



would you take your children to the Edinburgh Festival for a week?



Helen Oakwater is an experienced adoptive parent, coach, trainer, speaker and author.

WOULD you take your children to the Edinburgh Festival for a week?
Me neither.

However, I'm now 'child-free', so as a solo traveller at my first Fringe; I shamelessly eavesdropped, people watched and conversed with friendly festival goers. The wide age range of families attending surprised me. Sometimes three generations attended the same show, or based themselves at a venue, each doing their own thing and regrouped for meals/coffee/chips/pints throughout the day. I heard discussions and negotiations between these families but no disagreements, arguments or violent opposition.

Contrasting these functional families with my experience of adoptive family life, I wondered: why couldn't I take my kids to a festival - Edinburgh or Glastonbury - now, or years ago?

Maybe because their disjointed maturation didn't create self reliance, trust or a secure, psychological base from which to explore the world. You need all three to enjoy a festival.

Maybe their late development and fearfulness (often disguised as challenging behaviour) is a barrier to new experiences. In Edinburgh, there was a spirit of adventurousness, bizarre performances, edgy theatrical acts and sense of fun. All very unpredictable. You needed confidence to feel safe in that environment or have great trust in those you are with. My kids had neither. Their comfort zone was/is tiny.

I watched junior school children fully engage in the rhythmic stomping and face pulling of the Haka show and cheer the machete juggler atop a nine foot unicycle. These kids weren't overwhelmed by the cheerful crowds, scared by new experiences or reticent when invited to participate. They displayed enthusiasm for novel experiences, while regularly checking in with their parents via a quick look, smile or hug. Yes - checking their secure base was still present. They demonstrated self regulation and confidence in themselves and the adults around them.

By contrast, on a family activity holiday in 2000 the evening 'big top' entertainment finished with music and dancing. Despite much cajoling my kids refused to budge. Everyone else - honestly everyone else, staff, adults and children danced but my three remained, glued to their chairs. I now realise they were too fearful to participate, overwhelmed by the novelty. On reflection we should have sat hugging them, but I didn't understand they were terrified and dissociated. 'Developmental Trauma Disorder' didn't exist, 'Attachment Disorder' new. I just thought they were being shy.

In Edinburgh some adolescents attended performances on their own, met parents for lunch where experiences were shared. These teens queued for the next show while their parents leisurely finished their drinks before joining them.

Mine would have been incapable of safely navigating their way back to an agreed place or implementing a back up plan. Why? Because these tasks require the executive functioning skills of planning, working memory, time management and metacognition; skills many adopted and fostered children struggle with. Sensible self reliance is frequently absent. My teens couldn't discriminate between excitement, adventurousness and reckless risk taking.

Meanwhile back at the festival the older teenagers, young adults and their parents clearly relished each other's company. The years of 'normal' parental nurturing rewarded with healthy, collaborative relationships. They laughed, discussed ideas, communicated and trusted each other; calm and comfortable in each other's presence. No tip toeing round egg shells. No carefully guarded language. Parents were enjoying their holiday, actively relaxed, having fun. Their sons and daughters talked to them respectfully challenged them, share stories, ideas, dreams, job opportunities, heart breaks, catastrophic mistakes and triumphs. Ahhhh ... I wish.

My kids, like so many others who experienced maltreatment or neglect, arrived with massive developmental gaps. I wish I'd spent more time allowing them to regress, be toddlers, play babies, given them bottles, cradled them, focused on their underlying needs, not their chronological age. Had I done that, my 17 year old might not have wanted/needed me to spoon feed her dinner after a tough day at sixth form college; two hours before she engaged in 'adult' activities with her boyfriend.

Because their level of functioning is significantly lower than their chronological age, an Edinburgh Festival is inappropriate. They would feel unsafe and be hyper-vigilant. Once outside their comfort zone, fear takes over (base reptilian brain is in charge): observable behaviour might be panic, dysregulated emotional outbursts and behaviour disintegration. They 'lose it' or dissociate. Good therapeutic parents don't inflict unsuitable events on their child, just to satisfy their own needs.

It strikes me that what we call a 'secure base' in infancy grows into the adult 'comfort zone'. Hence the more you increase and strengthen that safe base during childhood, (dissolve old trauma, build self esteem, develop skills) the more resilient and less fearful the adult. People with a larger comfort zone are more likely to step over its edge, relish new experiences, risk festivals and grasp life with at least one hand, rather than cling fearfully to their old stagnant existence. ●



www.helenaokwater.co.uk
www.bubblewrappedchildren.co.uk