

“Am I the ‘Right’ Mom for this Child?” (Part One)

It is very common for adoptive parents, especially adoptive mothers, to ask, “Am I the ‘right’ mother for this child?” A child with a history of trauma, abandonment, institutionalization, abuse, neglect, pre-natal drug/alcohol exposure, brings to the home significant challenges. These issues don’t always simply fade with affection and time. That is, “love *isn’t* always enough” and he or she “just *doesn’t* simply grow out of it.” Parents try everything to “fix” the traumatized child. Still—each day—the child repeats the same behaviors over and over again! The adoptee has no lasting friendships. Grades may be poor. Homework is a struggle. The typical children are asking, “Why did you adopt him?”

Over time, this scenario causes mothers to develop many feelings and to ask themselves many questions. For example, they become riddled with guilt. “What am I doing wrong?” “Why isn’t she learning from her mistakes?” “Maybe I don’t love him enough?” “Maybe I need to try harder?” The parent takes on the blame for the child’s difficulties.

Anger often becomes dominant. The adoptive home seems immersed in conflict. A child with a history of trauma can make a mom or dad angrier than he or she ever thought possible! Parents think, “Why am I so angry?” “How can she get better when I am always yelling?” “Maybe I am a ‘bad’ parent.” “Why didn’t the agency tell us it would be like this?” “Why can’t she just ‘get it’?” “Can’t he see what I am doing for him?” “Why doesn’t she appreciate our efforts more?” “He pushes my buttons! He knows the things that make me angry and he does them on purpose to make me mad! Why is he doing this to me?” Anger compounds guilt.

Why can't I get him to listen?

Fear sets in. “What will happen to our family if he doesn’t get better?” “What kind of a future will she have if she keeps lying and stealing?” “How is this impacting our other children?” And, there is also, “Sometimes I am so angry I fear I could hurt her. I have to walk away. What kind of a parent feels like they could physically hurt their own child?” This latter declarative is particularly terrifying to a mom or dad. It challenges their entire sense of self. A parent who entered adoption because they “had so much love to give a child” is now having thoughts of harming the child! This raises a further query, “What has happened to me?”

Friends, extended family and even spouses frequently intensify the matter. Statements such as, “You’re too hard on him!” “You’re not strict enough. If he were my child, I’d make him listen.” “All boys act like that.” “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.” “Why do you let your kid walk all over you? Or, You need to toughen up!” only serve to make Mom wonder, to an even greater degree, about her fitness as a parent to the adopted child.

In reality, it is important for adoptive mothers and fathers to understand that all of the above is “normal” once a traumatized child enters the family. The remainder of this blog and all of Thursday’s post will help you understand why you have thoughts and feelings, and why you are the “right” parent for your child. Along the way through these two posts, we’ll offer some ideas to help you be an even better parent—if that’s possible ☺ Let’s get started! Today’s topic is a new tool box of techniques. On Thursday we’ll explore,

- resolving ambivalence,
- giving yourself kudos,

- the adoptee's transfer of feelings to his adoptive parents and more!

You Aren't a "Bad" Parent. You Don't Have the Right Tools: Growing up, we play house, take care of our dolls, mimic our dad shaving and so on. All of this fun allows us to take on the qualities of our own mothers and fathers. When we have children, we implement what we have learned in our day-to-day interactions with our sons and daughters. In essence, we are geared to parent children like our parents parented us. Unfortunately, the adoptee with a history of trauma doesn't respond to "traditional" parenting techniques. Time-out, removal of privileges, grounding, withholding affection, lecture, etc. are all rendered ineffective when a child has been abandoned, neglected, abused, institutionalized or exposed to drugs or alcohol before being born. Applying these techniques with a troubled transplant is like making toast in the refrigerator! You need interventions designed to have a positive impact on the troubled child.