

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.attachtrama.org)

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

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. 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 his 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 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 (or foster or biological) parent, I live every day 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 his 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 a situation or possessions involved. It has to do with the fear that's triggered, the trust that was broken, the chaos he feels. It's like he is having emotional seizure, as cascading brain chemistry takes him over. He doesn't choose this – I don't choose this—it just happens. So our days are mostly filled with emotional explosions and uneasy calms between the storms. When it does get quiet, I'm nervous about when the next bomb will hit. Each day is filled with anxiety, fear, guilt, and shame for us 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. And 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 willing 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. But 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 the self-regulation, self-soothing, and self-control required to do so. Rewards and punishments focus on the 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 sealed 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 into more and more 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.

