

Meet ATTACH Parent Member, Dawn Garrigus, interview by Sue Badeau.

My name is Dawn, I live in Virginia and I am a mother to 7, five by birth and 2 by grace, as well as 7 grandchildren. We adopted our two youngest as an identified first-degree relative resource family (kinship care) with the two coming into our therapeutic licensed Foster Home at ages 2 and 7.5. The placement was jaded by acrimony from the start, as the children had heard running negative commentary about us before even meeting us.

In spite of that, we had incredible natural supports. Everyone in the family took classes and watched videos, absorbed recommended reading and asked questions to support integrating our two newest into a typically functionally closely bonded military family unit. It was not just a set of parents preparing to adopt-it was an entire family leaning in.

Challenges not only come from the adoption, and the trauma the children had already experienced but also from our life experiences as a highly mobile military family. Our older children (all adults when the adoption occurred) had developed a high degree of flexibility and internal systems to navigate disappointments. Military kids like ours have their belongings packed by others, things they cherish lost, frequent moves, and friendships and family relationships interrupted by distance. As a result, the two new, youngest children had a natural support system built by the experiences of our older children and extended family.

This lived experience was – and is – invaluable. Glasses half full met empty glasses and it helped us get through the early days of this new portion of our parenting journey.



Dawn Garrigus and Family

And still – the challenges mounted, the disappointments mounted up, guilt, shame and grief threatened to overwhelm us. We were at sea in a sinking ship and the storms brewing were anything but typical. When we finally received the girls' records, we had tangible evidence of all that they had endured. So many had failed these two. We did not want to be next. I believed



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there was hope, I trusted that gains could be realized if the right supports were put in place during the brief windows of opportunity. Yet I also recognized that we would need supports and resources as wide and deep as all of the oceans.

One day, I sat in a Family Therapy session when the girls were asked "what is it about your foster/adoptive mom that makes you so frustrated or angry?". Her response was a very loud "she NEVER gets mad!!" I knew I needed someplace I could safely be truthful about our situation in order to find support. That is the state of mind I was in late at night, surfing online when I discovered ATTACH and placed my first phone call. Mary, the executive director called me back immediately the next morning. We talked for some time...the one thing that really struck a chord with me was when she told me she understood that I needed to feel safe, I had come to the right place and I need not fear being believed.

After that, I decided to attend the very next ATTACH conference even though it was being held on the West Coast (I live on the East Coast) skeptical about how much it would help, but willing to give it a shot. I left that conference a better version of myself and empowered. During those three days at the conference, it was the first time I actually felt heard, seen and understood in a way that only other adoptive family members could be: all of our perceptions, experiences, challenges and wins were valid (the good, bad, ugly and everything in between). I met and interacted with the invested professionals, authors and families who had blazed paths before me and who welcomed my families' bricks to add to the road. I came back refreshed with renewed hope...hope is tough to hold on to on the daily for sure.

After my first conference event I joined the virtual parent/caregiver support "Let's Talk" chats, opened every resource on the ATTACH website and purchased curriculum! ATTACH has been an integral part of the smorgasbord of resources and supports I rely on to maintain my family and myself. The Family membership was a terrific way to allow my husband and adult children access to the supports as well. Now, the conference is coming to Virginia so I am serving on the planning committee. It feels full circle to me and an opportunity to pay it forward... I almost found ATTACH too late as a parent attendee, my family was navigating some very difficult times and hard life altering decisions were on the table. While we still navigate the extremes and the fringes, we know we have a place to turn to help support us without judgement-our experiences are validated while no one insinuates there is a quick fix or are doing it wrong. Every parent and caregiver should be part of this network of support.

Can't wait to see you all in Virginia Beach!!