

The Shielded Heart

By Maureen Lovejoy

Maureen Lovejoy, MS in Ed, adopted an eight-year-old child with significant attachment issues and felt the frustration of not understanding her behaviors. Maureen has taught foster and adoptive parenting classes for over 10 years for the Oregon Department of Human Services.

Do these sound familiar?

"Just after spending special time with my child and thoroughly enjoying ourselves, he throws a terrible tantrum and acts hateful towards me."

"I just took my child shopping and got her all kinds of clothes and shoes she wanted. Then, within hours of returning home, she wails, 'You never do anything for me!'"

"We have gone through some rough times together, but last week was a dream come true. My child didn't get in trouble at school and was sweet and well behaved at home. This week he was suspended from school and at home his destructive behavior and insults have escalated to a point they had never reached before. I am considering having him moved."

What's going on?

Children who have been abandoned and neglected by their birth parents don't trust that you will be there for them. They are always waiting for you to abandon them, to send them away. Children whose parents have "promised the moon, but delivered manure" don't trust you to keep your word. They have trusted in the past and have been betrayed over and over again. In order to protect their hearts they cover them with a shield. Each time they are betrayed their heart shield gets thicker. The thicker a child's shield gets, the more determined he or she becomes to keep it in place. Keeping the shield in place takes a lot of mental and emotional energy.

Traumatized children are terrified of being vulnerable—of letting you into their hearts. They feel that they will die if they open their hearts to you and you, too, betray them. So, they do a lot of "button pushing" to keep you from getting too close.

After a while in a loving home that provides structure, routine and consistency, children begin to feel safe. They begin to trust and they unconsciously lower their heart shields. With their heart shields down they allow you to love them; they become very vulnerable.

Then, after a period of positive interaction, they remember all of their betrayals. They fall back on their old belief that you are like all the other adults who have betrayed their trust. They become anxious and frightened and are sure that it is just a matter of time before you hurt them or send them away.

They feel the need to shield their hearts, but if they have let you in, they can't put up the shield until they get you out. This is when they push your "biggest buttons," causing you to jump back out of their heart space. They lie, steal, say hurtful things, break things, hurt the baby or younger child, hurt the pet, etc. They do whatever it takes for you to back out so they can put the shield over their heart again.

This is the critical point where you can make the biggest difference. They need you to acknowledge their fear of betrayal and reaffirm your love and commitment to them. You need to tell them that you have confidence they will soon learn to trust you and that you will be there for them forever. Every time you stick with them, the shield over their hearts becomes thinner and easier to remove. They learn to trust a little more.

Remember, when a child pushes you away just after a time of greater connection, they are responding to their fear of abandonment. If you can reassure them that you will be there for them, they are likely to move into a closer relationship with you.