

Teaching Julia to Love »»

This Rockland mother rescued her child from a Siberian orphanage at 8 months old. She had no idea she would have to save her daughter again, this time from a disorder that threatened to tear her family apart. **By Tina Traster**

Julia dashed off the school bus and bounded down our path with her usual verve. I was sitting on a bench in our foyer, white as a ghost. “What’s wrong, Mommy?” she asked. “I got some bad blood test results,” I said. “Are you going to die?” she asked, fear spreading across her beautiful face. I told her I had severe anemia. I explained my body had no iron stores, and if I didn’t do something right away I’d need a blood transfusion. She dropped her knapsack at my feet, yanked a sheet of blank paper and a pen from my desk, and shot off into the kitchen. A few minutes later she returned with a page of calculations. My cereal had 10 percent of my daily iron. Our crackers, 15 percent. Yogurt, 0. Though I was preoccupied and panicky, I realized something extraordinary was happening. My 11-year-old daughter was genuinely frightened at the thought that something bad could happen to me.

What child wouldn’t be, you ask?

A child with a syndrome called reactive attachment disorder. A child who, because of early traumatic circumstances, fails to attach, and who is unable to form loving bonds. A child who doesn’t know how to love. That’s not my child anymore, but it was.

It is hard to locate the precise moment when I knew Julia really loved me—and allowed herself to be loved—because the road from being a detached, indifferent, oppositional child to one who opened her heart and let love in was long and complicated. It was through no fault of her own that she arrived in our arms from a Siberian orphanage at 8 months old, with a wall around her heart due to the neglect and absence of a previous primary caretaker.

It seems incomprehensible to some, but neither my husband Ricky nor I understood how wounded our daughter was. At 40, I was a first-time mother, and I thought my baby didn’t look me in the eye or cling to me because something was wrong with *me*. I had never heard of reactive attachment disorder, so my child was a complete mystery. She was ebullient and charming, especially with strangers, but she rejected any closeness from me, my husband, or any other primary caretaker. Mommy-and-me experiments were disastrous. There was no hanging with me in the music circle, and mommy-and-me yoga often turned into mommy-and-me wrestling. Julia wanted no part of a relationship with me. She even resisted taking my hand to cross a street.

Looking back, I realize I was unprepared, as many adoptive parents are. In those early years, each day was a desperate battle to survive another round of frustration and sadness, and another day to wonder if our circumstances were ever going to get better. By the time Julia was 3, I assumed I’d be raising a child who would never feel like she belonged to me. I was at the lowest of low points when I began paying greater attention to clues. I needed a lifeboat, and observing my world more objectively saved my family from drowning. I began to note that Julia had no more affec-



Tina Traster (right) with daughter Julia

Courtesy Tina Traster

tion or attachment to her nanny than she did to me. In fact, she attached to no one. At preschool, she isolated herself from other children. She was superficially charming and overly affectionate at first with adults but quickly became difficult and disruptive. Finally, I mentioned these behaviors to her pediatrician, who specialized in international adoptees. He mentioned reactive attachment disorder.

Shortly after that, I caught a television reporter interviewing an incarcerated woman. Natalie Higier had accidentally killed her Russian-adopted son. She was clearly remorseful, but she spoke frankly about how difficult it was to raise an emotionally-disturbed boy who would not accept love. This was the moment that changed my family’s life. My husband and I thoroughly researched and read everything about reactive attachment disorder. Julia was its poster child. We devoted ourselves to healing Julia, first by understanding the way her brain was wired and why she behaved the way she did, and then by utilizing a series of parenting techniques to break down our daughter’s emotional fortress. Stepping into her shoes, feeling her pain, and understanding why she was so closed off softened my anger and sense of helplessness. My husband and I, who have always had a strong partnership, chose to work as a family rather than engage a therapist because we’d heard it was difficult to find the right kind of help. If Julia showed no progress, though, we agreed we’d turn to professionals.

Over time, we drew our daughter out. We taught her to look us in the eye. We gave her time-ins, not time-outs, because isolation is what RAD children, as they are called, really want. We put up a united front and blunted her emotional chaos. We explained over and over that we loved her and would never abandon her, no matter what.

I don’t remember the first triumphant moment, because it wasn’t like that. Gradually a more natural flow began, but it was a while before I knew Julia was ready to let me be her mother. I do remember little things along the way, like when she’d call me “Mommy” and it no longer felt jarring or alien. I recall when she started taking my hand without resistance, and when she said, “I love you, Mommy,” with her eyes locked on mine, and I knew she meant it.

Julia’s turning 12, and we are like any other push-and-pull, buttons-pushing, loving-one-another-more-than-rainbows mother and daughter. Our deep bond is palpable now, but occasionally, in a moment of crisis—like a doctor’s call with some scary test results—I’m reminded it wasn’t always so, and it makes what we have now all the more precious.

Tina Traster, who lives in Valley Cottage with her family, is the author of *Rescuing Julia Twice: A Mother’s Tale of Russian Adoption and Overcoming Reactive Attachment Disorder* (Chicago Review Press 2014; \$24.95). Her website is juliaandme.com.

Find a Q&A with Traster about reactive attachment disorder at
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