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Research Critical Analysis

Prof Crhon/Poe

 **Boy Meets Abandonment Child Syndrome**

The 90’s hit-sitcom *Boy Meets World* is known for the life lessons and challenges Cory Matthews and his best friend, Shawn Hunter, experience. Their seven-year run targeted young audience members who eventually grew up with the characters, through 6th grade into their adulthood. The show addresses several social issues including child abuse, underage drinking, and bullying and guiding young viewers to understand the dangerous aspects. A social issue constantly shown is child neglect and abandonment in an unstable family. In *Boy Meets World* we see a common theme of life lessons in the way Shawn Hunter is brought up, facing child abandonment syndrome that negatively affects his social development. In several episodes, Shawn lacks self-identity and a sense of belonging and struggles to form relationships.

Shawn Hunter struggles to find a sense of belonging and identity due to parents abandoning him. He was always getting into trouble, in school, and with the law but remains kind-hearted. In season 2 episode 22, “Career Day” we start to see Shawn’s abandonment problems with his mother. Virna Hunter takes off with their mobile home, abandoning Shawn and his father. Shawn’s father, Chet Hunter, discovers this and informs Shawn he will have to leave as well to chase after his mother. Shawn is left to fend for himself without parental guidance. Shawn stays at a motel until his father returns. Though he has a place to live for the time, he decides to visit his teacher Jonathan Turner. He tells Mr. Turner he has come to visit because he has a question from the class. However, this is just an excuse to see Mr. Turner, which he is aware, allowing Shawn to enter his home. Mr. Turner asks Shawn if he is hungry and offers Shawn food, Shawn accepts and devours the food. In the episodes, child neglection is shown, we see that his basic needs are not met, he is starving and alone, and he seeks Mr. Turner to provide these needs. Chet eventually returns to ask Cory’s father, Mr. Matthews, if he can look after Shawn until he finds his wife. Mr. Matthews hesitates but eventually agrees. In this episode, we start to see the issue of child abandonment occurring.

Episode 23 “Home,” focuses on the way Shawn is conditioned to perceive life by the way his parents have raising him. The episode starts with Mr. Matthews telling his wife, “what kind of father abandons his son like that? All this time no phone call, no card, nothing.” We can even see the lack of manners Shawn has due to his parents. He clips his toenails at the dinner table and drinks of out the milk carton. The new living arrangements are not working out. Shawn feels smothered with the rules, curfew, and lectures. In the seventh minute of the episode, Shawn is comparing himself to a stray dog. He hears barking and says, “no leash, no collar, having a great time barking at the moon.” Cory says, “It’s probably barking ‘cause he doesn’t have a home.” Shawn replies “no he’s happy out there because he is free, no one is rubbing his nose in a carpet saying, don’t do that.” Cory then responds, “He looks lonely to me and cold, he looks like he doesn’t have a friend in the world.” According to a research found in “Parenting Styles,” “adolescents who considered their parents to be authoritative had higher levels of psychological competence and lower levels of psychological and behavioral dysfunction in comparison to adolescents who perceived their parents as neglectful” (Milevsky). Cory has authoritative parents. The way Cory and Shawn perceive the stray dog differently depicts the different parenting styles the two boys have experienced. Shawn received the negligent parenting style, where his parents are uninvolved and inattentive to his needs, setting no rules or boundaries, and desire no close relationship with him (Myers/DeWall). As for Cory he experienced the authoritarian parents who enforce rules and are involved in his life; they are strict yet reasonable with rewards and punishments (Myers/DeWall). Later on, in the scene, Shawn snaps and tells Cory “I have to get out of here.” He crawls out of the bedroom window to go for a walk; however, he runs into trouble. He gets tangled with the law; the cop takes him to Mr. Turner’s place explaining that Shawn has been caught vandalizing with some other kids in the school’s yard. Mr. Turner furiously explains the dangerous path Shawn is putting himself in. Shawn rebels, telling him “I got places to be.”

Again, we can see that Shawn is not used to having someone correct his actions. Child abandonment is negatively affecting Shawn in both episodes. Shawn crashes in Mr. Turner’s house after being lectured by him. The following day, the Mathew’s confront Cory, asking on Shawn’s whereabouts. As they confront him, we can see the authoritative parenting style, Cory feels guilty and is unable to lie because his parents enforce punishment to bad behavior. Seconds later Shawn and Mr. Turner appeared. Cory and Shawn were instructed to go to their room; we see the tension in Mr. Matthews. Moments later Chet calls, telling them he won’t be coming back anytime soon. The call involved the Matthews’ true feelings about Shawn. Mr. Matthew tells Chet it's unfair for Shawn and them to be forced into this commitment. Shockingly Shawn overhears the entire conversation and yells “None of you want me, well that’s FINE! I don’t need any of you. I never needed anybody.” Shawn feels unwanted and rejected, that’s when Mr. Turner takes Shawn under his wing; however, this living arrangement doesn’t work out very long. We see in this episode how child neglection affects Shawn.

In season 3 episode 4, we can see Shawn’s loss of identity, as he tries to run away after his first meeting with his new guidance counselor, Ms. Collins. She shares the one-year traveling experience she took after high school to get to know herself. Shawn takes off after hearing this for self-discovery. Trying to talk some sense into the kid, Mr. Turner chases after Shawn, telling him that he doesn’t have a clue what he is getting himself in. As the parental figure Mr. Turner tries to reason with Shawn. He tells Shawn if he wants to travel, they can, but only if Shawn starts going to school and improving his grades. Throughout the following episodes, we see that Shawn is finally settled in and is comfortable, and we see the strong bond that Mr. Turner and Shawn possess. Through their relationship we can see the attachment theory, children tend to form an attachment to their caregiver. (Myer/DeWall)

It wasn’t until season 3 episode 22, “I Never Sang for My Legal Guardian” where things rapidly escalated downhill. The episode began with Shawn receiving a letter from his father, whom he hasn’t heard from in a year. Shawn immediately throws it in the trash, because the address on the letter was 50 miles away, he says, “the least he could do is visit me.” Minutes later Mr. Turner informs that he’s finally completed all the paperwork to be Shawn’s legal guardian officially. Shawn is bothered, saying “I thought you done that months ago.” He starts to feel like a guest in his home again. Shawn takes Mr. Turner’s motorcycle to look for his father to convince him to stay and take care of Shawn. He gets arrested for driving underage and recklessly. Mr. Turner lectures Shawn about the dangers he put himself in and tells Shawn he is legally responsible. The words “legally responsible” offend Shawn because he feels as if he is a liability to Turner. In their argument, they both agreed that they aren’t really for this commitment. Shawn moves out and decides to move back to the trailer park, with his uncle, Mike. The audience can see Shawn’s struggle in finding a permanent home. However, his uncle Mike’s mobile home does not seem to be in the trailer park anymore. Shawn ends up sleeping in a park and gets spotted by some cops, and they take him in. As he was waiting for Jonathan to bail him out, he reunites with his dad in jail. His father was arrested for speeding and unpaid parking ticket. He asks his dad how long he is going to continue to chase his mother and when he is going to return, he tells his dad to stay and that he needs him. However, Chet tells Shawn that he thinks Mr. Turner’s place is better for him, and that he can’t give Shawn a better life. Shawn responds, “It was good, but I wouldn’t say better.” Chet agrees to stop his search for his wife and take responsibility for his son. Through these two episodes, we experienced the hardships of Shawn Hunter in trying to find a sense of belonging and identity.

In season four, we repeatedly see the instability of Shawn’s family. Shawn mother returns and agrees to come back home with Shawn and Chet as long as Chet changes his behavior and starts becoming a better father. Chet promises to do so and gets a job as a janitor. Even though his family has reunited, Shawn still feels empty, from the pain he has endured. In season 4 episode 21 “Cult” Shawn joins a youth cult because he is trying to find a sense of belonging. We can see how damaged, and vulnerable Shawn is in the episode as he is brainwashed easily. Shawn says, “I finally found a place where people let me be who I am without trying to change me or, need to know what my goals are in life” He is unaware of the handful of people that actually care for Shawn and genuinely want Shawn to succeed in life. However, he is manipulated by the leader of the cult Mr. Mack, who constantly tells Shawn that his family and friends are judging him and are not accepting him. This episode Shawn’s belief is exposed, Mr. Matthews questions Shawn if he believes in God, Shawn silence is his response. After this discussion, they are informed that Mr. Turner is in the hospital after a motorcycle accident. Shawn is hurt and runs to Mr. Mack to help him in this tough time; he doesn’t want to face reality and pain. Shawn eventually confronts the situation and begs God to not take Mr. Turner away from him. In this prayer he confesses he is hurt and doesn’t want to be empty anymore.

*“Jon.* ***I don't do alone real good...****I know you're in there but it's like you're not really here. You're not talking but I know you're here. So I'm just gonna talk, you can listen.* ***Jon, even when I was at the Centre, it was all the things you taught me that made me wonder if it was the right place for me or not. But you didn't teach me enough. You, and Cory, and my parents, and the Matthews and the handful of people who really care about me,*** *so don't blow me off, Jon! Don't blow me off, God! I never asked you for anything before and I never wanted to come to you like this, but don't take Turner away from me; he's not done yelling at me yet. God, you're not talking but I know you're here, so I'm gonna talk, and you can listen.* ***God, I don't wanna be empty inside anymore.”***

He realizes that he doesn’t need “the Centre” to feel a sense of belonging. However, Virna takes off again for unexplained reasons, leaving the family for good this time, and stabbing Shawn in the heart. Shawn doesn’t take this easy. Further, in the season, he can’t form a serious relationship with any girl, having trust issues with his girlfriend, Angela.

Through the show, we see the neglection and abandonment in an unstable family and the lack of education to be aware of the damage it is inflicting in their child. Shawn Hunter experienced it several times and the impact it has as he matures. Having difficulties in school, committing to relationships, struggling with a loss of identity and a sense of belonging. However, through the guidance of his friends and parental figures, Shawn was able to manage to overcome the tough barriers that life has placed on him. The show wanted the audiences to be aware of the social problem of child abandonment and displayed it through the character Shawn Hunter.

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