

## Adoption + Mental Health Issues = Invisible – Part 1

*Imagine that you prepared at great length for a dinner party at your home. You constructed the guest list, sent out the invitations, and prepared the menu. Nothing was too much effort for your party; you went to the store, prepared the ingredients, and cooked for hours, all in anticipation of how pleasant the conversation and the people would be. Except they weren't. The guests arrived late; the conversations were forced; and the food was slightly overcooked by the time all of the guests arrived. The anticipation and expectation of the great time you were going to have are discordant with your observation of the evening. The pieces do not fit. You're upset, partly because the evening did not go well, but also because of the inconsistency between your expectation and your experience. You are suffering from the uncomfortable, unpleasant state of [cognitive dissonance](#) (Cooper, 2007).*

Perhaps the greatest source of cognitive dissonance for adoptive families is the invisible quality of mental illness. That is, children with [mental health diagnoses](#) (PTSD, ODD, AD/HD, Bi-Polar, Conduct Disorder, RAD, etc.), often put forth more negative behavior in the home than at school, church, stores, family gatherings and so on.

Because this concept of “invisible” is so prominent and so difficult for the adoptive family, this blog is actually going to be three parts:

- This post, Part 1, will provide the overview to the topic.
- Part 2 will explore ideas, [pre-adoption](#), to offset this phenomena.
- Part 3 will then move to [post-adoption](#) and provide thoughts to help the family cope with this matter.

Overall, friends, relatives, teachers, neighbors, mental health professionals and child welfare professionals do not see the traumatized child accurately. If a family is parenting a child in a wheelchair, or a child who has mental retardation or Down Syndrome, the child's disability is obvious. However, children with mental health diagnoses look “normal,” so adoptive parents often hear:

“My siblings acted like that too!”

“My brother and I fought all the time. All siblings do that.”

“He is so cute.”

“She is so bright.”

“Maybe you should try some different parenting techniques.”

“My son did that too. He'll grow out of it. Just give it time.”

“Give him to me for a week. I'll straighten him out.”

“If you would show him more love, he would do better.”

“Why do you let your kid walk all over you? You need to toughen up!”

It isn't just adoptive parents who experience this “invisible” phenomena. The appropriately-developing children receive their share of comments and questions as well. Let's return to Lena, whom we met in the blog, Where are the Support Groups for Typically-Developing Children? Lena was adopted as an infant. In her late adolescence, her parents adopted a sibling group of two sisters ages 1 ½ and 5. The older of these two siblings has serious mental health issues. The younger sibling exhibits social and emotional delays, and she also receives treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. We learned that Lena's friends thought she was exaggerating when she would talk about the behaviors presented by her younger siblings.

Lena's peers felt that she simply did not understand her younger siblings. Lena's extended family repeatedly suggested that Lena's family "give the kids back." They offered little assistance even though Lena's family has requested their help. Lena's family is excluded from holiday meals. The reaction of Lena's friends and family members has caused Lena to ask many questions,

"Why aren't my relatives more helpful? I spent so much time with them growing up. What happened?"

"I am adopted. If I had problems what would they have told my parents? Did they really ever accept me?"

"Why do my friends think I am exaggerating? They have known me since grade school. Do they think I would make things up?"

"Everyone is questioning my parents' decision to adopt. Why can't they see that my sisters have problems?"

I need to educate everyone!

In light of the array of questions and comments, many parents go about attempting to alleviate their cognitive dissonance by educating everyone involved with their child. There is a drive to make others understand that, "It's him, not us, that has the problem." They explain the child's difficulties. They provide books, articles and Internet links. They ask their adoption-competent therapist to call their child's educators, coaches and child care provider in order to validate that the adoptee does indeed have mental health issues.

The outcome of these efforts is often that the family looks unhealthy. Friends, relatives and professionals silently think, "What is wrong with this mom? Her son is a great kid. He acts fine here at school. Why does she want him to have problems?" A vicious cycle is produced. The more information the family provides, the crazier the parents appear. Parents regularly report, "I feel like I am crazy. No one understands. No one listens to me. Why does everyone blame us? Why can't anyone understand that parenting Johnny is a struggle?"

Education is never a waste of time. However, attempting to inform those who do not see the problem (because they do not experience it) can be futile—a venture that actually increases distress. So, what can the adoptive family do?

I feel so alone. No one understands.