

Will I Love My Adopted Child as Much as My Birth Child?

Many families that adopt will instantly love their adopted child as much as they love their birth children. When I was a worker placing children, we often stated that there was a “spark” on the part of the parent. They would meet a child or see a picture of a child and just know that was “our” child. The child was quickly accepted and integrated into the adoptive home. There is certainly true happiness for these parents and children.

However, there are also cases like the following:

An adoptive mom wrote,

“When we first met Jason, he was an infant only 8 months old. From his infancy to about age 3, we had the same love for him as we had toward our birth daughter. Our love for him, at that time, was no different from the way we loved our daughter. For the first few years, except for the screaming and the crying at bedtime and nap time, he seemed “normal.” A “normal” child is very easy to love regardless of the label of “birth” child or “adopted” child.

But, after his behavior problems started to worsen, and as the years unfolded, our love for Jason started to change to anger, bitterness and resentment due to the effect his behavior was having on the rest of the family. We gave unconditional love to him and received what seems to this day to be hatred in return. We pray daily that the Lord will soften our hearts and teach us how to love him again as his heart heals from the pain of his childhood neglect. We have never totally stopped loving him. But it’s almost like an obligatory love right now.”

Many readers may be saying, “Oh my, a mother who doesn’t truly love her son!” Actually, it is grief that you hear in her note—anger, bitterness, and resentment—that has caused love to be be-sodden by torrents of difficult behaviors and issues with which their child has flooded the family. As grief is a part of adoptive family life, it is not uncommon for adoptive parents—mothers and fathers—to talk about lost love when the adoptee has mental health issues, “I love him but, I don’t like him anymore.” “I try to love her.” “I want to love her. But, it is hard, harder than I ever imagined.”

It is difficult to love *anyone* who rejects you and has a very different value system—this includes your own child. Rather than criticize these parents, they need to be provided with a forum for expressing their feelings. They need support and validation. They are already guilt ridden about the fact that they don’t feel love for all of their children equally and unconditionally. Frequently, when helped to grieve, feelings of affection resurface.

In the meantime, a sense of obligation drives parental efforts to heal the adoptee from past hurts. Parents often say, “We adopted. We made a commitment. We are going to follow through.” I think that commitment is often the “substitute love” of adoptive parents. Commitment drives positive behaviors toward the child. The following comments from another mom capture this sentiment,

“I don’t think love and affection are based solely on a child being biological or adopted. Personalities play into the equation for me. My biological daughter, Kate, is more loved now than are Bob (biological) or Teresa (adopted). Kate puts more effort into our relationship. I didn’t always love her more. Her teenage years, middle school thru first year of college, were rough, and loving her was difficult. My adopted daughter, Teresa, has moments of being most loved;

moments where I feel she's connected with me and our family dynamics. There are times when I believe that I need to be most loved and all the kids need to take a back seat. I don't spend much time thinking about my love for my children. My love and care hopefully come out in my behavior."

Love, in adoption, may be about what parents "demonstrate" toward their children rather than about what they "feel" toward the child at any given moment in time.

In conclusion, the adoption community takes for granted that the adoptee has intense feelings and that expressing these feelings is cathartic. The same courtesy must be extended to the siblings and parents if the family is to heal. Perhaps we need to learn that love—like adoptive families—comes in all sizes, shapes and colors.

Be it an intense emotion, a "commitment" or a "behavior toward the child", love in all its forms maintains the permanency of the placement, and allows healing and growth to occur. Thus, love—in all its facets—makes for successful adoption outcomes.