

invisible wounds c

Adoptive mother, Helen Oakwater, explores how visible disabilities attract more sympathy and attention than ones which can't be seen. And she asks "What does society think happens to the hundreds of 'Baby P's' who don't die?"

ADOPTED children have hidden wounds. Neglect leaves no surface scars. A child forced to perform sex acts is superficially unmarked. Bruises from beatings fade. Cruel words are remembered. The pain of losing a birth family lodges in the heart.

For many adopters this is a huge issue. The deep hurts their children carry are not visible to the naked eye. Have you ever been able to spot a rape victim in the shopping centre? Of course not – it's a preposterous notion.

Adopters can't share their child's history with the world; often they don't know the half of it anyway.

"Could you show my son some slack please because as a toddler he spent long periods locked in a room eating rotting food?" Not a conversation for a school playground.

An adult adoptee, who literally drew a picture of himself in fragments, said to his mother, a skilful therapeutic parent; "It would be so much easier if I were in a wheelchair with my emotional disability, then people would immediately see my problems."

He has a good point; it's the invisibility of intense childhood trauma that magnifies future issues. Ninety-nine per cent of traumatised children look normal and if they have a physical disability this can mask the inner psychological wounds.

Alex Bell, adoptive mother extraordinaire, exemplifies this. (See pages 8 and 9).

A Mother Like Alex

At the end of October, wearing my Adoption UK 'trustee' hat, I had the privilege of attending the launch of Bernard Clark's book *A Mother Like Alex*. A splendid affair at the National Portrait Gallery; champagne, delightful morsels on little spoons and a couple of speeches. My mascara barely survived the poem read by Matthew, the first child adopted by Alex, now 25.

We watched an extract from the Sky Real Lives documentary first broadcast on 3 December 2008. (Yes, I know that was a month or so ago, but in these clever technological days of catch up television, you may still find it).

Alex is a remarkable woman who has adopted eight special needs children, seven with Down's syndrome. They all attended the launch, devouring as much chocolate cake as they could.

The following day I saw *A Mother Like Alex*, in WH Smith. HarperCollins clearly want people to buy the book and hear her story; to quote the back cover 'this is the story of an extraordinary mother and her unusual family – a story of courage, perseverance and, above all, love.' It's also, in my opinion, beautifully written and a great read.

People will quite rightly see Alex as amazing, tough, resilient and unique. She is a fighter; a pioneer and wonderfully human. Seeing Alex and her family on film, walking round a theme park (seven on foot, two in wheelchairs) is awe inspiring. I suspect people witnessing their day out felt admiration and respect for her and what she has done. I know I couldn't do it.

Having watched the Sky TV programme and read the book, I had assorted

feelings. Alex loves her children and they love her ... except Adrian, who is referred to as 'the lodger'. It is his part in the story which will probably resonate with adopters most.

Adrian was featured in *Adoption Today* (which then included children's profiles) in October 1987. A copy of the advertisement is in the book.

Adrian is a stocky though short nine-year-old with light brown hair. He is a Down's syndrome child with very good general health. He came into care shortly after birth and has now lived with three foster families who unfortunately have been unable to care for him permanently. Although Adrian can be over boisterous at times and is extremely active, he is a loving and loveable boy with an outgoing, friendly nature.

However, 'Alex noticed a detachment in Adrian from the very start, rare in Down's children', realising 'he's got huge attachment problems'.

Bernard Clark tells it like it is throughout the book. It's not a saccharine read. "She tried so hard, but she couldn't make him love her and therefore she couldn't love him".

Later in the book Alex says: "It's very distressing when you put your heart and soul into a child and you get Mr Blank."

Subsequently Alex and I chatted on the phone and she said: "If Adrian had been my first, I wouldn't have kept him; it really affected my confidence. I had to go out and get another child to prove to myself I could still do it, that it wasn't something in me that was wrong.

“Wounds that can't be seen are more painful than those that can be seen and cured by a doctor”

Nelson Mandela

Needs group

None
Emotional or behavioural difficulties (EBD)
Offenders
Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)
Children with disabilities (CWD)
CWD + EBD
EBD + Offenders

Estimated mean annual cost per child

£ 33,634
£ 51,431
£ 58,176
£ 65,102
£ 76,305
£ 97,633
£109,178

Approx mean weekly cost per child

£ 647
£ 989
£1,119
£1,252
£1,467
£1,878
£2,100

Extracted from *Cost and Consequences of Placing Children in Care* by Ward, Holmes & Soper. Published by Jessica Kingsley, 2008

Don't stop hurting

"It's easier to look after my kids than kids with attachment disorder," she asserted. "I couldn't have coped with kids without disabilities, it's much too hard – thinking about drugs, alcohol and all that peer pressure."

I hope that every adopter and foster parent takes that on board. I also hope every social worker, teacher, decision maker and politician recognises it too. Parenting traumatised children is probably the toughest job in the world and sometimes the most disempowering.

The World's Perspective

There has been huge media interest in Alex's story. It's a magnificent human interest story for the press, a great headline grabber and spectacular pictures. The double page, centre spread feature in *The Sun* was a publicist's dream.

Author, Bernard Clark, asserts: "This is not a story about disability or adoption, therapeutic communities or social work – it's a book about love."

Yes it is. However I wonder: Without the two wheelchairs and extra chromosome would the story have been in the *The Sun*, *The Times* or GMTV? Alex's story generates a loud 'Ahh' and 'Isn't she wonderful' from many quarters and individuals. People are sympathetic to her children's behaviours. Yet for most adopters with children who have 46 chromosomes, the public response is different – more like 'tut tut' or worse.

Adopted children without disabilities look 'normal'; their wounds are invisible. The impact of the abuse, neglect, pain and suffering they experienced in infancy and childhood, ignored and often undetected. Nelson Mandela, quoted by Andre Zuckerman in the recent book *Wisdom*, says: "Wounds that can't be seen are more painful than those that can be seen and cured by a doctor."

Visibly Disabled v Visibly 'Normal'

Adopters frequently feel undervalued and disenchanting. By comparing and contrasting Maddy (a fictitious, 'generalised adopter' of my invention), with Alex, we can see where some differences might lie. Even though this is a sweeping generalisation, the underlying principles are evident. There are bucketfuls of anecdotal evidence about Maddy. Participate in any Adoption UK conference, local group meeting, message board debate or 'It's a Piece of Cake?' training and you'll hear this perspective repeatedly.

Maddy (Mother of Attachment Disordered Difficult Youngsters) has two siblings originally placed aged two and four. Their birth mother was a vulnerable woman who intermittently used both drugs and alcohol. She had a succession of boyfriends and there was some domestic violence. Her flat was cold and chaotic, with little food and few toys. The children lived in several different foster homes when not being 'rehabilitated' at home, (a fairly typical scenario).

Now the children's behaviour is very challenging with some sexualised behaviour, bursts of aggression, occasional periods of intense gut-wrenching sobbing, nightmares, stealing, lying, food hoarding and angry outbursts. School is not supportive and the local authority has no budget for therapeutic work, (again a fairly typical scenario).

Scenario/Situation/Perspective	Alex	Maddy
Children have visible disability	Yes	No
Children have visible emotional wounds	No	No
Children's behaviour 'not normal'	Yes	Yes
Observers tolerate the 'not normal' behaviour	Yes	No
Observers blame parents	No	Yes
Need to keep child's history confidential	No	Yes
Able to share children's history	Yes	No
Society at large praises efforts	Yes	Yes
Public accolades	Yes	No
Great human interest story	Yes	No
Praised by strangers in the street	Yes	No
Media interest	Yes	No
Battles with local authorities to fund therapy	Yes	Yes
Battles with social services	Yes	Yes
Feels respected and empowered	Yes	No

Sentimental society thinks adoption is a wonderful concept. A new mummy and daddy for a 'poor little babykins' who has lost theirs – 'Ahh'.

However society doesn't want to address the root cause, witness the ghastly consequences of child abuse or provide support to repair the damage. What does society think happens to the hundreds of 'Baby Ps' who don't die? Do they really suppose that traumatic memories from years of abuse just evaporate on placement?

Costings

A recent social services assessment determined it would take 15 people to replace Alex and care for her children. If paid merely the minimum wage they'd collectively receive £3,438 per week. Alex receives less than a fifteenth of that! By my reckoning it would cost the taxpayer around £13,000 per week if Alex's children were in the care system; more than half a million pounds per year. Maddy's children would cost at least £1,300 per week, about £65,000 a year.

Neither Alex nor Maddy want to be paid for either adopting or their therapeutic reparenting. What they do want is high quality, effective therapeutic services for children carrying emotional traumas and psychological hurts. They want help to heal the invisible wounds, so isn't it scandalous that neither of these women can get the right emotional therapeutic help for the children they parent?

Sadly the media isn't grabbed by that huge injustice, but therapy for traumatised children with invisible wounds and challenging antisocial behaviour doesn't offer glossy heart-warming pictures or snappy headlines.

NB: Alex Bell approved this text. Thanks Alex.
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