

Absence of Tears - The Children

One of the first things I noticed when starting my work as the parenting instructor at a shelter for homeless women and children was what I came to call the “absence of tears”. This does not mean that children in a homeless shelter never cry. They do. What it means is I saw a noticeable difference in what *caused* tears to be shed. I was accustomed to grandchildren from middle-class families where tears were shed over mundane things like the choice of TV cartoons or which toy to play with or reluctance to settle down for a nap.

Children in a shelter come in clinging close to their mothers. They are literally shadows of their parent - following not like ducks in a row but in a tight ball around her. Many of them have been walking the streets looking for a place to stop. Some have been brought in by police. Some have spent countless hours in old cars trying to get from a bad place to something better. Sometimes they have no shoes. Sometimes they have no clothing except for what they wear. Sometimes they have left behind a special toy or blanket. Many have experienced violence. All have been uprooted - taken from whatever security their former life had allowed - and now find themselves sleeping in dormitories and surrounded by strangers in large rooms.

Their tears are for a bottle of formula or a dry diaper. They cry because they are in strange territory, and there is a fear that their last familiar human might disappear. The choice has not been theirs, but they do not cry over a lack of choice. They shed tears over basic things that most people take for granted. Much of the time they adapt and the tears ebb as long as that one person important in their lives is within sight.

They learn at an early age not to rock the boat, and they soon internalize the shockwave of homelessness and make it their own.

The Unclothed Child

They had left in a hurry. There was no time to dress her or pack a bottle of