

Center for Family Development

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Subtle Signs

by Arthur Becker-Weidman, Ph.D.

Gail tells her seven-year-old daughter, Sally, to pick up the napkin Sally had dropped. As Sally crosses her arms a sad and angry pout darkens her face. Gail says, "Sally, I told you to pick up the napkin and throw it away." Sally stomps over to the napkin, picks it up, and throws it away. Crying and whining, Sally stands with her back to Gail. Sally, angry and unhappy is exhibiting one of the subtle signs of attachment sensitivity that nearly all children adopted at a young age demonstrate. An informal survey I conducted of children adopted from Asia between the ages of four months and two years of age revealed that over half the children showed subtle signs. Attachment is an interpersonal, interactive process that results in a child feeling safe, secure, and able to develop healthy, emotionally meaningful relationships. The process requires a sensitive, responsive parent who is capable of emotional engagement and participation in contingent collaborative communication (responsive communication) at nonverbal and verbal levels. The parent's ability to respond to the child's emotional state is what will prevent attachment sensitivities from becoming problems of a more severe nature.

What are the subtle signs?

1. Sensitivity to rejection and to disruptions in the normally attuned connection between mother and child.
2. Avoiding comfort when the child's feelings are hurt, although the child will turn to the parent for comfort when physically hurt.
3. Difficulty discussing angry feelings or hurt feelings.
4. Over valuing looks, appearances, and clothes.
5. Sleep disturbances. Not wanting to sleep alone.
6. Precocious independence. A level of independence that is more frequently seen in slightly older children.
7. Reticence and anxiety about changes.
8. Picking a scabs and sores.

Internationally adopted children experience at least two significant changes during the first few months of life that can have a profound impact on later development and security. Birth mother to orphanage or foster care and then orphanage to adoptive home are two transitions. We know from extensive research that prenatal,

post-natal, and subsequent experiences create lasting impressions on a child. During the first few minutes, days, and weeks of life, the infant clearly recognizes the birth mother's voice, smell, and taste. Changes in caregivers are disruptive. The new caregivers look different, smell different, sound different, taste different. In the orphanage there are often many care givers but no one special caregiver. Adoption brings with it a whole new, strange, and initially frightening world. These moves and disruptions have profound effects on a child's emotional, interpersonal, cognitive, and behavioral development. The longer a child is in alternate care, the more these subtle signs become pervasive.

There are effective ways for a parent to help his or her child.

Parents and the right parenting are vital to preventing subtle signs from becoming anything more than sensitivities. Parenting consistently with clear and firm limits is essential. Discipline should be enforced with an attitude of sensitive and responsive empathy, acceptance, curiosity, love, and playfulness. This provides the most healing and protective way to correct a child. As Sally walks away to pout, Gail comes up behind her, scoops her up, and begins rocking her gently while crooning in Sally's ear. Gail sings songs and tells Sally she loves her and understands Sally is angry at being told what to do. Gail expresses sadness that Sally is so unhappy. At first Sally resists a bit, but she soon calms down and listens as Gail tells her how much she loves Sally. Sally is sensitive to feelings of rejection and abandonment that are evoked by her mother's displeasure, so Gail brings Sally closer to reassure Sally nonverbally. It is by experience that the subtle signs are addressed and managed. Nonverbal experience is much more powerful than verbal experience since most of the subtle signs have their origin in nonverbal experience and nonverbal memory. These sensitivities are not a mental illness or Reactive Attachment Disorder. They are subtle signs of attachment sensitivities. So, what can you do?

First, as Gail does with Sally, bringing the child in close is better than allowing the child to be alone or isolate him or herself.

Second, as Gail does with Sally, talk for the child. Putting words to what the child is feeling. This allows the child to feel understood by you, maintains a connection, and helps assuage the fear of rejection and abandonment.

Third, do not make food a battle. A child who steals food or hoards food usually has sound emotional reasons for this. Providing the child with food so that your child experiences you as provider is often the solution. Put a bowl of fruit in the child's room. (Be sure to keep it filled. It does not good if you provide and then leave an empty bowl!) In some instances, I have recommended that the parents provide the child with a fanny pack and keep it stocked with snacks. This usually quickly ends hoarding and stealing of food.

Fourth, for the child who is overly independent, doing for the child and not encouraging precocious independence is helpful. So, making a game of brushing your six-year old's teeth, dressing your seven-year-old, or playing at feeding a nine-year-old, are all ways to demonstrate that you will care for the child. Keeping it playful and light, allows the child to experience what the child needs and helps eliminate hurtful battles.

In conclusion, subtle signs are important reminders that our children have ongoing sensitivities that as parents we must address in a responsive and sensitive manner. Responsive and sensitive communication is essential. Attachment is a function of reciprocal, sensitive, and responsive communication; attachment does not reside in the child alone. It is very important for the parent to manage and facilitate this attuned connection within a framework of clear limits and boundaries, natural consequences, and firm loving discipline.