

Maybe When I'm 25, I'll Be Grateful!

Mary, David and Stephanie arrived for a therapy appointment. Stephanie came into this family via intercountry adoption at age 4. Now at age 6 and 1/2, she displays lying, stealing, hoarding food, lengthy fits when told "no", and she very frequently breaks toys and ruins her clothing. She throws all her clothes on the floor and walks on them. She writes on them with markers, and she'll pick a small hole into a gaping tear! Mary and David are quite confounded! Mary stated, "You would think a child who came from having so little in the orphanage would appreciate a warm bed, a nice home, food everyday and lots of pretty clothes."

Mary's thoughts about her daughter displaying some sort of gratitude are common:

Toni and Grace adopted two brothers from foster care, Ben and Jacob, ages 10 and 4 ½, respectively. They stated, "Our expectation was that we were providing Ben and Jacob a situation that was a lot better than their previous situation. To some degree, we were rescuing them. Their lives with their birth family were replete with domestic violence and drug use. We thought they would be happy to be a part of a healthy family situation. We really thought kids coming from the background that our two boys came from would welcome a loving, caring home where parents were there all the time, genuinely taking an interest in their lives. However, they didn't see it this way at all. Their background prevented them from understanding what it meant to be a part of a family. Five years later, we finally feel we are moving out of the conflict and tension that has been so much a part of our lives since their adoptions. Yet, there are still many difficult days as we continue to help Ben and Jacob fit into our family."

Charles, speaking of Alan, who was adopted in adolescence, said, "My expectation for Alan was to provide him with the same kind of household and give him the same opportunities as my other kids had—opportunities he never had. In return, we expected that he would adapt to that and be gracious and mold himself into part of the family. This didn't happen."

Many parents who proceed with the adoption of a child with special needs do so out of a long-term desire to help a child in need. This may stem from a religious upbringing and/or commitment that includes strong values regarding caring for others, or from having grown up alongside foster or adopted children, or from having been raised with a strong sense of community. For example,

Ray and his wife adopted Paul, internationally, when he was 18 months old. Paul is now 13 years old. Ray expressed that he always wanted to adopt. Throughout his whole life, he had felt that adoption offered a way to help another human being. Ray's family of origin placed great emphasis on lending a helping hand to those in need. Ray thought, "I couldn't fulfill this philosophy better than by taking in a child."

An expectation generated by Ray's motivation to adopt is that helping someone in need should result in gratitude on the part of the person being helped. Instead, Paul is angry that he was adopted. He believes, albeit inaccurately, that he could be with his birthmother if Ray and his wife had not adopted him from Korea. Paul expresses his anger by throwing things and making statements such as, "I never wanted to be adopted anyway." Ray, infuriated due to years of this ongoing issue, states, "You have no idea how much better off you are that we adopted you." While this may be true, Paul is only able to see what he doesn't have: his birth family. Paul is not able to see what he does have: a loving adoptive family who provides an assortment of

opportunities. Ray feels let down and unappreciated. The two lived at odds until each was helped to see the other's viewpoint.

Expectations of gratitude need to be examined and adjusted. As the example of Ray and Paul, in particular, makes clear, such expectations lead to unnecessary conflict. Overall, children shouldn't be grateful to have a loving, caring family—this is an inherent right.

Really if we think about this, does it make sense to think that children and teens will be grateful? How old were you when you actually understood and appreciated what your parents did for you? Most of us only realize the full extent of having good parents when we become responsible for maintaining our own place to live, paying our own bills, and raising our own children. So, perhaps, when your adoptee is 25, he or she will thank you!

Today's "Reading and Resources" (right) lend to developing realistic expectations when adopting a child with a history of trauma—abandonment, institutionalization, neglect and/or abuse.