

# Finding the Right Therapist for a Child with Trauma & Attachment Related Issues

When you have adopted children at an older age, you are getting a child with a history you only catch glimpses of through their behaviors. It can be hard to differentiate between whether a child's response to trauma has more to do with the actual incidents you know of, or with the perceived or real abandonment your child experienced from his or her birth parents. As a parent, if you decide to take your child to a therapist, it can be difficult to figure out what specialty you are looking for. Of course, I would recommend that any therapist you take your child to has some knowledge about foster care and adoption (even if you do not think the issue is adoption related), but as a therapist who specializes in both trauma and attachment disorders, I can tell you it is also important that you find a therapist with the right kind of training for your child. Doing so will save you a lot of money and aggravation and is more likely to speed the healing time for your child. With these particular children there are steps you can take to ensure that you have the right person. The steps include:

1. Figure out if your child has "only" trauma, or has trauma with attachment related issues. Here is the distinction, a child with trauma without attachment disturbance usually experienced a one-time



occurrence that happened during a relatively short period of time and was quickly identified. I would describe trauma with attachment related issues as trauma that also impacts a child's ability to bond with the caregivers in a healthy way, for example, abuse or neglect by a primary caregiver or ongoing abuse or neglect that a child did not disclose. If you feel as though your child's trust in adults to provide care for them has been altered significantly, you will want to seek someone with knowledge of attachment related issues. When in doubt, I would see someone who specializes in both trauma and

attachment. If you find that there is an attachment related issue for your child's situation, I would always make sure to take the child to a therapist who understands attachment, because in order to work on attachment disorders or disturbance, you must know about trauma since the two go hand in hand.

2. Once you have determined whether you are looking for a therapist with trauma training or whether you need someone with both an attachment and trauma focus, in addition to the questions you may already have about insurance, and

other details consider asking these additional questions:

- What is your training in attachment and trauma?
- What recent trainings have you attended or conducted that relate to attachment and trauma?
- How do you conduct your sessions?

The answers to these questions, if you are talking to the correct therapist, should indicate that the person stays actively engaged in seeking training for attachment and trauma related issues. Additionally, an attachment specialist will indicate to you that

you will be in the room for most, if not all, of the time that your child is in therapy with them. Attachment oriented therapy is significantly different in that a therapist focuses much more on your relationship with your child rather than their relationship with your child. In traditional therapy, including therapy for singular trauma, you would take your child to see the therapist, you might check in with the therapist at the beginning or the end, and then your child would see the therapist alone for the majority of the session.

While traditional therapy is effective with many children, for children with attachment disturbance, it can actually damage a child's relationship with his or her parent. I have seen this happen, since a child with attachment disturbance has a tendency to reject caregivers, and, while alone with a therapist the child may talk to the therapist about how terrible and difficult his or her parents are. The therapist and child will bond over this and the therapist shakes his or her head in disbelief, meanwhile he or she may overlook a parent who is trying to meet the child's needs while reinforcing for the child that the caregivers in his or her lives are, in fact, inadequate.

Remember, children with attachment disturbance see adults as unsafe on some level and tend to fit them into these categories. A skilled attachment therapist will spot when a child is doing this and help the child to retrain his or her system of trust by teaching how to find trustworthy adults

and by training the adults in his or her life to be trustworthy in the way the child needs them to be. ❁

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Kate Oliver, LCSW-C, is co-owner of A Healing Place, a private practice in Columbia, Md. Before opening her private practice, Oliver worked at the Sexual Trauma, Treatment, Advocacy and Recovery Center (STTAR) in Columbia, Md., for five years. During her time with the STTAR Center, Oliver completed a year-long program where she earned a certificate in working with children and adolescents with attachment disorders. After learning more about attachment, Oliver worked with incarcerated, pregnant mothers in Baltimore City as the clinical director for the program, Tamar's Children. Tamar's Children worked with an attachment protocol, The Circle of Security, which taught adults with a history of trauma and neglect to bond with their infants. She used this method with the residents and added an additional group for women already in the program who were going to be reunited with older children in foster and kinship care. In 2007, Oliver opened "A Healing Place," where she now specializes in working with children with trauma and attachment related issues. Recently, she also joined the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Psychotherapy Training and Education, Inc. You can find her via her blog, [help4YourFamily.com](http://help4YourFamily.com), where she writes about ways to help children and parents feel happier and healthier.



## A Checklist: Does My Child Need Residential Treatment?

Parenting is hard work. Even the most socially-defined "perfect child" can be a challenge and cause mom, dad, grandma or grandpa to question their parenting skills. So why then, should parenting a child who has suffered abuse and trauma seem anything other than nearly impossible?

John Roope, director of early childhood mental health services at Chaddock, often remarks, "No role is harder or more important than raising our children, including the one or two in 10 who carry the extra challenge of a label. Never let anyone do that amazing job alone."

But how do you know when it is time to take the next step? When is it time to consider placing your child in a residential treatment center? Some parents can just sense what to do, others make logical decisions, but for many others it can be an overwhelming decision clouded with guilt and doubt. So for parents who are overwhelmed, we offer a simple checklist to focus on the important issues at hand while addressing some of their concerns.

**QUESTION 1: IS YOUR CHILD MAKING PROGRESS IN OUTPATIENT THERAPY?** If your child is making progress in outpatient therapy — great! Chances are you have found a good therapist who is addressing the concerns of both you and your child. Continue what you are doing while making time for self-care, reflection and special family time. For those whose children have stopped making progress in outpatient therapy or have stopped going to therapy altogether, you might want to consider residential treatment. But before you take that next step, consider finding a therapist who has extensive training in the

trauma and attachment field. Perhaps, a new therapist who more fully understands the unique needs of your child could provide the guidance your family is seeking.

**QUESTION 2: HAS YOUR CHILD BECOME**

**AGGRESSIVE?** If your child has recently become aggressive, take a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the situation. Find a trusted friend to watch your child so you can devote an hour or two to clearing your mind and focusing your attention on the needs of your child. Was there a trigger to the aggression? What could've been done differently to prevent the aggression? What steps can be taken to prevent aggression in the future? These are all questions you can ask yourself and those who support your family. The goal should be to assemble a plan that addresses your concerns while offering a feeling of confidence and strength in future situations. If you are unable to establish a plan that safely supports you, your child and those around you, it might be time to think about residential care. In a residential treatment facility you will find caring professionals who have been trained to assist children who struggle with the same issues as your child. Therapists and staff members have received training in multiple models and evidence-based practices and remain focused on the successful progress of your child.

**QUESTION 3: ARE OTHER CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME AFRAID**

**OF YOUR CHILD?** Caring parents share the desire to provide a safe and loving home for all of their children. It can be traumatic for other children in the home when that safe environment is disrupted by a child who is struggling with attachment issues. Difficult decisions must sometimes be made out of love and concern for all of the children in the household.

**QUESTION 4: HAS YOUR CHILD BEEN PSYCHIATRICALY**

**HOSPITALIZED SEVERAL TIMES?** Nothing can be more overwhelming than admitting your child to a hospital for psychiatric care. It is difficult and frightening. However difficult, quite often it is helpful for both you and your child. One or two hospital stays can provide an opportunity to explore additional options for your child with the goal of meeting his or her unique needs. When you find that your child is in need of frequent hospital stays, it could be time to

explore residential care. Residential treatment should be a last resort. Regardless of how they act or what they will tell you, children

who struggle with attachment and trauma issues want to be with their family. Due to the trauma they have experienced they are unable to properly express how they feel and just how much their family means to them. But, after all options have been tried, it is OK to turn to a residential treatment facility to find other ways of providing the care your child needs.

Sometimes, the greatest act of love can be letting go and letting your child experience the intensive treatment of a residential care facility designed to understand and meet his or her unique needs. Although parents may not be the "on-call" primary caregiver, they remain engaged in the life of their child while having the opportunity to find rest, strength and renewal.

Just remember, you are not giving up . . . you are giving hope. ☀

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Karen Doyle Buckwalter, MSW, LCSW, is the co-author of the article "I Deserve a Family" published in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Social Work* and a contributor to the book "Creating Capacity for Attachment." She is the director of treatment services at Chaddock, a multi-service agency providing a range of residential, educational and community-based services for youth, birth through age 21, and their families. While at Chaddock, she has been instrumental in the development of an innovative residential program for adolescents, ages 8-16, who struggle with developmental trauma and attachment. She is a certified Theraplay therapist, trainer and supervisor and has presented seminars in the United States, Great Britain, Wales, Australia and Africa on the topic of attachment and trauma in children. Buckwalter, who has worked with adoptive families throughout her career, has been with Chaddock for 18 years.

Karol Ehmen is the associate director of marketing who specializes in telling the story of Chaddock. She was recently instrumental in the second publishing and redesign of "Swings Hanging from Every Tree," which is a collection of daily inspirations for foster and adoptive parents and the first publication of Chaddock Press.