



# Post Adoption Press

Serving families formed by adoption in Sonoma,  
Lake, Mendocino and Napa Counties

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## My Life as a Parent of a Traumatized, Attachment-Disordered Child

Dear Interested Party:

*I'm giving you this letter because you have expressed an interest in my experience as a parent of a traumatized, attachment-disordered child. It is not a story I relate to you lightly. My child has some very special needs and because of this, so do I. I need people to understand what our family faces, not just judge us as incompetent. It isn't fair what happened to my child or to me. But it is what we are both facing, and we face it together everyday.*

*First, I'd like you to know that this letter was not written just by me. Parents from all over the country are using it to tell a uniquely tragic story. Many of these parents have "normal" kids as well as traumatized ones, and they all agree the difference between them is night and day. So, this letter isn't the ranting of one isolated, overwhelmed, and oversensitive adult. I did not "do" this to my child. My child came to me this way. Chances are he would be struggling with these same behaviors and emotions in any family. My child's problems are not the result of poor parenting by me. In fact, parents of traumatized children are some of the most courageous, committed, resourceful, insightful, misunderstood and stressed-out parents around. We are not just bellyachers. We are in fact, front-line troops in the battle for civilization itself. If you think that's somehow overinflated, consider the statistics that most of today's prison population was abused and/or neglected and many have attachment-related emotional problems.*

*So here is what happened-when my child was a little baby, at the time he was most vulnerable, he did not get basic needs met. Perhaps, he was not picked up when crying, not fed when hungry, left alone for hours, or left with various strangers for days. Perhaps he was beaten, shaken, or otherwise physically or sexually abused. Perhaps he had chronic or unmitigated pain due to medical procedures and had no way of communicating his distress. I might guess at these details of my child's trauma, but I will never likely know the full truth. Because of this neglect and abuse, my child became traumatized and was convinced that he was going to die. He learned that he could not trust anyone to meet his needs. And every day since, when my child wakes up in the morning, this deep-seated anxiety gets reloaded. In order to survive, he has become unconsciously committed to never, ever being vulnerable again. He uses all of his basic survival intelligence to control an outside world he feels he cannot trust. All his existential energy is focused on keeping people far enough away so he won't get hurt again, but close enough so that they won't leave him either. Unfortunately, he is never really satisfied with either proximity and is therefore constantly in a "push them away/pull them close" dilemma. As his adoptive parent, I live everyday in this no man's land of damaged intimacy. I've been emotionally wounded from the many times I've tried to break through my child's formidable defenses. Those who don't need to get as close-teachers, relatives, neighbors, etc.-won't experience the full intensity of these primal defenses. So if you are lucky enough to see him withdraw or witness one of his rages, you are probably getting close-so good for you! But if this does happen, please remember that you are witnessing a child stuck in a desperate fight for survival-he has become once again that scared, traumatized baby, absolutely convinced he has to control you and everything in the world in order to be safe. It can't get more primal than that.*

*As his parent, I am dedicated to helping him realize that I am not his enemy. It is that stark, I'm afraid, but not hopeless. During these very difficult years, I have tried many approaches to parenting of my special child. The standard, traditional disciplinary approaches used by my parents were obviously tried first and were an instant failure. Star charts and behavior-based rewards came next, and they did not work either. I have tried using praise rather than criticism, bribery, ignoring destructive behaviors, created known-in-advance consequences listed on print-outs. I've hired numerous specialists; cleared all possessions out of his*

(continued from page 1)

bedroom; taken away TV and computer privileges. Nothing has changed his dangerous, self-destructive behavior. His response is more primal, more subconscious and has little to do with the fear that's triggered, the trust that was broken, the chaos he feels. It's like he is having an emotional seizure, as his cascading brain chemistry takes over. He doesn't choose this-I don't chose this-it just happens. So our days are mostly filled with emotional explosions and uneasy calm between the storms. When it gets quiet, I'm nervous about when the next bomb will hit.. Each day is filled with anxiety, fear, guilt, and shame for my child and I both. It is like we're living on an emotional minefield, and the mines keep regenerating, exploding again and again.

What I face daily is, that despite my best efforts to be a loving caregiver, my child's early developmental trauma has created a discord that is a true paradox. For example, I may try to gently calm my upset child, but this is not experienced as soothing to him. So his trauma is triggered and he may withdraw, shut down or lash out. This causes me to get stressed as my child reacts counter to my intention. Now my stressful reaction starts to feel familiar, even "safe", to him, so he works (often subconsciously) to expand this, and we descend into deeper and deeper dysfunction and chaos. To my child's trauma-injured brain, this dysregulated feeling, which feels painful to healthy people, actually feels normal to him. I'm left feeling stressed, angry, and emotionally spent.

Absolute total consistency (at home and at school) does help somewhat. Parenting traumatized children is nothing like parenting emotionally healthy children. The responses you receive can be very unrewarding and punishing, since moments of closeness and intimacy are very rare and can trigger a trauma reaction. My beloved special child is often willing to do for others (even complete strangers) what he is not will to do for me (this is another behavior common with attachment disorder).

The damage done due to early childhood trauma and not being able to safely attach to a trusted caregiver has left my child with the emotional development of a toddler or infant. The big difference is that my child is not a toddler. He's much older and knows how to swear, punch a hole in the wall, and swing his fists or feet to hurt others. Imagine the terrible-twos lasting for years and years, escalating in intensity and effect-I'm a parent of a 100+ pound, physically coordinated, verbally adept, emotionally trigger-happy baby.

Imposing limits isn't enough. My child must be helped to accept these limits and internalize self-regulation, self-soothing, and self-control. Rewards and punishments focus on outside, observable behaviors, not the internal underlying process that creates these behaviors. At the same time, he does not need us to lower our expectations for either his behavior or his academic performance. What he needs is help in accepting and reacting to these expectations with flexibility and self-control. He needs to restart the developmental process and move beyond an emotional toddler. He needs to move out of this developmental disarray toward a more civilized, balanced inner process.

Our family needs support, education and understanding. We did not expect that this would be our daily reality, and it isn't easy. I may seem stressed, fearful or angry. I am frequently overwhelmed. I am making significant sacrifices so that my child can rise above the chaos of his trauma and find true hope and healing. We all have amazing abilities to adapt, as adversity can deepen us and perhaps this will be so for my child as he confronts deeply seated wounds and transgressions. But we must go beyond intellectual definitions of "normal" and "cured" and think of it in another way: Can someone's affliction, which has shut off various levels of meaning from his life, be mitigated enough to possibly reopen some of those channels? Or put another way, if left alone without special effort, will these kids descend more and more into emotional chaos? Clearly, the answer to both questions is yes. Therefore, the effort and sacrifice I'm making in my life for him, and the help you are now hopefully willing to give me, is of great value. Help me help my child realize the true blessing life can be.

Thank you for reading this.

Note: This letter was written by members of the **Attachment & Trauma Network (ATN)** as an example of how to talk about your own personal experiences and share your family's struggles with people who may want to, but don't, understand. Feel free to use any parts of this document as you edit this story to make it your own. Julie Beem, Executive Director, ATN ([www.attachtrauma.org](http://www.attachtrauma.org)). Please go to <http://marcdeprey.posterous.com> to view a video of this piece. Marc Deprey is the President of the Coalition to End Childhood Trauma, 321 South Main Street, Sebastopol, CA 95472.

National Adoption Day is  
**NOVEMBER 19th**

Join us for a fabulous celebration  
at  
Forget Me Not Farm



at the Sonoma Humane Society  
5345 Highway 12 West, Santa Rosa

10 am to 1 pm  
Guided tours of the farm  
Buffet lunch, Face painting  
Art projects and more

RSVP at 571-2048 by Nov. 11

*"Adoption Nation is the Silent Spring of adoption. It is, quite simply, the most important book ever written on the subject."*  
—Former Executive Director, National Adoption Foundation

**ADAM PERTMAN**

Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

**Adoption  
Nation**

REVISED AND UPDATED

How the Adoption Revolution is  
Transforming Our Families—and America



Parents Place presents a **FREE**  
workshop with

**ADAM PERTMAN**

October 15, 11:00 - 4:30  
at TLC Child and Family Services  
1800 N. Gravenstein Hwy. Sebastopol

RSVP is required and space is limited  
Please call now to sign up  
(707) 571-2048  
Childcare and lunch provided

Adam Pertman is Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, A former Pulitzer-nominated journalist – he is also Associate Editor of *Adoption Quarterly*, the premier research journal dealing with adoption and foster care. He will be discussing his book : *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families – and America.*

Co-sponsored by

TLC Child and Family Services

and

Adoption Law Offices of Adams and Romer

## FALL 2011 Calendar

**Petaluma Parent Support Group:** First Tuesday of each month, 5:45-7:45 pm, at B'nai Israel Jewish Center

September 6: Screening and discussion of *Unlocking the Heart of Adoption*

October 4: A discussion about *Understanding and Transforming Aggression in Children* (by Todd Sarner)

November 1: A conversation with Jessica O'Dwyer, author of *Mamalita: An Adoption Memoir*

**Santa Rosa Parent Support Group:** Third Wednesday of each month, 5:45-7:45 pm (Free childcare)

September 21: A conversation with Jessica O'Dwyer, author of *Mamalita: An Adoption Memoir*

October 19: A discussion about *Understanding and Transforming Aggression in Children* (by Todd Sarner)

November 19: Screening and discussion of *Unlocking the Heart of Adoption*

**First Fridays for Teens:** Monthly social activities for teens, 6:00-8:00 pm with pizza and snacks!

**Socialization Group for Young Children (6-9):** Help children develop healthy social skills and practice talking about adoption to strengthen self esteem and establish positive peer relations. Tuesdays, beginning September 27, 3:30 - 5:00 pm.

**Lifebooks for Tweens(9-12) :** Create a lifebook with help and support from parents. Two Monday evenings per month, beginning September 19, 5:30 - 7:30 pm. Introductory meeting for parents only on September 12

**Please call Liz Jimenez (707-303-1509) for more information or to sign up for the above groups! An RSVP is required Unless otherwise noted, all events take place at Parents Place, 1360 N. Dutton Ave., Suite C, Santa Rosa**

Post Adoption Services @ Parents Place (PAS) offers a variety of services for families formed by adoption. From one-to-one crisis intervention and counseling to support groups for children and parents, we have something to support you and your children. We also provide parent and professional trainings on a variety of topics throughout the year to help build skills and knowledge regarding adoption related issues. Our goal is to be here as a resource for you and your family. We have a free lending library filled with informative books on a variety of parenting, adoption and attachment issues. Our staff and clinicians are knowledgeable and caring. Parenthood and adoption can be both a joy and a challenge.

Post Adoption Services are funded through a grant from California State Department of Social Services



Post Adoption Services at Parents Place  
1360 North Dutton Ave. Suite C  
Santa Rosa, CA 95401