

Adoption + Mental Health Issues = Invisible – Part 2

In Part 1 of this blog, we learned that adoptive families often experience a cognitive dissonance—a discrepancy between what they expect and what they experience. This can be particularly true in cases in which the adoptee’s mental health issues seem “invisible” to teachers, extended family members, neighbors, mental health professionals, etc. Mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters are being bombarded with negative behaviors—lying, stealing, disrespect, food issues, property destruction, poor hygiene, and so on—on a daily basis. Yet, outside the home, the adoptee appears “normal.” Friends, colleagues, professionals, etc. begin to wonder, “What is wrong with this family?” Simultaneously, the family thinks, “Why can’t anyone see that it is him; not us?”

Frequently, the adoptive family’s response is to begin to attempt to educate everyone around them. This can work adversely. The more the family provides information, the more “crazy” the family looks. The fallout from this scenario varies. Parents may become angry or [depressed](#). “Why is he (i.e., adoptee) doing this to our family? He can act ‘good’ for everyone but us?” “Why doesn’t my own sister believe me? She has known me her whole life?” “Why don’t my friends support me?” The typical kids think, “Yeah, he has a life now, but mine sucks! I wish he hadn’t come to live with us?” “Why did my parents get another kid? Wasn’t I enough?” “Why does she treat my parents this way? They gave her a home.” The end result is a negative emotional climate within the adoptive family. A once happy, peaceful family is now cranky, over-stressed, frustrated, depressed and often at odds.

So, what is a family to do? Below are some thoughts and suggestions for the [pre-adoption phase](#). Part 3, coming on Tuesday, August 18, will provide ideas for [post-finalization](#).

Please keep in mind a few things about solutions as you read the remainder of this blog,

- There are no “one size fits all families” solutions. Each adoptive family is unique.
- There is no one “magic moment.” There is no one solution that will transform the adoptee and so cause a change large enough to restore the family to “normal.”
- There are sometimes no ideal solutions. Often, we must break a goal into parts, and then work, piece by piece, until we reach our goal.
- Solutions require prioritizing. Altering one or two things at a time is more effective than attempting sudden sweeping changes.

Pre-Adoption Ideas

Pre-adoption is really the time to begin to prepare your support system for the arrival of your new son or daughter. As soon as you make the decision to adopt, sit down and write a letter to your family members, friends, etc. outlining your excitement, any reservations and so on. This gives your sisters, aunts, uncles and parents time to absorb the idea that adoption is a viable, workable option for building a family. Anticipate and address their concerns and yours. For example, if you know that your Uncle Marvin has a tendency to crack racial jokes and you are adopting from [China](#), you may want to write about how this situation will need to change. If you know your father will be sad at the loss of genetic connection to his grandchild, empathize with him and express your sorrow as well. Adoption generates positive feelings and loss for each member—nuclear and extended—of an adoptive family. Frequently, grief causes inappropriate comments and remarks upon the announcement of the pending adoption. Lead time, via a letter, helps each relative-by-adoption explore their thoughts and feelings as well as the

prospective family's. From this, conversation and a "getting everyone on the same page" mindset can follow. Two very helpful books in this area are *Adoption is a Family Affair* and *Adopting: Sound Choices, Strong Families*.

Allow yourself the opportunity to understand that you may experience problems post-adoption. Every day I meet families who say, "Our adoption agency did tell us about [attachment difficulties](#), behavioral problems, learning disabilities and so forth. We thought because we were adopting so young the information didn't apply to us." Or, "We were given a reading list, but didn't read the materials." Bottom line — "We didn't think that we would get a child with problems." *Reality — two thirds of international and domestic adoptees have moderate to severe problems!* Post-adoption support is more likely when everyone is provided information—in advance—about the potential emotional, behavioral, cultural and academic issues that may arrive with the adoptee. Subscriptions to [Adoptive Families Magazine](#) or [Adoption Today](#) are a great way to launch a successful adoption complete with a well-educated support system.

Parents and agencies want to consider including more than adoptive parents in pre-adoptive training. It is common knowledge that, post-adoption, many families lose their support system. Friends and family members drift away because they don't understand the issues that adoptive parents face. They provide unsolicited advice with an undercurrent that infers that the problems are due to poor parenting. Isolation may occur as the time needed to tend to out of family relationships is unavailable. The adoptee's chaotic ways interfere with the capacity to attend a family gathering. Research shows that support—informal and formal—leads to positive adoption outcomes. Whether your pre-adoptive training is a reading list, on-line courses or in-person group meetings include those folks who are expected to provide support down the road.

Oh, and let's also make sure we are including the children already living in the family in all pre-adoptive preparation! Research studies regarding the impact of a placement on the typically-developing children in families which adopt children with difficult backgrounds (i.e., institutionalization, abuse, abandonment, neglect) conclude that the stability and satisfaction with adoptive placements are impacted by the children—birth and/or adopted children—residing in the home at the time another child enters the family system. Further, preparation and support for the family's existing children may be the necessary keys to reduce disruption rates; retain foster and adoptive families; maintain the emotional well-being, security and stability for the appropriately developing children; and ease the transition for everyone concerned. Sibling experts write that throughout their lives, brothers and sisters have a need for information about their sibling's condition. Their need will closely parallel their parents' informational needs. So, providing typically-developing children with information is important in offsetting disruption, and it gives reassurance, answers questions and helps resident children prepare for the future. Visit our previous blog, *This is Not the Brother or Sister I Expected!: The Need to Prepare the Typical Children* or read, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*. The workbooks, [Living with the Sexually Abused Child](#) and [Preparing Foster Parents' Own Children for the Fostering Experience](#) are valuable resources as well.

In conclusion, today's adoptive family has a wealth of information available to them, to their relatives and close friends and their typical children. The pre-adoption phase offers the opportunity to pass this information along to your support system. Read, read and read some more before your new son or daughter joins your family. Attend [support groups](#), [adoption conferences](#), community trainings, [online trainings](#), online chats, etc. As you travel the road to getting the child, take those closest to you along for the ride!