What the Therapist would like you to know

Not all therapists are equipped to handle the complex needs of families struggling with attachment disorders and trauma…or how the deal and parent the seemingly “unwilling.” But there are good ones out there, and I count myself among them. As a trauma-attachment therapist, a previous foster parent for 36 years to over 470 children and teens, an adoptive parent of six children—most with attachment challenges, of which all of whom are now attached, biological parent of two, and step-parent to two children, I have a great deal of specialized training and an incredible amount of hands-on experience. This means I won’t take your child’s outlandish stories as gospel until I check with you. I will focus on building the relationship between you and your child, not between me and your child. And I will include you in the planning and treatment process to help your whole family be the best they can be. With that in mind, here are three things I would like parents to know.

1. This is about you as much as it is about your child.If you want me to work with just your child, I’m not the right therapist for you. Attachment and relationship-building goes two ways—from your child to you and from you to your child. I will help everyone in the family to interact with each other in new, more positive ways. Not only does your child need to change, you may too! Your child needs to work on shifting their maladaptive attachment, their listening abilities, and their behavior patterns, yes, but so will you need to change, and you may need to both adapt and change the way that you look at who your child is and what they have been through, as well as to notice what your child’s needs are that you might not have noticed before. Any gaps in your own attachment ability will hinder the relationship between you and your child. Depending on your childhood and teen years, these changes may be big or small. I may ask you to come in for a few visits on your own if the issues are small. Or, I may suggest you do your own therapy with another therapist if the issues are bigger. This may hurt your feelings, especially at first, but please remember that this isn’t about right or wrong or good or bad. It’s about building a strong family. When I ask you to come in alone every third session, it is meant for you to catch up on what I am seeing during therapy with your child, as well as for you to hear what your child might need a little more of from you. It is also a time for the therapist to hear what is going on at home as well…good as well as the not so good things. It is meant to hear what you need as a parent from therapy as well.

2. The path of change and growth is not a straight line. If your child has arrived to you after time spent in the system or in an orphanage—either domestically or internationally—there is usually some “missing pieces” that s/he has been struggling with. If you child has been present for a divorce in the family—even though the child seems to be adapting to two single parents and two separate homes vs one partnership—they might also have suffered with some of the same types of things, such as an adjustment to what it is now vs then, what rules have changed, what the emotional response(s) to him/her might be (both internally and externally) with these changes, as well as to the new people who might be present in their life (and what THOSE people’s role is or is not in his life). Behaviors can erupt out of such things as Mommy or Daddy starting to work outside of the home when that parent has always been there for them. In other words, behavior does not only happen for children of adoption or those who live in foster care, but also when there is any major change in a child’s life. Anytime there is a change in your child’s structure, consistency, predictability and the nurturing pieces for whatever reason there might be, can become a concern for your child, and thus the child’s behavior will most likely change. Family fun, compliance, reciprocity, social and emotional awareness, and self-regulation will improve but it will be slow. There will be days, weeks, or even months when it will stall or even deteriorate. Sometimes you implement new therapeutic parenting techniques that make you feel like the most successful parent in the world! And then the same strategy may not even work for a month or more. Change and growth can be compared to the whole family crossing a creek. Sometimes you’re carefully stepping from river rock to river rock, moving across the creek. Sometimes your feet get wet. Other times you fall in. Sometimes your foot moves back to the rock behind you. Then you find a new path. No matter what, keep focusing forward and you’ll make it. I’ll encourage you and support you. Positive self-talk will help!

3. We’re not just changing behaviors, we’re changing how his/her brain is thinking, how he deals with his/her emotions, and changing his/her and your own world viewsWhen you tell me that consequences don’t work, that no matter what you do, your child’s behaviors don’t change… you’re misunderstanding the process. The child’s behaviors are the tip of the iceberg—the surface. We’re working to change the deeper parts of your child—trust, positive sense of self, problem-solving ability, self-regulation, emotional awareness, social skills, and more. Discipline, or what we now generally refer to as restitution or repair, is a part of shifting your child, but only one part. The most important thing you’ll do with your child is building and growing their connection with you. Playing together, laughing, snuggling, reading to your child… these build the relationship and change not only the behaviors of your child, but also the whole child much faster and much deeper than any form of discipline ever will. S/he might seem like they don’t care, but my hunch is that caring part feels vulnerable, and that is most likely a part of him/her that s/he is nervous about letting you see. Remember, the good therapists are on your side. Keep up your hard work and good parenting. I’m with you!

**To quote Michael Fox, "*Family is not an important thing, it is everything."* It is my goal to help you and your family be that "everything."**