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Why Some Children Want to Stay With Their Abusive Parents

Attorneys and other professionals need to know that the reasons children may want to be with an abusive parent may be based on attachment issues, feelings of shame, psychobiology, and a lack of understanding that they are even in an abusive situation.

By Susan Radcliffe and Daniel Pollack | July 5, 2021



Every state defines child abuse and neglect in statute. In New Jersey, N.J.S.A. § 9:6-1 defines the specific terms “abuse,” “cruelty,” “abandonment,” and “neglect.” Other statutes, like N.J.S.A § 9:6-3, use these definitions to establish criminal penalties. But statutes and regulations cannot account for every situation.

Nearly 50 years ago a bank robbery took place in Stockholm, Sweden. The perpetrator took four bank employees hostage for six days. When they were finally freed some of them refused to cooperate with efforts to prosecute the perpetrator. Indeed, some of them even helped defend him. And so, the mental disorder “Stockholm Syndrome” was coined. Does this kind of reaction apply to victims of child abuse? If so, what is the psychobiology in play?

Common sense says identifying with one’s tormentor just won’t happen. As adults, when someone harms us, or uses unkind tones or makes rude comments, we tend to avoid them. Child protective services workers see some of the most heinous acts of abuse and neglect committed by parents and guardians to their children. Yet, many of those workers tell stories that, despite the atrocious physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect, the children just wanted to remain with their parents or caregivers. Why doesn’t the most ancient fight-or-flight response kick in? Looking at the concept of attachment may help to answer this question.

Attachment

What exactly does “attachment” mean? Rolfe (2004) [notes](#), “Put simply, attachment is an emotional bond between two people in which there is an expectation of care and protection (p. 3).

[Ainsworth](#) developed patterns of attachment based on her research of the “Strange Situation.” This study shows scenarios where infants and their parents are observed when a stranger appears. It focuses on the infant with the mother, the mother leaving, a stranger entering the room, the infant being left alone, and

different scenarios where the stranger and mother attempt to comfort the infant. Four different attachment styles were [noted](#):

1. Secure -- the infant shows distress with separation from the parent and wants to have physical contact when the parent returns.
2. Insecure/avoidant -- the infant is not overly upset about the parent leaving and turns away when the parent returns.
3. Insecure/resistant -- the infant is distressed with separation from the parent but resists physical comforting when the parent returns.
4. Insecure/disorganized/disoriented -- the infant appears most upset over parental separation, but upon reuniting with the parent, the infant appears confused.

Secure attachments occur when the caregiver is sensitive, responsive to the child, reliable, trustworthy, caring and supportive. Children then learn that the world is a safe place, they can trust others and are worthy. But what if a person's source of attachment is also their source of pain and trauma?

The type of [attachment](#) a child has with a parent is seen as a predictor to a child's social and emotional health outcome. Insecure attachments in children have been [found](#) to contribute to anxiety, difficulties with emotional regulation and peer interactions. If a child cries after a supervised visit, is this an indication that the child has a strong healthy attachment to the parent? Not necessarily. The child might have an attachment, but it might not be a healthy one.

What does attachment to an abusive parent look like?

Children growing up in abuse and chaos only “know what they know.” Some children think that they are deserving of abuse and downplay the abusive parent’s behavior, because, after all, in the child’s mind, the parent is always “right.” Moreover, children want to please their parents, and so, they continuously strive for that parental approval.

Baker and Schneiderman [note](#) in their book *Bonded to the Abuser: How victims make sense of childhood abuse*, that children are biologically wired to form an attachment with the caretaking adult despite the character of the adult. Therefore, the child wants to be connected to the parent even if the parent does atrocious things to the child.

Oxytocin and the brain

Neuroscience plays an important role in attachment as well. Oxytocin is a powerful neurotransmitter and hormone with the cute nickname, the “cuddle hormone.” It is secreted during childbirth and breastfeeding, providing a person with a feeling of safety, security, and bliss. It is responsible for relationship building, empathy and trust. Released during hugging, kissing and cuddling, it makes a person feel “warm and fuzzy”. Oxytocin can also help a stressed person feel connected with someone else. When a person is struggling, experiencing trauma, or is in pain, the oxytocin “directs” the person to a person who provides them a sense of security and safety. If the source of safety is also the source of pain and trauma, it will nonetheless create a drive for the person to connect with that source. This is how trauma inflicted by a parent could be strengthening an unhealthy attachment.

Biopsychological reasons aside, abusive parents may subtly persuade their child that no one will believe the child if they say they were abused. Alternatively, the child may be threatened with even greater abuse if the child informs on the parent-perpetrator. Playing on the child's desire not to betray its own parent helps to keep the abuse a secret.

No one knows how many of these kinds of cases are misinterpreted as the child's forgiveness for abuse and trauma. Whatever the number, attorneys and other professionals need to know that the reasons children may want to be with an abusive parent may be based on attachment issues, feelings of shame, psychobiology, and a lack of understanding that they are even in an abusive situation.

Susan Radcliffe, LCSW-C, is a mental health therapist with the Dorchester County Health Department in Cambridge, Maryland. Contact: sue.radcliffe@maryland.gov.

Daniel Pollack, MSW, Esq., is a professor at Yeshiva University's School of Social Work in New York. Contact: dpollack@yu.edu.