Neglect

By Kathleen A. Platzman, Ph.D.

In the past several years, our society has called upon the foster care system to do much more than temporarily provide food and shelter for children whose parents cannot. Now foster families are routinely asked to care for physically and emotionally neglected children. Neglect occurs when a child’s physical (food/shelter) and/or psychological (dependability, trust, warmth, loving) needs have not been met over a long period of time. The experience of neglect has the power to change the way a child sees him or herself, others and the world. Because neglected children have never had a protective, safe, and loving home, they tend not to trust the world to be accepting and kind or responsive to their feelings and needs.

Neglected children have no expectation that their needs can or should be met because no one has ever provided them with consistent physical or emotional nurturing. This is expressed in a wide range of attitudes, skills and feelings. They can be angry, pessimistic, jaded, and cynical. Sometimes they have mature knowledge of survival skills for a dangerous world (such as stealing food). They can have hidden fears, seemingly bottomless need, and social withdrawal. Some believe that they are worthless, unsafe, or weak. They might also believe that caretakers are under-responsive, unreliable, or even dangerous.

How did they get this way? Many different kinds of experiences are neglectful. Parents/caretakers can be explosive in their anger, give out inappropriate punishments, or scapegoat the child. Others can be literally neglectful of physical necessities. They also provide no supervision, sympathy or other kinds of emotional support. Sometimes
neglectful parents and caretakers exploit children by forcing them to take a parent role and care for younger children or adults. All of these parents and caretakers are neglecting the child’s individuality and needs for nurturing and acceptance.

Now foster families are called upon to physically care for these neglected children while providing new experiences for them that will allow them to heal and to learn what a loving home is really like. This is a lot to ask of a foster family. The book Troubled Transplants (by Richard Delany and Frank Kunstal) provides ideas and suggestions for helping foster families support these youngsters. They offer the idea that neglected children form a “mental blueprint” (a view of the world) that is difficult for a foster family to undo. Quite often family members become upset over issues the foster child has brought with him or her.

In addition to many specific strategies foster families can try, Delany and Kunstal offer four broad goals for foster parents rearing neglected children: 1. contain the bad behavior, if any; 2. increase verbalization to find out the child’s mental blueprints of self and others; 3. help him communicate his needs; 4. promote positive encounters that increase attachment to people.

In our laboratory, we follow children who were prenatally exposed to drugs and alcohol. Many of these youngsters have experienced neglect and are living with foster families who are struggling to understand how they can help. Drugs are often thought of as the cause for behavior and mood problems. Often however, the neglectful environment is more likely what is behind worrisome behavior. Neglected children – all children- need love, respect, and attention and care that remains constant through good and bad times.
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