Adoptive mother Jennifer says she often hears the phrase when talking about adopted children, ‘They are fine, we don’t see any problems’. Within this article she uses her professional insights to explain why ‘not seeing’ any problems doesn’t necessarily mean there aren’t any.

A COMBINATION of my personal journey and professional experience of working with children led me to co-found Inspired Foundations in 2011 with an aim of raising awareness of the needs of looked-after children. I was inspired by a vulnerable child. In order to do this I deliver training and consultancy.

My own adoption journey began nine years ago when I adopted two children. My youngest son William is 15 and he has always shown difficulties immediately - he was hyperactive, obsessive, rejecting and aggressive. We were able to access local services fairly quickly as his needs were visible. My older son Darren was the opposite - he was quiet, well behaved and loving. You could argue that he was quite simply ‘perfect’.

It wasn’t until William’s difficult behaviours began to ease that I started to look a little closer at Darren. By this time, he was aged five and it slowly dawned on me that he had never lost his temper - ever. He had never pestered his teachers for anything, never asked for a packet of sweets in the shop. He would smile and hug me regularly but the hugs felt empty and the smiles were fake. My gut instinct told me something was wrong and I sat about trying to gain support for him. It was then I found out that I was unable to depend on my primary caregiver, feeling confident that they would receive this.

As well as looking at the things that might be causing the difficulties faced by these groups of children, I do find myself worrying more and more about the avoidant children - the ones who do not want to be helped.

Thinking out loud
Try commenting, or ‘wondering’ out loud about your child’s behaviour to help them recognise the feelings they may be having. e.g.: “I think you might be worried about going to school today because it is sports day. I think I will ask Miss Smith to sit close to you to see if she can help you feel better.” “I’m feeling nervous” or “I’ve noticed you look sad whenever I cook pasta. Is it okay to look sad when I don’t cook your favourite meal?” It should be remembered that these are comments, and not questions, so do not expect a response as this can add pressure to their already anxious state.

Reduce questions
These children will often be described as ‘not wanting’ to ask for support because they feel they are unworthy they have a need to be depended upon. Most traditional behaviour approaches focus on rewards and sanctions - where praise and treats are conditional on good behaviour. Children with an avoidant attachment style will be unlikely to show many unwanted behaviours, meaning they won’t require much in the way of sanctions. However, it is also unlikely you will see many exceptional praiseworthy behaviours.

Instead, a middle of the road approach ensures that the child stands out for neither good, nor bad behaviour. Therefore, trying to use traditional behaviour strategies such as losing points, out or reward charts will rarely prove successful. The lack of development in cause and effect thinking often means such techniques are lost on the child, but also for a child who already sees themselves as ‘bad’, and ‘unworthy’.

...children who experience poor care will believe they are bad, worthless and unlovable, and their caregivers untrustworthy.

Connect before you correct
Many traditional behaviour approaches focus on rewards and sanctions - where praise and treats are conditional on good behaviour. Children with an avoidant attachment style will be unlikely to show many unwanted behaviours, meaning they won’t require much in the way of sanctions. However, it is also unlikely you will see many exceptional praiseworthy behaviours.

Instead, a middle of the road approach ensures that the child stands out for neither good, nor bad behaviour. Therefore, trying to use traditional behaviour strategies such as losing points, out or reward charts will rarely prove successful. The lack of development in cause and effect thinking often means such techniques are lost on the child, but also for a child who already sees themselves as ‘bad’, and ‘unworthy’.

Helping the child who doesn’t want to be helped

...to look a little closer at Darren. By this time, he was aged five and it slowly dawned on me that he had never lost his temper - ever. He had never pestered his teachers for anything, never asked for a packet of sweets in the shop. He would smile and hug me regularly but the hugs felt empty and the smiles were fake. My gut instinct told me something was wrong and I sat about trying to gain support for him. It was then I found out that I was unable to depend on my primary caregiver, feeling confident that they would receive this.

Ambivalent insecure attachment
Do not trust that adults will keep them safe and therefore show attention-seeking behaviours to ensure they are noticed and their needs are met. Feel unable to depend on caregiver when upset or frightened.

Avoidant insecure attachment
Often quiet and unassuming, appearing well behaved and compliant. Do not believe that adults can keep them safe so avoid having to rely on them whenever possible.

Disorganised insecure attachment
Often in a state of confusion with no ‘organising strategies’. Can exhibit extreme behaviours, which show no real pattern. They often have a ‘push-pull’ approach to caregivers with the feelings of ‘I need you but I can’t cope with you’.

My experiences as both a parent and a professional have taught me that the children who exhibit ‘ambivalent’ and ‘disorganised’ attachment styles are often noticed much quicker, because they are often loud, hyperactive and attention seeking. They want people to notice them and often this is achieved. Whereas I am in no way minimising the difficulties faced by these groups of children, I do find myself worrying more about the avoidant children - the ones that no one really notices.

When talking to other professionals about children with avoidant attachment issues, I am often met with comments such as “We don’t have any children like that at our school” or “Despite all the training we have done, Sarah is fine and her behaviour is amazing.” This can also be very true of parents, who just like me all those years ago, believe they have a ‘golden’ child. One that behaves all the time and never causes any fuss. My personal belief is that for many of these children, far from being ‘fine’, they are actually doing a great job because the world is a scary place, and they don’t want your interventions, your help or support. The fact people are not noticing any issues is exactly what they are aiming for.

Connect before you correct
Many traditional behaviour approaches focus on rewards and sanctions - where praise and treats are conditional on good behaviour. Children with an avoidant attachment style will be unlikely to show many unwanted behaviours, meaning they won’t require much in the way of sanctions. However, it is also unlikely you will see many exceptional praiseworthy behaviours.

Instead, a middle of the road approach ensures that the child stands out for neither good, nor bad behaviour. Therefore, trying to use traditional behaviour strategies such as losing points, out or reward charts will rarely prove successful. The lack of development in cause and effect thinking often means such techniques are lost on the child, but also for a child who already sees themselves as ‘bad’, and ‘unworthy’.

Helping the child who doesn’t want to be helped

...to look a little closer at Darren. By this time, he was aged five and it slowly dawned on me that he had never lost his temper - ever. He had never pestered his teachers for anything, never asked for a packet of sweets in the shop. He would smile and hug me regularly but the hugs felt empty and the smiles were fake. My gut instinct told me something was wrong and I sat about trying to gain support for him. It was then I found out that I was unable to depend on my primary caregiver, feeling confident that they would receive this.

Ambivalent insecure attachment
Do not trust that adults will keep them safe and therefore show attention-seeking behaviours to ensure they are noticed and their needs are met. Feel unable to depend on caregiver when upset or frightened.

Avoidant insecure attachment
Often quiet and unassuming, appearing well behaved and compliant. Do not believe that adults can keep them safe so avoid having to rely on them whenever possible.

Disorganised insecure attachment
Often in a state of confusion with no ‘organising strategies’. Can exhibit extreme behaviours, which show no real pattern. They often have a ‘push-pull’ approach to caregivers with the feelings of ‘I need you but I can’t cope with you’.

My experiences as both a parent and a professional have taught me that the children who exhibit ‘ambivalent’ and ‘disorganised’ attachment styles are often noticed much quicker, because they are often loud, hyperactive and attention seeking. They want people to notice them and often this is achieved. Whereas I am in no way minimising the difficulties faced by these groups of children, I do find myself worrying more about the avoidant children - the ones that no one really notices.

When talking to other professionals about children with avoidant attachment difficulties, I often am met with comments such as “We don’t have any children like that at our school” or “Despite all the training we have done, Sarah is fine and her behaviour is amazing.” This can also be very true of parents, who just like me all those years ago, believe they have a ‘golden’ child. One that behaves all the time and never causes any fuss. My personal belief is that for many of these children, far from being ‘fine’, they are actually doing a great job because the world is a scary place, and they don’t want your interventions, your help or support. The fact people are not noticing any issues is exactly what they are aiming for.

As well as looking at the things that might be causing the difficulties faced by these groups of children, I do find myself worrying more and more about the avoidant children - the ones who do not want to be helped.

Thinking out loud
Try commenting, or ‘wondering’ out loud about your child’s behaviour to help them recognise the feelings they may be having. e.g.: “I think you might be worried about going to school today because it is sports day. I think I will ask Miss Smith to sit close to you to see if she can help you feel better.” “I’m feeling nervous” or “I’ve noticed you look sad whenever I cook pasta. Is it okay to look sad when I don’t cook your favourite meal?” It should be remembered that these are comments, and not questions, so do not expect a response as this can add pressure to their already anxious state.

Reduce questions
These children will often be described as ‘not wanting’ to ask for support because they feel they are unworthy they have a need to be depended upon. Most traditional behaviour approaches focus on rewards and sanctions - where praise and treats are conditional on good behaviour. Children with an avoidant attachment style will be unlikely to show many unwanted behaviours, meaning they won’t require much in the way of sanctions. However, it is also unlikely you will see many exceptional praiseworthy behaviours.

Instead, a middle of the road approach ensures that the child stands out for neither good, nor bad behaviour. Therefore, trying to use traditional behaviour strategies such as losing points, out or reward charts will rarely prove successful. The lack of development in cause and effect thinking often means such techniques are lost on the child, but also for a child who already sees themselves as ‘bad’, and ‘unworthy’.