



The Absent Mother and the Internal Void: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Abandonment and Adoption

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep psychological consequences of early maternal abandonment through the lens of object relations and attachment theory, with a particular focus on adoption. When a child is left by the biological mother, the loss is not experienced as a comprehensible event but as a psychic rupture. According to object relations theorists such as Fairbairn (1952) and Klein (1946), early caregiving relationships are internalized to form “internal objects”—psychic representations of caregivers that serve as templates for understanding the self and others. In the absence of sustained maternal care, the infant is deprived of the opportunity to internalize a stable maternal object. The result is not a process of mourning, but the formation of a psychic void—a loss that cannot be thought, named, or symbolized.

Introduction

Winnicott (1953, 1965) described the infant’s early dependence on the mother as essential to psychological existence, noting that without her, the infant “cannot be.” When a mother disappears without explanation—either physically or emotionally—the child is not developmentally equipped to process her absence. This creates what Winnicott termed “unthinkable anxiety.” The loss is not registered as grief or longing, but as a structural absence in the internal world. The ability to self-soothe, regulate emotion, and trust others is profoundly affected by this early rupture.

The Child’s Experience of the External World

The child’s experience of the external world is shaped by the caregiving environment that follows. Bowlby (1969) highlighted the importance of responsive, consistent caregiving for the development of secure attachment. However, children who experience abandonment are often subject to inconsistent or impersonal care, particularly in institutional settings or foster systems. These environments may compound the original trauma and reinforce a perception of the world as unsafe and unpredictable. Main and Solomon (1990) observed that such early disorganization often leads to disoriented or contradictory attachment behaviors.

The Adoptive Mother and Internal Dynamics

When an adoptive mother enters the child's life, she encounters not a blank slate, but an internal world organized around loss, fragmentation, and mistrust. The absence of a stable internal object creates a vulnerability to primitive defense mechanisms, such as splitting, projection, and idealization (Kernberg, 1975). The adoptive mother may be idealized as a perfect figure, capable of restoring what was lost, or vilified as a persecutory object who, like the biological mother, will inevitably leave. These binary representations echo Klein's (1946) paranoid-schizoid position, where the inability to integrate good and bad leads to extreme and unstable relational patterns.

This idealization is emotionally precarious. Any misattunement—real or perceived—can shatter the idealized image and reawaken fears of abandonment. The adoptive mother, initially seen as all-good, may suddenly become all-bad, as the child re-enacts the trauma of maternal loss. This dynamic reflects a deeper developmental difficulty: the child has not reached the depressive position (Klein, 1952), in which the mother is understood as a whole person, capable of both nurturing and failure. Instead, the child continues to relate through part-object representations, vacillating between intense longing and fearful rejection.

Emotional Regulation and Mentalization Challenges

In addition to relational instability, children who have not internalized a reliable caregiver often struggle with emotional regulation. Fonagy and Target (1997) emphasize the role of “mentalization”—the capacity to understand one's own and others' mental states—as a key developmental achievement rooted in early secure attachment. When this is absent, the child is left with intense affect states that cannot be named or managed. The adoptive parent is then tasked not only with providing care in the present, but with symbolically representing the mother who never fully existed in the child's inner world.

Even genuine acts of care and consistency from the adoptive mother may be mistrusted or misinterpreted. The child may resist closeness, provoke rejection, or display heightened sensitivity to small ruptures. The relational field becomes emotionally loaded, shaped by unconscious expectations of loss and betrayal. As Hughes (2009) notes, the adoptive parent often becomes the recipient of projections rooted in the original trauma.

Long-Term Impacts and Therapeutic Repair

In the long term, the absence of stabilized internal objects profoundly impacts the child's attachment patterns and worldview. Without an internalized sense of safety and consistency, the world may be experienced as emotionally barren or fundamentally unsafe. The self, in turn, may be perceived as unworthy of love, incapable of trust, or destined to be rejected. Relationships are approached with hypervigilance, and conflict evokes intense emotional responses. Every disagreement may feel like a catastrophe. Arguments are not simply interpersonal events—they are experienced as psychic threats, reenactments of abandonment that echo the earliest relational wounds.

The child is not merely reacting to the present, but to an unresolved, unformulated experience of absence. This emotional residue continues to shape not only relationships but the individual's internal reality and expectations for the future. Without intervention, the capacity to imagine a hopeful, safe, or nurturing future remains severely compromised.

Therapeutic intervention in such cases must focus on the reconstruction of internal objects. Consistent, empathic relational experiences—whether with therapists, adoptive parents, or caregivers—offer the possibility of forming new internal templates. Through these experiences, the child may begin to internalize a caregiver who is stable, imperfect, yet reliably present. This process is neither linear nor swift, but it provides a foundation for integration, regulation, and relational trust. Over time, the fear of abandonment may give way to a more cohesive and resilient sense of self and other.

The legacy of early maternal abandonment is not only a matter of memory, but of psychic structure. When the maternal object was never internalized, the child is left with a void that colors every subsequent relationship. Adoption offers hope for repair, but it also brings forth the re-enactment of past wounds. Only through sustained, attuned, and reparative relationships can the internal world begin to heal, allowing the child to move from a place of rupture to one of relational possibility.

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