

STONEWATER®

ADOLESCENT RECOVERY CENTER

Healing Adoption and Abandonment Wounds in Adolescents

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES



Adolescence is a pivotal period of identity formation, emotional development, and social exploration. For adolescents who have experienced adoption and/or early attachment disruptions, this stage can be particularly complex. Feelings of loss, rejection, or instability can spark struggles with mental health and substance use, leaving parents feeling helpless and heartbroken.

At Stonewater Adolescent Recovery Center, we understand how deeply adoption and abandonment wounds impact a young person's well-being and the unique challenges these adolescents face in treatment. Our highly customized, supportive and empowering approach has been proven to be effective with this particular type of client.

"I think it's hard for parents because they want clarity. They want someone to say, 'This is the problem. This is the solution,'" Stonewater Clinical Director Jeff Noles says. "But more often than not, it's a combination of multiple things—mental health, attachment wounds, environment—and we don't always know how they're weighted. What we do know is that the pain from early attachment wounds doesn't just go away on its own."



Attachment Wounds, Adoption & Abandonment

What are attachment wounds? Any disruptions in early emotional relationships—no matter how subliminal—can cause emotional injury in children that is hard to overcome. In many cases, even the most well-meaning adoptive parents can't reach the scars caused that a child endured while in vitro, or in the days prior to their adoption. For many children, behavioral issues like substance use are the end result.

Adopted adolescents and those who have experienced early childhood separation from caregivers are at a significantly higher risk for mental health disorders and substance use.

For example, one study found that individuals who have been adopted can be twice as likely to develop a substance use disorder as those who are not.

In fact, more than half of all adopted participants in that study went on to develop a substance use disorder.

Attachment Wounds & Substance Use

Adolescents struggling with attachment wounds often experience difficulty trusting others and forming healthy relationships due to a deep-seated fear of rejection and abandonment. When real or perceived rejections occur, they may have strong emotional responses that are hard to regulate. They may struggle with self-worth and a sense of belonging. They may turn to substance use as a way to numb their deepest pain, and/or fit in with their peers.

According to Clinical Director Jeff Noles, such behavior can also be a way of testing the relationships that they do have. "I think one of the biggest challenges is that these kids are testing to see if we'll stay," says Noles. "They've experienced what it feels like to lose trust, so they push people away to confirm their belief that no one will stay. It's frustrating to see them finally connect, only for them to retreat back into old behaviors."



Treating Adoption & Abandonment Wounds at Stonewater

At Stonewater, we take a trauma-informed, relationship-focused approach to healing attachment wounds. Our program is designed to help adolescents feel safe, supported, and understood while building the emotional resilience needed for long-term recovery. We help each young man in our care identify his own individual strengths, so he can find purpose and passion to live a full life.

When creating treatment plans for adopted clients, “Consistency is huge,” Noles explains. “If you make a promise, keep it. If you say you’ll be there, show up—because these kids are looking for the smallest reason to believe you won’t.”

Building trust with our residents takes time, and we emphasize predictability and stability in our therapeutic relationships. Therapists and staff ensure that interactions are attuned, patient, and focused on developing secure attachments.



DBT & Emotional Regulation

In addition, Stonewater is a fully DBT-integrated program, providing adolescents with skills for managing distress, recognizing and responding to triggers, and building healthy relationships. In the therapeutic milieu, they practice these new skills in real time, surrounded by staff members who are trained in DBT and can support their learning.

It can be a messy process, but one that often leads to unexpected results—as this case study illustrates.



CASE STUDY: FROM DEFIANCE TO PURPOSE

“One client in particular, David, didn’t care about anything we had to say,” Stonewater Program Manager Charles Twilley recalls. “If you had told him the sky was blue, he would argue with you that it was black and purple. If anyone was participating in something negative, David would be there right alongside, just being resistant.”

“But, our clinical staff and team members are trained to be consistent in delivering our message, holding the standard, and being respectful,” Twilley continues, “treating our young men like human beings. We treat them with respect even at times when we are met with severe disrespect. When they are first met with that respect, you start to see them turn around. You see the light in their eyes: ‘Maybe these people know what they’re talking about.’”

“That’s what happened with David,” he recalls. “The first three weeks, it looked like he might be administratively discharged, but we held the course until he turned it around. Ultimately, he graduated and was excited to graduate as a leader. Those are the kinds of cases that just light up your day.”

Building New Bonds

“Kids with attachment wounds are often stuck in an approach-avoidance cycle,” explains Noles. “They crave connection, but the moment they start to trust, they remember what it felt like to lose it. So they sabotage.”

At Stonewater, we also use trauma-focused interventions, including CBT, experiential therapy, and family therapy to help clients challenge negative beliefs about their self-worth and develop trust in relationships.

Many of the strongest bonds are built in our group sessions. Adopted adolescents often feel isolated in their experiences, but group therapy provides a space where they can connect with others facing similar struggles, helping to normalize their feelings of loss, identity confusion, and belonging.

“We encourage kids to share their stories in group settings,” Noles says. “We don’t frame them as broken, but as individuals with unique strengths and perspectives. Learning to verbalize their experiences is empowering.”



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Supporting Your Adopted Adolescent in Recovery

As a parent or caregiver, supporting your child's healing process involves patience, understanding, and ongoing commitment. Here's how you can help:

- **Acknowledge Their Feelings:** Even if they had a loving home, their sense of loss is valid.
- **Show Up Consistently:** "These kids are constantly scanning for proof that people won't stay," says Noles. "Be predictable."
- **Encourage Therapy & Emotional Expression:** Provide space for them to talk openly about their experiences.
- **Validate, Don't Fix:** "They aren't looking for solutions. They want to feel heard and understood," Noles explains.

Addressing adoption and abandonment wounds is a long-term process, but healing is possible with the right support. At Stonewater Adolescent Recovery Center, we provide a comprehensive, individualized treatment approach that helps adolescents work through their pain while developing the skills they need to build healthy relationships and lead fulfilling lives.

For more information or to speak with our admissions team, visit www.stonewaterrecovery.com or call (662) 373-2828. Healing begins with connection—and we are here to stay.