

REACTIVE ATTACHMENT DISORDER

DEVELOPMENT, SYMPTOMS, TREATMENT



SHEPHERDS
HILL ACADEMY



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Reactive attachment disorder (RAD) is a condition that is often found in children. Individuals suffering from RAD have often suffered some sort of trauma or neglect in basic care. This type of neglect occurs when the individual does not form a healthy attachment to their caregiver or parent (typically their mother) before the age of five.

WebMD describes attachment from a caregiver as the child being “repeatedly soothed, comforted, and cared for,” and when the child’s needs are met. It is through this attachment that a child will learn to love and trust others. The child will also become aware of their own feeling and needs at this time. They will learn to regulate their own emotions and develop a healthy image of themselves and relationships with others.

Although reactive attachment disorder is rare, it is a serious condition that may affect the child throughout their entire life. According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), RAD can continue for several years or lifelong for a child that does not seek treatment.

How Does a Teen Develop Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)?

According to WebMD, a child will develop reactive attachment disorder by the age of five. However, this disorder, when left untreated, may seriously affect the child through their teen years (or even their entire life).

A child may be at risk for developing reactive attachment disorder if they are in serious situations of neglect, either socially or emotionally. These children lack the opportunity to develop healthy attachment and relationship skills.

According to the Mayo Clinic, a child may be particularly at risk of RAD if they:

- Live in a children’s home or other institution
- Frequently change foster homes or caregivers
- Have inexperienced parents
- Have prolonged separation from parents or other caregivers due to hospitalization
- Have a mother with postpartum depression
- Are part of an unusually large family, where parental time is scarce, unavailable, unequally divided or rare

Although children are resilient, it is important for them to feel safe and learn to develop trust. Infants and young children require a stable and caring environment to grow and thrive. The basic needs of a child must be both recognized and met. For example; when a baby cries the caregiver will need to

recognize the infant's need (perhaps a diaper change or a meal) and be able to meet that need. In addition to simply meeting the need of the child, the caregiver must also meet the child with an emotional exchange such as eye contact, a smile, or loving touch. When a child's needs are not met, or when those needs are not met with an emotional connection, the child will learn not to expect it.

WebMD cites causes of reactive attachment disorder as:

- Persistent disregard of the child's needs for comfort, stimulation, and affection
- Persistent disregard of the child's basic physical needs
- Repeated changes of primary caregivers that prevent formation of stable attachments

Symptoms Found in Children with Reactive Attachment Disorder

Symptoms of reactive attachment disorder can fall into categories of inhibited and uninhibited. A child with inhibited RAD will be more self-conscious and show restraint. A child with uninhibited RAD will act out without consciousness or restraint.

According to WebMD, common symptoms of inhibited RAD in a child include:

- Detachment
- Unresponsive or resistant to comforting
- Excessively inhibited (holding back emotions)
- Withdrawn, or a mixture of approach and avoidance

A child with uninhibited RAD may show signs of:

- Indiscriminate sociability
- Inappropriate selection in attachment figures

Does My Teen Have RAD?

Signs and symptoms of RAD appear at a very young age. If you believe your teen may have reactive attachment disorder, collect an inventory of signs and possible causes from their childhood as well as the present.

Signs and symptoms often found in children with reactive attachment disorder may include:

- Withdrawal, fear, sadness or irritability that cannot readily be explained by the child
- Sad and listless appearance
- Not seeking comfort
- Showing no response to comfort

- Failure to smile
- Watching others closely but not engaging in social interaction
- Failing to ask for support or help
- Failure to reach out when picked up
- No interest in interactive games such as peekaboo

There are many signs and symptoms of reactive attachment disorder that could be found in your teen. If your teen exhibits a number of these signs and symptoms, it is recommended that you seek professional help in order to assess if your teen may have RAD. If your teen does have RAD, treatment will be crucial to their future success.

Do These Symptoms Describe Your Teen?

- Intense control battles, very bossy and argumentative; defiance and [anger](#)
- Resists affection on parental terms
- Lack of eye contact, especially with parents – will look into your eyes when lying
- Manipulative – superficially charming and engaging
- Indiscriminately affectionate with strangers
- Poor peer relationships
- Stealing
- Lies about the obvious or tells crazy lies
- Lack of conscience – shows no remorse
- Destructive to property, self and/or others
- Lack of impulse control
- Hypervigilant or hyperactive
- Learning lags and/or delays
- Speech and language problems
- Incessant chatter and/or questions
- Inappropriately demanding and/or clingy
- [Food issues](#) – hordes, gorges, refuses to eat, eats strange things, or hides food
- Fascinated with fire, blood, gore, weapons, and/or evil
- Very concerned about tiny hurts, but brushes off big hurts
- Parents appear hostile and angry
- The child was neglected and/or physically abused in the first three years of life

How Does Shepherds Hill Academy Help Teens Suffering from Reactive Attachment Disorder?

Shepherds Hill Academy (SHA) is a faith-based [therapeutic boarding school](#) with a wilderness component. Shepherds Hill Academy has had decades of experience in working with teens who suffer from reactive attachment disorder, or RAD.

First and foremost, our program at Shepherds Hill Academy provides safety for your child. Our highly qualified staff are dedicated to caring for and meeting the needs of your teen. Our staff is a consistent and constant presence in the life of your teen during their time at SHA. Over the year your student is here, they will see our staff consistently provide for their basic physical needs.

Our team of certified and licensed counselors and [therapists](#) will provide for your teen's emotional and psychological needs. Your teen will participate in [one-on-one counseling](#), group and family counseling, and [equine therapy](#). Your teen will experience a positive social environment where they are challenged to grow.

Shepherds Hill Academy will remove your teen from the negative influences, pressures, and insecurities of our culture, and will offer them a safe and secure place to heal.

If you believe your teen is suffering from Reactive Attachment Disorder, please give us a call today at 706-779-5766.

Tips to Help Your Child Feel Safe

Safety is the core issue for children with reactive attachment disorder and other attachment problems. They are distant and distrustful because they feel unsafe in the world. They keep their guard up to protect themselves, but it also prevents them from accepting love and support. So before anything else, it is essential to building up your child's sense of security. You can accomplish this by establishing clear expectations and rules of behavior. Also, by responding consistently so your child knows what to expect when he or she acts a certain way, and—even more importantly—knows that no matter what happens, you can be counted on.

Set limits and boundaries. Consistent, loving boundaries make the world seem more predictable and less scary to children with attachment problems such as reactive attachment disorder. It's important that they understand what behavior is expected of them, what is and isn't acceptable, and what the

consequences will be if they disregard the rules. This also teaches them that they have more control over what happens to them than they think.

Take charge, yet remain calm when your child is upset or misbehaving. Remember that “bad” behavior means that your child doesn’t know how to handle what he or she is feeling and needs your help. By staying calm, you show your child that the feeling is manageable. If he or she is being purposefully defiant, follow through with the pre-established consequences in a cool, matter-of-fact manner. But never discipline a child with an attachment disorder when you’re in an emotionally-charged state. This makes the child feel more unsafe and may even reinforce the bad behavior since it is then clear to them that particular behavior pushed your buttons.

Be immediately available to reconnect following a conflict. For children with insecure attachment and attachment disorders, conflict can be especially disturbing. After a conflict or tantrum where you’ve had to discipline your child, be ready to reconnect as soon as he or she is ready. This reinforces your consistency and love and will help your child develop a trust that you’ll be there through thick and thin.

Own up to mistakes and initiate repair. When you let frustration or anger get the best of you, or you do something you realize is insensitive, quickly address the mistake. Your willingness to take responsibility and make amends can strengthen the attachment bond. Children with reactive attachment disorder or other attachment problems need to learn that although you may not be perfect, they will be loved, no matter what.

Try to maintain predictable routines and schedules. A child with an attachment disorder won’t instinctively rely on loved ones and may feel threatened by transition and inconsistency—for example, during times when traveling or during school vacations. A familiar routine or schedule can provide comfort during times of change.

Discover More Parenting Resources

Read more articles, like this one, on [Common Teen Issues](#)

Listen to Podcasts & One-Minute Features from Parenting Experts on [License to Parent](#)

Article Resources

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