

# CHILDREN AND ATTACHMENT WOUNDS

## Part One

By: Mary Lambrecht, M.S. LMFT

Is “no!” your child’s favorite word? Does your child seem overly reactive and put a negative spin on things? Do small requests turn into major arguments? Does he resist the slightest change? Do experiences that could be positive seem to be sabotaged by your child? One or two of these behavioral symptoms could simply be your child’s personality or a developmental phase. However, if your child seems to consistently struggle with most of these, they could be signs of attachment wounds triggered by early trauma in your child’s life.

Some traumas that authors Gary Sibcy and Tim Clinton cite as significant include: a parent’s divorce, illness or death of a parent or sibling, parent depression (including postpartum depression), an alcoholic family system and chaotic, neglectful, angry or critical parenting styles. Foster and adoptive children seem to suffer higher rates of attachment wounds than children from intact biological families. Fortunately, a combination of specialized family therapy, practical changes in parenting styles and a parent’s faith and dependence on God’s guidance, can repair trauma and build loving parental/child bonds.

**Specialized Family Therapy: Family Narrative Attachment Therapy (FNAT):** The emphasis in FNAT is not on the child’s problem behavior, but rather on the early underlying attachment issues that fuel the behavior. Developed in 1995 by Joanne May of the Family Attachment Center of Minnesota, this therapy is modeled from John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory. John Bowlby, a family researcher from the early 1950’s, helped families recognize the link between children’s behavior and the responsiveness of primary attachment figures. The intent of FNAT is to increase the child’s ability to separate from a traumatic past and move forward with purpose and belief in a better future.

**Technique:** FNAT is a gentle, soothing story told by the parent to the child. The story starts from birth through the lifeline of the child’s history. For biological parents, the storytelling would relate actual events of the child’s life, but also strongly focus on the *positive attitudes and feelings of parent to child*. For example, a mom might say to her eight-year-old son: “When you were born, you had such dark hair and bright blue eyes! I held you close to my heart and felt so thankful that God brought you into our family.” Later on in therapy, Dad might say to his son: “I remember when you were two years old. I bought you your first football. I remember feeling so proud that you were my son.”

The foster or adoptive parent, in FNAT, tells a story that conveys what their own thoughts, emotions, behavior and activities with the child *would have been, had they been in the child’s life at that time in the child’s history*. Joanne May

emphasizes that while FNAT does not alter the actual history of the foster or adoptive child, it can provide a new positive narrative and emotional bonding, from which the child can view his/her world.

Emotional and physical closeness to the primary caregiver or parent is essential for children in managing negative emotions, and in building self-confidence and creativity. Family Narrative Attachment Therapy is one way that promotes healing for attachment- wounded children. FNAT can also be used alongside other parenting techniques that focus more on specific problem behaviors. Look for part two of this series, in the December newsletter, for tips on behavioral strategies with your child.

In my own work with parents and children with Family Narrative Attachment Therapy, God has reinforced that it's never too late to bond with your child. God indeed "restores the years that the locust has eaten." (Joel 2:25).

*References: "Attachment Theory and Treating Oppositional Defiant Disorder" by: Dr. Gary Sibcy & Dr. Tim Clinton, Christian Counseling Today, 2004 Vol. 12 No. 2.*

*Attachments, Why You Love, Feel and Act the Way You Do by: Dr. Tim Clinton & Dr. Gary Sibcy.*

*For more information on Family Narrative Attachment Therapy, or to schedule an appointment with Mary Lambrecht, please call The Center for Family Healing: 920.720.8872.*

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