

By Carol Lozier

As an attachment therapist, I write articles for adoptive and foster parents. However, today's post is written to my colleagues --therapists who work with adopted or foster children and their families.

In educational workshops parents are instructed: Remain in the room during your child's psychotherapy. Yet, most therapists are not trained to keep parents in the therapy room. Commonly, most therapists meet with the parents alone, and then work with the child alone with a short time for both parties together. While this practice is commonplace, it is not optimal for adoptive or foster families.

A long time ago, I decided to keep parents in the session though it was not how I was trained either. At first, it did feel odd but not only have I become accustomed to it, I prefer it. Adoptive mom, Amy, highlights her rationale to include parents in the session:

"The therapist is partnering with me to help heal my child. The therapist is teaching me how to therapeutically parent my child by modeling the wording. I am there to help the therapist too- she may incorrectly interpret my child's silence, or withdrawal or hyperness. At those times, I can point out, 'he does this when x happens,' and then we can work together to address what to do when x happens at home and she's not there. In speech, OT, PT, there are exercises that you do between visits, and the same is true with 'feelings therapy'. Besides, she is with him for one hour a week; I am with him the other 167 hours that week and I have to know how to help him."

10 Reasons for Therapists to Incorporate Parents in a Child's Session

There are numerous reasons to see the adopted or foster child within a family therapy setting. Let's identify the top reasons to involve parents in the child's therapy session:

- 1. Parents Are Our Co-Therapist.** In an effective therapy session, one of the parent's roles is to be our co-therapist as they know their child better than we do. Oftentimes, parents will identify a negative belief or trigger that we were unaware of, or they may identify helpful information that we overlooked. Besides, issues come up at home and parents need to be equipped to work on them as they arise. Adoptive mom, Cheryl, addresses this point: "Today, I was able to help my son connect back and work through an issue. As a result this has been one of the best weekends we have had in a year. I don't think I would have been able to help him work through that had I not sat in on his therapy. It has helped me to understand him better too. My perspective has changed so much since being a part of his therapy; it has helped me as his mom."
- 2. Parents Aid In Healing The Past.** Parents need to be included in the session as an aid to the healing process. In therapy, when a therapist and child re-create past trauma, a parent's presence offers emotional protection to the child while they work

on difficult or scary past events. Also, when a parent is available, they can make corrective, healing statements during the therapy process which is far more powerful than ours.

3. **Clarify Information.** When a parent is in the therapy room, they can clarify information or fill in gaps of missing information. Many times, children do not know or do not remember information about their past. In these instances, parents can quickly relay the information to us.
4. **Correct Inaccurate Information.** Along the same lines, if the parent is in the room, they can correct information that the child misunderstood or misquoted.
5. **The Child Can Turn to Their Parent.** During the session, the child may have numerous needs from simple questions to reassurance to needing to use the restroom; the parent has to be accessible so that the child can turn to them for help. We want the child to lean on their parent for help, and not us.
6. **Encourage The Child.** One of the parent's roles in therapy is to encourage their child's hard work. At times, the child will encounter difficult emotions or issues, and it is necessary for the parent to praise and support the child through this time. It is another opportunity for the child to lean on his or her parent, and turn to them instead of away from them.
7. **Honesty.** Let's face it, there are times when children are not honest. They are not honest because they do not want to feel embarrassed or get in trouble, and sometimes because they do not want to admit to their wrongdoing. When the parent is present it ensures honesty from the child. This is important for a multitude of reasons, but especially because a dishonest answer can lead us down the wrong path, wasting precious time for the child.
8. **Be A Role Model.** We are a role model for parents. They learn valuable skills when they watch us work with their child, and it is a great opportunity for us to coach them on parenting and therapeutic skills. Adoptive mom, Lynn, shares: "Being in the room allows me to be a better parent at home. These issues can't be fixed just in therapy sessions. They get fixed by the parents doing what they need to do between the sessions. Being in the room, I'm able to learn how to respond to things better."
9. **What Was Instructed?** As the counselor, it is our job to teach the child healthier skills. If the parent is not a participant, they are not familiar with the instruction and can not encourage their child to practice the new skill.
10. **Bonding.** There will be times when a child feels upset in session, and we want parents to comfort their child. If the parent is not in the room that task is left to us and then, the wrong person is connecting with the child! Janie, adoptive mom to Andrew explains: "As a mom, I don't want to miss out on the important moments of healing that happen in therapy. We love our kids and work so hard, and I don't want

to miss out on the rewards of when my son is genuine and vulnerable, because that's not a side I see every day. It's important that I be a part of that too.”

I understand that the majority of therapists have been trained to separate parent and child during the therapy process, and trying something new is initially daunting. Nonetheless, I hope that the potential benefits, and the parent's heartfelt comments spur you to consider changing your practice. I hope you will experience the value it has for both you as well as the parent and child.

Note: All names have been changed to maintain the confidentiality of families.