out to harm their child – but they do.

# Trauma contaminates the child



**Helen Oakwater is an adoptive parent, NLP Coach and Trainer. She adopted a sibling group in the early 1990s and has first hand experience of living with 'the child who hurts'. Her adoption and NLP credentials are listed on her website along with previous articles published in Adoption Today. [www.helenoakwater.com](http://www.helenoakwater.com)**

*'If our caretakers have a wounded inner child, their neediness will prevent them from meeting their own children's needs. Instead, they will either be angry at their child's neediness or will try to get their own needs met by making their child an extension of themselves.'*

*'The wonder child is dependent because he is in a process of maturing, or ripening. Each stage of development is a step towards... adulthood. If the child's needs are not met at the proper time and in the proper sequence, he moves on without the resources necessary to meet tasks of the next stage. A small mistake in the beginning has far-reaching consequences later on.'*

The chart illustrates different stages of development. It gives a sense of what is needed when. Various types of abuse, unmet needs and the absence of key positive experiences generate *'Toxic Shame: the feeling of being flawed and diminished and never measuring up. Toxic shame feels much worse than guilt. With guilt you've done something wrong; but you can repair that – you can do something about it. With toxic shame there is something wrong with you and there is nothing you can do about it; you are inadequate and ineffective. Toxic shame is the core of the wounded child.'*

Anyone who has heard Dan Hughes PhD (the much-loved and respected American clinical child psychologist,) speak at a

conference or training event in the UK, knows his belief that at the core of intensely damaged children is 'pervasive shame'.

Connecting the work of Dan Hughes, Susan Forward and John Bradshaw makes sense of our children's behaviour. These two short articles are an attempt to link maladaptive adult behaviour to negative childhood experiences. I hope it's sparked your curiosity, expanded your map of the world and exposed you to fresh ways of thinking.

You may want to read these books for yourselves. Remember they are written for adults who had difficult childhoods, not for parents, so you won't find overt strategies for reparenting traumatised children. However you will find chunks of useful information, germs of ideas, personal stories, theoretical models and growth strategies. I think they open a door into both our children's minds and our own.

Parenting traumatised children is the hardest job in the world and possibly the most thankless; hence the more tools you have, the more you will be able to detoxify your children and help them melt the pervasive, toxic shame which resides deep inside them. ■

© Helen Oakwater 2008

**Some Guidelines and Building Blocks for Dependency Needs** used by Bradshaw; based on Erik Erikson's (childhood) developmental stages

I AM ...	Age	Stage	Needs	Development polarity (+/-)	Ego strength	Power of	Relationship issue	Impact of deficiency
I am you	0-9m	Infant symbiotic	'Interpersonal bridge' Mirroring eyes, echoing voice, loved, admired, valued, being special, taken seriously, touched; certain Mother will not leave you	Basic trust v. mistrust	Hope	Being	Healthy Narcissism	Toxic shame. Believe something is wrong with you
I am me	9-18m 18m-3y	Toddler – exploratory – separation	Curiosity nurtured to express separateness, learn balance of 'letting go' and 'holding on'	Autonomy v shame and doubt	Willpower	Sensing and doing	Psychological birth. Counter-dependence	Toxic Shame – believe it is not ok to 'be you', boundary issues, addictions
I am someone	3-6y	Pre-schooler	Healthy adults to model behaviour; heroes, magical and make-believe play	Initiative v. guilt	Purpose	Imagining and feeling	Independence	Toxic-guilt – lack of individual identity resulting in role disorders e.g. super-responsible one, overachiever, people pleaser; caretaker; offender
I am capable	6y-puberty	School age	Learning opportunities, support socialisation	Industry v. inferiority	Competence	Knowing and learning	Inter-dependence Co-operation	Toxic shame No sense of self
I am my unique self	13-26y	Adolescence	Establishment of a conscious identity	Identity v. role confusion	Fidelity	Regeneration	Independence from family	This is where earlier gaps become even more prominent