

Little Ann

Listening to the news on Monday regarding the Supreme Court decision on the destiny of “Ann”, the 2 year old girl who is to be transferred from his adoptive parents to his biological parents, I was most unimpressed with what most commentators seemed to suggest would happen to Ann. The subtext of what many people were saying was that this may have been a good decision for the biological parents but was not really a good decision for the child. People continued to use the now hackneyed phrase “in the best interest of the child” in a somewhat one-dimensional way by failing to distinguish short-term from long-term interests.

What I was particularly interested in was the use of the word “trauma” and the assumed effects of trauma on the child. As a psychologist and parent I was interested in the comments made because many people seemed to assume that the effects of this decision would have long-lasting and traumatic effects on the child from which she would not recover. However, evidence from many kinds of psychological research would not support this claim.

The first point I would make, very simply, is that there is a substantial difference between *uncomforted trauma* and *comforted trauma*. In other words, if a child experiences something that is very distressing and the parents of that child ignore or fail to comfort the child then the effects of the trauma will be more difficult to deal with. If on the other hand the parents are fully aware of the distress and they appropriately mind and comfort the child, it is fundamentally different. How the effects of the trauma are handled is what determines the outcome.

Healthy well-functioning survivors of trauma tell many stories of how the love, comfort, guidance, empathy, and strength of key people close to them allowed them to survive and thrive the most appalling of experiences. Survivors of the worst traumas imaginable will tell inspiring stories about how the love of a relative, the kindness of a neighbour, the strength of a parent, the deep understanding of a friend, are what allowed healing to take root and develop.

One of psychology’s best-kept secrets is that the effects of distress, trauma, childhood, and change are not as great as imagined. The popular myth is that the effects of childhood experiences determine the character of the child. This, surprisingly, is not actually substantiated by research. Putting it simply: The effects of childhood are over-rated.

Starting 50 years ago researchers all over the world were convinced that childhood has a great impact on childhood development and they looked carefully for evidence of this. You would expect massive evidence for the destructive effects of bad childhoods such as parental deaths, divorce, illness, beatings, and neglect on the adulthood of victims. What researchers found was that there was some support for these conclusions but certainly not massive evidence. In fact the conclusions of Martin Seligman, past-president of the American Psychological Association, is that *early past events exert only a little influence on adult lives*. Researchers found that the effects of certain traumas such as the death of a parent or divorce have, in the long run, small effects on the life-long well-being of the victim.

On top of that, what research also tends to show is that within three months of most life changes, whether good or bad, people tend to return to their basic level of well-being. Whether you win the lottery, or lose a job, your sense of well-being will tend to return to a relatively fixed level.

This stuff is really good news for many people because it is liberating. One can be freed from the assumption that an unhappy past, or a trauma experienced in childhood, marches you toward an unhappy future. We now know that this is not true. Many of my clients feel great relief when they discover that, despite some bad family experiences, their children are as likely to be happy and okay as most other children.

An interesting fact relevant to this adoptive case is that research also shows that the psychology of adopted children turns out to be more similar to the biological parents. Hundreds of studies on identical twins separated at birth show that 50% of almost every personality trait turns out to be attributable more to genetic inheritance than childhood experience.

The effect of one's genetic inheritance, the power of human comfort and empathy, and the indomitable resilience and adaptability of the human person far outweigh the effects of any distress or trauma. Remember, for any child it is unmet, ignored, or denied trauma that is the most difficult to handle. And even in these conditions, children have an extraordinary imagination that allows them to survive.

So for little Ann, no one should assign her to the dustbin of life-long distress and trauma. With love, care, and the strength of those around her she has as good a chance of developing into a delightful happy child as the spoiled child next door.