

August 2015, Issue #4

Therapeutic Parenting Journal

A Resource for Parents and Professionals

**Focus of
this Issue:**

Parenting the Attachment Trauma Teen



Should I Call the Police?

Mary Lou Edgar, MSS, LCSW

An adoptive mother, who had been a foster parent to her daughter for five years, adopted her after an adoption disruption in another state. This child constantly curses at her mom, steals from her, lies, and destroys her possessions. This child experienced enormous trauma in her early life. She is now almost impossible to parent. One evening this mom was at her wits' end, the child was out of control, and she called the police. Unfortunately, the child lied, there were misunderstandings, and the mother was arrested. The child moved to a foster home. Ultimately, this was resolved; however, it was traumatizing for this mother, and for this family.

Maybe you are not familiar with situations like this. If so, great! However, more and more of our children are becoming destructive and harmful to others. For some families, they can call their therapist and get help. For others, they are advised to call 911. Parents are reticent to call the police, and if they do, they just want an officer to scare their kids and get them to calm down. However, that is not the role of the police.

Most of us don't think about the police when we make the decision to adopt. We think about grandparents, relatives, and friends. Depending upon the age of our child, we might be thinking about schools, therapists, or psychiatrists. But we don't think about the police. Why would we need to? However, the reality for many families of children who have experienced trauma is that they may – at some time – need to call 911. When that happens, families don't have any idea about what to expect. The police don't usually know how to react either. Like the situation in the scenario above, this lack of understanding can make things worse. It is important that parents understand what can happen and how they should react when they contact the police. If they don't, the consequences could be severe.

In the state of Delaware, a number of adoptive families had problematic experiences with both state and local police agencies. Because we want to make sure that children are safe, in our state - as well as in all states – the Division of Family Services (DFS) and law enforcement agencies are closely connected. When the police are contacted about a child who is out of control, their first thought is that the child is being hurt. When they meet a family who is being terrorized by their child, it can be very confusing. When it became clear that calling the police often resulted in either the child or the adoptive parents being arrested, it was decided that something needed to be done.

Delaware Interagency on Adoptions (a group of representatives from both the public and private sector) developed a committee called the Community Education on Adoption (CEA). It is made up of all facets of the community. The goal is to educate people about children who are adopted and have experienced significant trauma. We also wanted to educate people about the families who adopt. The goals of the committee were significant and overarching. The committee identified segments of the community (mental health, education, law enforcement, etc.) who needed to understand these children and families.

What the committee discovered was that many of our community responders and helping professionals believed that once a child is legally adopted, all the issues that brought them to adoption magically disappear. They no longer suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because they have a permanent family. Their mood disorder, dissociative disorders



and oppositional behaviors are cured at finalization. Of course parents know this is not true.

One of the first groups identified for more education were law enforcement officials in our state. Initially, training was provided for adoptive parents (by a retired police officer) about how to respond once they have contacted the police. The police throughout our state then became involved. They were welcoming and accepting of the information we shared. Delaware is a small state so it might be more difficult to reach out to the police in other states; however, we found them to be very agreeable. A presentation was made to the Chiefs of Police Group that meets regularly. They were given laminated cards that officers could put in their police cars so they would have information about how to respond to an adoptive family with an out-of-control child. We provided questions they could ask to gain information about the family.

The training for families included helping them determine when to call the police. They too were provided with laminated cards that could help them speak intelligently about what was happening in their home. Families were advised to follow some simple procedures:

- Be proactive with your child! Parents are aware of some of the triggers that instigate their children, but not all of them. When children dissociate and relive a past experience, they are usually not capable of self-regulating. Our children can become incredibly strong, and they can be destructive. No matter how attuned you are to your child, you may need help!
- Assess if everyone in your family is safe. If they are not, have some members leave the home. It might be beneficial to have a safety plan in place that involves a friend or neighbor who can help.
- Don't call 911 unless you believe it is absolutely necessary. Too many calls and you will not be believed.
- If you call 911, be prepared to explain that your child is adopted and has a history of trauma (abuse and neglect). Explain that when frustrated, your child can't verbalize emotions and becomes aggressive and destructive to property, self, and/or others. Explain that your family is not safe.
- Use terminology such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Because of the number of veterans who have this, it is familiar terminology, and, it is what many of our kids have.
- When the police arrive at your home, be very calm. One parent said that before she spoke to the officer, she needed to go breathe. The officer told her he was impressed. Use plain language and speak clearly. Crying and screaming tend to cause others to think that you have – or are -- the problem.
- If your child calms down, you don't have to cancel the call. Parents can be embarrassed when an officer arrives and the child is fine. Please don't be. This is necessary to help your child know you mean business and that you will keep your family – as well as this child – safe.
- If you think your child is still dangerous, allow the police to advise you about what to do. Maybe your child needs to be taken to a psychiatric facility. Arresting a child is not productive. You may be told (or think) that this is a good scare tactic. It isn't. This is a time to educate officers about why our children behave as they do. But, do it briefly! They don't have much time.



- If you feel you are helped, it is good to send a brief note thanking the department for sending an officer who assisted you.

We have come a long way in Delaware in educating law enforcement officials about our children by adoption. We believe that we are collaborators. Our kids have experienced a great deal and so have we. We are fortunate to have responders who are beginning to understand!

Mary Lou Edgar, MSS, LCSW

is the mother of five children, three of whom are adopted and have special needs. She is also a clinical social worker and the Executive Director of A Better Chance for Our Children. She and her husband reside in Wilmington, Delaware.



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Toni Hoy, B.A.

Toni graduated with a B.A. in Communications and it shows in her advocacy work! She is a gubernatorial appointee for the Community & Residential Services Authority and serves on the board of NAMI Barrington Area. She is best known as author of the nationally acclaimed best-seller, *Second Time Foster Child*. She is married and is the mother of four children. Toni's article is on page 16.



Jane Samuel, J.D.

A past litigator, Jane is married and the mother of three girls. Currently, she splits her time between parenting, ATN work and her writing. A former SE

Asia ex pat she has seen adoption culture from both sides of the Pacific. Her work has appeared in Asian and American newspapers, blogs and the anthologies: *From Home to Homeland* (Yeong & Yeong Book Company, 2009), *Our Very Own – Stories Celebrating Adoptive Families* (Touch Adoptive Services 2010) and *The Zen of Midlife Mothering* (Kindle 2014). Jane's article is on page 22.



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My child has been adopted and has a history of trauma (abuse and neglect). When frustrated, my child can't verbalize emotions and may be aggressive and destructive to property, self, and/or others. My child is likely behaving this way in response to a known or unknown traumatic event that occurred in the past. This is similar to veterans who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We are working hard to help our child heal. Please understand that there are times when we need assistance in managing these difficult behaviors while keeping our family safe. We have been advised that physical discipline tends to re-traumatize our children and is not effective.

Name of psychiatrist/therapist: _____

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Please understand that these family members are doing all they can to help their child – thank you for supporting them as best you can.

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Thank you for understanding that some children who are adopted suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of them have been neglected and badly abused. These children can be aggressive to their parents and destructive in their homes. They are often behaving in this way as a response to some trigger from their past. As a community, we are working to educate adoptive parents about how to help their children so a crisis can be averted. However, when they are not successful, the police may be called. If you are with a family, you might want to ask them the following:

- Have you ever reached out to Law Enforcement before? Why?
- What type of discipline has been recommended to you? Have you tried that? What happened? (Any type of physical discipline tends to re-traumatize our children and is not helpful).
- What kind of support do you have? Could you contact someone to help you now?

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