

Oh, The Behaviors!: Developing “Value” Competency – Part One

Over time, we have put forth many posts to help alleviate the negative behaviors presented by children with histories of trauma. Frequently, adopted sons or daughters—adopted very young or older, internationally or domestically—develop or enter the adoptive family with a lengthy list of behavioral difficulties. Lying, stealing, aggression, destroying household objects and toys, bedroom floors cluttered with candy wrappers, hoarding food under mattresses or in a closet, name calling, profanity, repetitive incomplete homework assignments, lack of personal hygiene, bed wetting, smearing feces, hiding urine soaked clothing, and so on are some of the challenges that adoptive moms and dads must deal with—daily!

Today’s post is part one about “value competency.” It is another in our series of behavioral difficulties. Value competency is a most important quality that adoptive parents must develop when their adoptee arrives with a history of trauma. “Value competency” is the ability to live—long-term—with children who, due to their traumatic histories, have developed values that are at discord with those of the adoptive family. Values drive behavior. So, a family member possessing a distinctly opposing set of values doesn’t always act in a manner preferable to moms, dads, brothers and sisters. This concept is similar to a long-standing adoption concept—“cultural competency”—the ability to flourish and nurture healthy identity development when the adoptive family is comprised of members from various cultures.

This blog follows the “Why” does he or she act like that? and “What” can we do about it? format of all of our posts related to changing negative behaviors. The previous blog posts about behavioral difficulties are listed as “Related Blogs” at the end of this post.

“Why?” *Different Values?*

Overall, it might seem that nurture would lead to healing all past hurts experienced by any child. The adoptee would move in and “love would be enough.” Yet, providing nurture to a child with [complex trauma](#) goes beyond the typical ways of expressing love. Nurturing the adoptee who has experienced abuse, abandonment or neglect involves maintaining empathy and being tolerant in light of difficult and demanding behaviors and other trauma residue (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme and Cuddeback, 2006).

Changing behaviors takes time—more time than can be imagined pre-placement. In fact, it is no easier for children to change their habitual negative behavior than it is for adults. We have all had the experience of making New Year’s resolutions. We pledge to diet, to exercise, to stop smoking, to eat healthier, to spend more time with family and friends, to develop a hobby and the list goes on. Some are able to accomplish their resolution. Many are not. February arrives (and it has!) and the resolution has already gone by the wayside!

Actually, many of these children’s behaviors were developed to survive the abuse and neglect they experienced. So, the child who suffered trauma believes that his behaviors kept him alive. Giving up the behaviors is thus perceived as giving up the very things that saved his life, the lives of his siblings or even his birth mother. For example,

Yesenia and Tania resided with their birthmother and their three older birth brothers. Their birthmother would leave the children alone, sometimes for several days. The children became adept at rummaging through garbage cans in order to eat. The garbage also contained broken toys and tattered clothing. These items were treasures to these five children. Upon being

adopted, Yesenia, age 6, continued to pick through the neighbors' trash. On the neighborhood's assigned garbage pick-up day, she would delight in going from home to home digging through each trash can. She would excitedly arrive back at her own home with pictures, small pieces of furniture, toys, clothes, cardboard boxes and so on. She thought these items were valuable contributions to her adoptive household.

Yesenia continued to believe that she needed to provide for the family. She felt her "value" was in what she could bring to the family.

As another example,

Toby's birthmother had serious mental health issues. When angry with her children, she withheld food. Toby reported that his birthmother was angry "a lot." When food was provided, there was little, and it was thrown on the floor. Toby and his brother had been forced to scavenge around on the floor to retrieve the food. Food was plentiful in his adoptive home. So abundant in fact, that Toby would eat until he vomited. He always made sure to awaken in the middle of the night to raid the pantry. On his way back to his bedroom, he carried as many snacks as he could.

Toby was determined never to be hungry again. Toby's "value" was on food, rather than on trust that his adoptive mother and father could provide for him.

Lastly,

Kurtis was placed in foster care at birth as his birthmother had been incarcerated for theft and possession of narcotics. Kurtis was shuffled through five foster homes and then, at age 10, he moved to his adoptive family. It seemed that each time he moved few of his clothes and toys followed him. In fact, he usually reached his new destination with one garbage bag of items. Vivian, his adoptive mom, was shocked with Kurtis' never-ending carelessness. New mittens were lost. Jeans were riddled with doodling in magic marker. Brand new toys were broken within minutes. School books disappeared. Dishes shattered if he was asked to clear the table.

Objects had little meaning to Kurtis. There would be more at the next house. He had no ability to "value" the hard work that his adoptive mother had to put forth to ensure that Toby had nice clothes and the latest toy or electronic device.

It is fairly easy to appreciate the development of various behaviors when we connect the behavior to its origin. However, living day-to-day with children who lie, steal, cheat, destroy property, swear, and so on is demanding, grueling and challenging for parents, brothers and sisters.

Pre-adoption, adoptive parents may expect that the child they are adopting will have similarities and dissimilarities from the other family members. However, the family often anticipates that the differences will be more in the areas of food preferences, clothing and hair style, or hobbies. We all have relationships in which these differences exist. How often at the mall do we see the men sitting outside of the store waiting for their wives? Women want to look through the sales racks and men often do not. Or, during a shopping trip, the family splits up. Mom and the daughters proceed to the shoe stores. Dad and the sons go directly to power tools. Most families have more than one television. Everyone gets to watch his or her favorite shows.

Adoption brings with it such disparities. However, adoption may also mean attempting to form a relationship, obtaining a “psychological fit,” with a person who has a very different value system. Over time, the child’s behavior can be perceived as a direct affront to the mother and father’s good parenting and their efforts to help them become a successful human being. Parents begin to make statements such as,

“He steals instead of asking.”

“He hoards when we provide more than enough to eat. For Pete’s sake, we aren’t going to run out of food. We aren’t his birth family!”



“I work hard and he breaks everything he gets his hands on. Who does he think is going to replace this stuff? Money doesn’t grow on trees!”

“I can’t believe the things he says to me. I would have never talked to my parents that way!”

It is also not uncommon to hear,

“I love him, but I really don’t like him anymore.”

“There are days I simply don’t want to live with him any longer.”

Empathy has turned to anger. Tolerance has vanished as well. Feeling that all of their good intentions have been rejected, the parents begin to withdraw from the child. What is the point in giving when it does not seem that it is received? Guilt heaps higher—“What example is being set for our resident children?”

If you find yourself in a position where your empathy has turned to anger, come back on Tuesday for Part Two of this post. Learn some ways to re-group and proceed in a new direction. Offered will be solutions for steering your family to more calm and peaceful interactions. Now, there’s something we can all value!