



ABC's of Living with a Child With Invisible Special Needs: “A Double Dose of Different”*

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*David Brodzinsky quote

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- *Grieving over the loss of one's fantasy child can be a long and emotionally wrenching process. But it's essential – both for maintaining your own healthy outlook on life and for equipping your child to face life's challenges. Parents who never come to terms with their child's challenges may unwittingly make the child feel as if she's responsible for something that is totally outside of her control.*
 - Quote from an Adoption Blog:
http://adoptionblogs.typepad.com/adoption/2005/10/adopting_your_d.html

Adoption and Learning Disabilities

- 30-45% of children in foster care compared to 11 percent of all children ages 6 – 17 receive special education services (Jackson and Mueller 2005).
- Barker Foundation Survey (1996) found that 30% children – mostly adopted as infants - had Learning Disabilities
- Brodzinsky and Steiger, (1991), 5-7% of children in a NJ study had Learning Disabilities yet represented only 1-2% of the population

Why?

- Prenatal history could include

- Genetic predisposition
- Prenatal care, nutrition, substance use, stress



- Pre-adoption history could include

- Severe grief reaction,
- Attachment difficulties
- Abuse or neglect



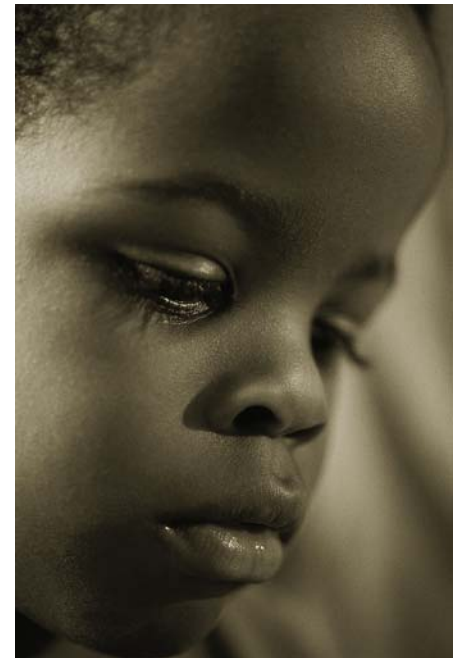
Attachment and Invisible Special Needs

- **Early experiences that can lead to attachment disorder may also have a profound impact on a child's learning**
- Brain pathways responsible for social perceptions, emotion, and empathy are the same ones that regulate communication and organization of memory.
- Higher levels of certain brain chemicals caused by chronic stress or trauma can damage a part of the brain called the hippocampus, making it hard to create and retain memories needed for learning.

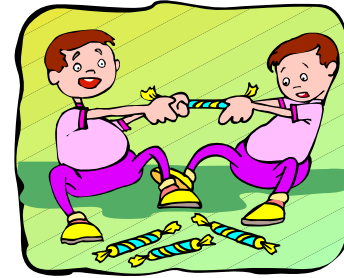


Impact on the Child, and the Family of “Double Difference”

- Self Esteem
- Feelings and Questions about Birthparents
- Anger, Not Having Control
- More Systems to Deal with
- To Tell or Not to Tell – Social Isolation, Stigma, Embarrassment



Feeling SAD >>>> makes me feel
MAD >>>> which leads to acting BAD



- Model a range of expressions for emotions
- Use stories, movies, puppet play to “practice” and observe lots of emotions
- Provide physical as well as verbal outlets for emotions

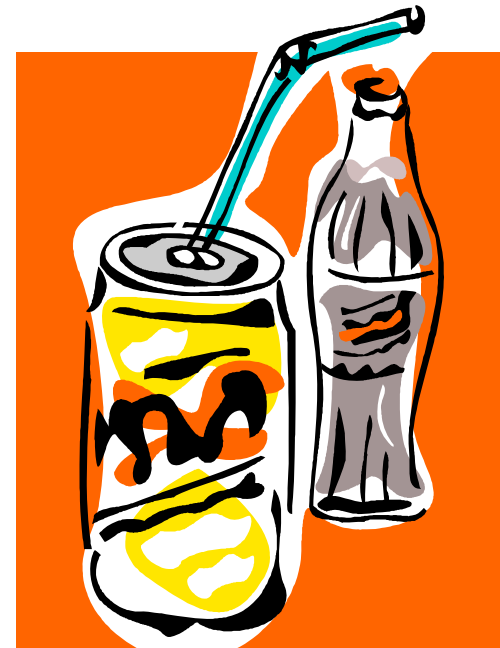
Manage Anger – Yours and Theirs

- Reduce Anger – know your “stress busters”
- Set the tone and environment to reduce anger
- Express anger – provide both verbal & physical outlets
- Provide portable outlets too!



SODAS method of Problem Solving

- S = Situation
- O = Options
- D =
Disadvantages
- A = Advantages
- S = Solution



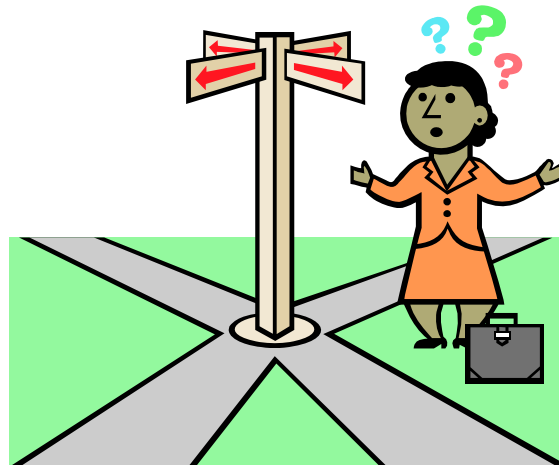
Have few rules – but enforce consistently



- Relate rules to values
- K.I.S.S.
- Written reminders – posted rules, agreements are helpful
- You are helping your child develop a toolkit of responsible behavior

Advocacy

- Develop your advocacy skills
- Help your child to become a self-advocate
 - <http://www.fvkasa.org/>



Advocacy 101

- Targeting
- Preparing
- Influencing
- Follow Up



Preparing

- Identify both formal and informal resources
 - Use resources family is familiar with as starting point
- Formal resources – agencies, providers
 - Applications, enrollment, waiting period
 - Eligibility, fees, alternatives
- Informal resources
 - Is the foster family a resource
 - Resources provided by extended family
 - Peer Support
 - Community of faith

Becoming an Effective Advocate

- Build relationships
- Develop professionalism
- Be organized and accessible
- Avoid “us” versus “them” conflicts
- Be persistent –
Never give up!



Developing Partnerships with Multiple Providers

- Identify providers needed including specialists
 - Build relationships
 - Demonstrate professionalism
-
- Be organized and accessible
 - Avoid “us” versus “them” conflicts



Become Part of a Larger Group

- For support
- For information
- For advocacy



Advocating for Special Services

- Ask WHY any service is recommended
- Participate at every stage
- Keep abreast of changes in the law, regulations, funding, and other local resources that affect the child in your home



Teaming up with the School



Coordinate between school and home:

- Parents and other caregivers need to **coordinate** - Tell your child's teacher what strategies work for your child at home.
- If necessary, seek the help of your school psychologist, counselor or social worker.



Home and School, cont

- **Ask teachers** if your child is exhibiting **stress in school**.
- This will help you understand what your children are learning, prepare for challenging assignments and foster **thoughtful discussion at home**.



Become Familiar with your child's School

- Get to know the principal and other key staff
- Participate in the "Home/School Association"
- Get to know how your district operates in terms of special education, rights of parents, chain of command
- Talk with other parents to learn of typical assignments in various grades



Impact of Carrying “Invisible Special Needs” to School



- Self Fulfilling Failure prophecies
- Grief, loss & trauma-related anxiety make concentration difficult
- Demonstrates symptoms of ADD/ADHD
- Social anxiety - “I don’t/can’t fit in”; “Nobody likes me” or “Nobody will like me if they know what happened to me and/or what’s wrong with me”

General Activities



- Use and teach positive, respectful language about about the special challenges your child faces
- Consider offering special activities during special weeks or months which acknowledge or celebrate diversity
- Take different approaches at different times based upon your child's age
- Engage the support/help of your resource parent group - consider "Exchanging Schools"
- Provide books and resources for the classroom teacher and the library

Dealing with Challenging Assignments

- Plan ahead
- Help teacher accomplish same learning goals with an alternative assignment

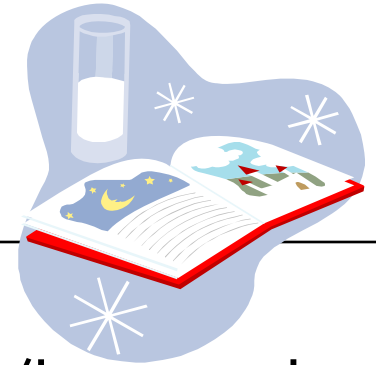
- **Important that children are not singled out for alternative assignments**



Help Your Child Speak for Herself at School



Telling “My Own” Story



- Help your child have the language s/he needs to feel understood
- Help your child practice his/her story
 - Use the lifebook as a tool - what is private, what is OK to share
- Teach pro-active problem-solving strategies
 - Practice responses to difficult situations



Q & A and Wrap Up

Thank you!

