

“We are Family”: The Importance of Claiming to Enhance Attachment in Adoptive Families

Today’s post is taken from *A Child’s Journey Through Placement* by Vera Fahlberg. This book has been a classic in adoption since its arrival in 1991. It is the 1992 Benjamin Franklin Award-winner in the best new Psychology/Self Help book category. This book provides the foundations, the resources, and the tools to help professionals—therapists, pediatricians, juvenile justice workers, CASA volunteers, and child advocates—as well parents—birth, foster, adoptive—and any others who care, in supporting children for whom the journey through out-of-home care becomes part of the road to adulthood. Vera Fahlberg is our “guest blogger” today.

In Chapter 1, Attachment and Separation, Vera writes,

Claiming is a way to build [attachments](#) and bonds. Claiming behaviors are those which separate the “we’s” and “they’s” of the world. That is, claiming—in adoption—is really recognizing who is a member of a family and who is not.

When a child arrives in the family by birth, parents immediately start the claiming process. The child is explored for physical abnormalities. Parents want to know that their child is normal, like all others. They insure that the facial features, numbers of fingers and toes, and basic physical appearance are normal. This takes a very brief period, seconds rather than minutes. This superficial exploration is usually followed by a much more detailed examination as to the ways that this infant is unique, most particularly ways that this infant reflects genetic connections. Ears, fingers and toes are closely scrutinized to see whom the child resembles. The sense of interpersonal connections is enhanced by this claiming. When they see physical similarities, parents experience further feelings of entitlement.

Obviously, adoptive parents will never experience the unique type of bonding which occurs between a birth mother and her child during pregnancy. However, the development of attachment after birth proceeds in a nearly identical manner whether a child is genetically connected to the parents or not.

Although there may not be the same physical similarities in adopted children, identification of the child as a unique individual of particular value to the family enhances claiming. Following are some ways to “claim” your new son or daughter right from the start of your relationship.

Clarify the rules of the family. Most families have a variety of rules and expectations which may never have been clearly identified or verbalized but which differentiate family members from friends or acquaintances. For example, casual acquaintances are not expected to take food from the refrigerator, without asking, during a visit. Yet, we might expect that family members will feel free to do so. On the other hand, we are more likely to tolerate a visiting child’s misbehaviors without comment than if our own child were acting the same way!

Practice new relationships: Some children, especially those who experienced trauma prior to the adoption, may need to “practice” getting close to new parents. For example, when a child moves to an adoptive family and a permanent parent-child relationship is being created the child might be asked to practice calling his new parents “Mom” and “Dad” right away; to practice giving hugs and kisses at bedtime; or to practice sitting on Mom or Dad’s lap (or close by Mom

and Dad) every day for ten minutes. During that time they can be read to, sing songs, talk quietly and so on. It is a time when they can practice learning to be comfortable being physically close. When the child is too old to sit on his parents' laps, he can practice having fun with them by playing games or sitting close while reading a story, etc. Parents are given similar instructions so that the child understands that learning to be close involves both children and adults working at it.

Sharing histories: This is another way to facilitate attachment. Not only is the child asked to share his past with his new parents, but other family members need to share their past history with the child. Sharing family photo albums provides one avenue of doing this. Having other relatives—grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.—share the “family stories” about the parents when they were young, helps the child see his new parents as real people with a past history. The more that the new family member can see others in the family as individuals, as opposed to people playing the roles of Mother, Father, Sister or Brother, the greater the likelihood that he will form a unique relationship with each.

Learning to read emotional cues: Recognizing family members' emotional cues may be difficult for someone just joining a family. Newer members of the family may need help recognizing when Dad is teasing vs. when he means what he says and/or when Mom is serious vs. furious. Likewise members of the adopting family will need to pay special attention to learning the emotional cues of the child joining the family.

Family events and rituals: [Rituals](#) and traditions add to family stability and a sense of belonging while simultaneously meeting an individual's need for intimacy. We want to involve the new son, daughter, brother or sister in the family rituals and events. We also want to incorporate various aspects of rituals the new arrival might have experienced in previous homes or in his country of origin. Reciprocal rituals offer another way to share histories—becoming “we” must always be a two-way street.

Claiming can be done in terms of physical and psychological characteristics, in terms of shared knowledge, and in terms of shared experiences. In claiming, the focus is on similarities rather than differences. Through claiming the parents and siblings come to accept the child as their own and as accepted family members. “We” are truly then a family when claiming is successful!