How Parenthood Shaped the Life of Maisie

Eric C Yu

University of Michigan

Humans learn through the influences of external sources. Often times, our perceptions of what we know and understand can be quickly traced back to early childhood experiences. In the video, *A Home for Maisie*, Maisie is identified as a problem child because of her behavioral patterns and how she lashes out; because of this, Maisie has difficulty finding a permanent home. Many families decided to send Maisie back into foster care, but what could Maisie do to be better? Where did these problems actually originate? As seen in various studies, these kinds of behaviors can be attributed to attachment issues that resulted from an early age, the level of quality caregiving in a home, and the relationship built between a parent and his or her child.

In describing the relationship between a parent and child, Mary Ainsworth identified four main attachment patterns. Children could have Secure Attachment, Insecure Avoidant Attachment, Insecure Resistant Attachment, or Insecure Disorganized Attachment. From her actions in the video, Maisie appeared to have Insecure Resistant Attachment. Ainsworth defines Insecure Resistance as “seeking closeness with a parent, but when parents leave and return, the child displays angry, resistant behavior with no way to comfort.” (Schreier 2016a). We see this angry type of behavior at the beginning of the video when Maisie shouts things such as: “don’t touch me” and “gonna kill you, gonna kill you.” An example of extreme violence is presented as well when Maisie punches out and even bruises her foster mom, Sue. When these types of tantrums occur, Sue tries her best to hold and comfort Maisie, but most times, the tantrums cannot be controlled. This kind of behavior provides evidence that Maisie had some form of insecure attachment with her foster mom. In an essay presented by Jessica Laranjo, attachment can be attributed to maternal sensitivity, but a prerequisite for maternal sensitivity is maternal mind-mindedness (Laranjo 2008). In the video, Sue tries her best to be sensitive to Maisie’s problems and tantrums. However, because Sue doesn’t initially understand the root causes behind Maisie’s tantrums, she fails to have maternal mind-mindedness. Laranjo describes the importance of mind-mindedness in building strong attachment, and as the video continues, Sue becomes more aware and understanding of Maisie’s troubled past.

In addition to Sue’s relationship with Maisie, Sue’s relationship with Jim, her husband, should’ve had an important impact on Maisie’s attachment as well. Sue and Jim appear to work well together and seem to make decisions as a team. Having adopted eight troubled children in the past, Sue and Jim have a lot of faith in one another. Strangely though, their strong relationship doesn’t seem to impact Maisie’s attachment. At the start of the video, Sue and Jim have doubts that Maisie can fit into the family, but believed in their abilities to take care of her. By the end of the video, the couple believes that they can only take care of Maisie given additional clinical help. Over the course of the video, their thoughts stayed in alignment the entire time. Haneefa Saleem discusses how maternal and paternal wantedness can affect a child’s social-emotional development (Saleem 2013). Although Saleem’s research was done primarily on wantedness for pregnancy, parallels can be drawn to Jim and Sue’s situation. Both Jim and Sue carried similar opinions throughout; according to Saleem’s research, this should’ve helped Maisie’s social and emotional development. However, Maisie seemed to trend in the other direction – having difficulty with her emotional development instead. Maisie’s behavior is interesting because it seems to go against the observations that have been made in research. Jim and Sue didn’t appear to be the cause of Maisie’s insecure attachment; another factor must’ve played into it instead.