

As Mother's Day Approaches: The Role of Triggers in Adoptive Families

You are driving in the car and a song plays on the radio. Suddenly, you are reminded of your first love—you smile.

The song is a trigger—an identifiable situation or event that can create emotional upheaval. A trigger generates feelings. The adoptee with a traumatic past often lacks the skill of verbalizing such emotions. Instead, their feelings are expressed through their negative behaviors.

This situation tends to disrupt holidays and other special events. These occasions remind the adoptee of his or her past losses. Feelings surface, and a behavioral explosion occurs—a birthday party, family vacation or [Gotcha Day](#) quickly deteriorates into a stressful and conflictual affair. This phenomena is often referred to as an “adoption-related crisis.”

Triggers are also like dominos. Brothers and sisters become triggered themselves. “Why does he have to ruin every holiday? I miss my “old” family. Everything was peaceful before my parents adopted him!” Or, for mothers and fathers, an unpleasant occasion may cause a resurgence of infertility issues or unresolved losses from their families of origin. Issues such as abuse, the untimely death of a parent or sibling, the impact of alcoholism and the emotional unavailability of a parent during one’s childhood are developmental. They are triggered by various life stages such as becoming a parent. Many parents will find that they engage in a parallel process of healing subsequent to an adoption. Parents will need to re-work unpleasant childhood experiences while simultaneously assisting their adopted child to do the same.

Trigger management is an essential tool for maintaining a positive emotional climate within adoptive families. It is also a timely topic with Mother’s Day approaching.

Trigger management begins with:

- *Recognize common triggers:* Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, birthdays, holidays, the anniversary of the adoption, the anniversary of the day the adoptee was removed from her birthparents, airplane rides, visits with birth siblings, birth of a child, adoption of a child, kindergarten or first grade, the beginning and end of each school year, puberty, questions and comments made by strangers, and school-related projects or classes such as genetics or biology.
- *Identify the losses associated with the triggers.* These issues bring the grief to the surface.
- *Use triggers to generate conversation and feelings.* That is, triggers can be used as a tool to facilitate grief. About two weeks before a holiday, anticipate the possibility of difficulties. Make a statement like, “Mother’s Day is almost here. Do you think about your birth mom around Mother’s Day? I do. If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be your dad. I know she hurt you and I am sad about that. I am also happy to have you for a son.” The parent has established that the birthmom is a safe topic. He has acknowledged that there is hurt. He has identified a potential feeling and he has expressed feelings of his own. He modeled talking about feelings. Kids do learn from their parents!
- *Resolve, resolve and resolve trigger-related grief.* It isn’t selfish to make grieving time a priority. In fact, it is essential. Grief is responsible for causing angry blow-ups that throw the family off course for days. Adoption-related crises could be avoided by allowing for a cry, or as one mom does, “I drive to a place near some woods. I get out and walk into a nice patch of trees. I shout about everything that makes me angry. The trees seem to

take it pretty well and I know I feel a whole lot better after venting to them. They don't talk back!"

- *Resolve, resolve and resolve again!* Matters once settled tend to crop up again because losses are developmental—for adults and children. Parents are encouraged to take stock of potential grief issues—their own and all of their children's. Make this an ongoing process. Make time to think about your behavior and that of your children. Behavior may be reflective of pent up emotions. Rather than letting these feelings throw you off course—causing you to take your anger or sorrow out on your children or spouse—seek to uncover the root cause of your feelings.
- *Get started!* Stop expecting that everything is just going to get better on its own. Quit waiting for the adoptee “to grow out of it.” Take action to generate improvements in the family. Utilize professional assistance if necessary.