

# DEAR FRIENDS & FAMILY

Dear Friend,

I've told you before how I'm struggling with my child's behavior but I'm not sure you understand how serious—how desperate—things are.

Here's the unvarnished truth—my child relies on manipulation and melt-downs to control his surroundings. He refuses to follow the simplest of instructions and turns everything into a tug-of-war as if it's a matter of life or death. Every day, all day, I deal with his extreme behavior. He screams, puts holes in walls, urinates on his toys, breaks things, physically assaults me and so much more. I'm doing the best I can but it's frustrating and overwhelming.

Most people, maybe even you, blame me for my child's behavior. This makes me feel even worse. I already blame myself most of the time, especially because I've struggled to bond with him. It's heartbreaking to know he only feigns affection to get something from me. There's not a parenting strategy I haven't tried. Nothing has worked. Often, I feel like a complete failure as a mother and struggle to face each new day.

Fortunately, my child's behavior makes a lot more sense to me now that he's been diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder (RAD). Let me explain. When a child experiences trauma at an early age his brain gets "stuck" in survival mode. He tries to control the surroundings and people around him to feel safe. In his attempt to do so, he is superficially charming, exhibits extreme behaviors, and rejects affection from caregivers. Unfortunately, even with a diagnosis, there are no easy answers or quick treatments.

Even though I work so hard to help my child heal, friends and family often don't believe or support me which is incredibly painful. I understand it's hard for you to imagine the emotional, physical, and mental toll of caring for a child with RAD when you haven't experienced it yourself. And, you can't possibly be expected to know the nuances of the disorder and its impact on families like mine. That's why I'm putting myself out there about the challenges I'm facing.

When you undermine me, you inadvertently set back the progress I've made in my already tenuous relationship with my child. I wish you could understand how good my child is at manipulating people—how he turns on that sweet, charming side you usually see. In fact, you may never witness a meltdown or even realize he's manipulating you. Yes, he's that good. When you think he's bonding with you, know there's always an end in mind. He may seek candy or toys. The biggest win of all for him, however, is to get you to side with him against me.

Keri Williams  
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Here's how easily it happens—my child is sitting in timeout, looking remorseful as he watches the other kids play. You think I'm too hard on him and say, "He's sorry and promises he'll make better choices next time. How about you give him another chance?" You need to understand there's a lot going on behind the scenes that you simply don't see or know about.

When you undermine me, you inadvertently set back the progress I've made in my already tenuous relationship with my child. The structured consistency—what you feel is too strict—is exactly what my child needs to heal and grow into a healthy, happy and productive adult.

Please know I'm following the advice of therapists and professionals. Strategies for raising a child with RAD are often counterintuitive and, watching from the outside, you may not agree with them. That's okay. But, instead of interfering, would you give me the benefit of the doubt?

Over the years, well-meaning people have said some pretty hurtful things to me, things like:

- All kids have behavioral issues. It's a phase. They'll grow out of it.
- He's so sweet. It's hard to believe he does those things.
- Let me tell you what works with my child...
- Have you tried \_\_\_\_\_?
- Oh, he's just a kid. I'm sure he didn't do that on purpose.
- A little love and attention is all he needs.

I know these sentiments are meant to be helpful, but here's the thing—my child isn't like yours.

He has a very serious disorder. Statements like these minimize our situation as if there are easy solutions that I just haven't tried. Honestly, I'm not looking for advice. What I need most from you is a shoulder to cry on and an ear upon which to vent—without being judged, second-guessed, or not believed.

Reactive attachment disorder is a challenging disorder that's difficult to treat so we have a long road ahead of us. Every day is a struggle and I'd love to be able to count on you but not for advice or answers. I just need you to listen and offer encouragement. I know how deeply you care for me and my child and I'm thankful to have you in our lives. I've lost some relationships through this incredibly difficult journey. I don't want to lose you too.

Sincerely,

A parent of a child with reactive attachment disorder