

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

Welcome to Part Two of our post, designed to help adoptive mothers, in particular, know they are the right parent for their troubled son or daughter. Part One explored the types of feelings and questions a parent can develop when presented with the challenge of parenting a child with a history of trauma. Frequently, such children don't blend into the family as expected pre-adoption. As the child struggles to heal from her past hurts, the parent begins to question his or her parenting abilities. Unfortunately, parents may conclude that they are the problem. This is when parents explore their fitness to nurture and guide the child who arrived via adoption.

In Part One we also put forth the statement that this type of self-doubt and strong emotional reaction is “normal” in adoption-built families. We began to explain why. Today, we continue with the “why” and we also offer some “what to do.” By the end, you will know you are the right parent! Armed with new knowledge and tools, you will be renewed and rejuvenated!

Without further delay, let's move to our “why” and “what to do”:

Ambivalence is to be Expected. Think about starting a new job, getting married or having a child by birth—all of these uncharted experiences generated anxiety. Parenting a child with mental health diagnoses brings about the same type of tense, uneasy feelings. This is a new and unfamiliar challenge. Review and apply the skills you utilized to successfully pass through these previous hesitant times. This will renew your confidence in yourself.

Give Yourself Kudos for Your Self-Control. Few really understand the impact of living with a child who daily discounts you, your rules, your values and your morals. It requires great self-control to walk away from your son or daughter and from others who criticize your parenting. Pat yourself on the back each time you give yourself a time-out. Only a good parent can do this, and can do this on a repeated basis.

Reflect on How Well Your Birth and/or Previously Adopted Children are Doing or on Previous Interactions with Children. Likely, if you have appropriately-developing children, they are doing great! They are off on play dates, involved in athletics, making the honor role, helping out in the community and so on! You made possible these successes! Obviously, you have the skills to parent! Even if you don't have other children, you have nieces, nephews, kids next door and so on. Review these interactions. These children probably adore you and look forward to spending time with you. A couple, childless prior to adoption, didn't live in a vacuum. Likely, such parents can count many times in which they contributed positively to a child's life. Use these proud moments to bolster your self-esteem, and to revive your knowledge of yourself as a good parent!

Progress Consists of Small Steps. “Fixing” the adoptee is an expectation to alter. Instead, begin to think in terms of “small steps forward.” Progress is often in increments. Come to expect regression as well. At times, it will feel like you took two steps forward, and then ten steps backwards. Regression is essential to cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Most “normal” children lose the ability to talk when they are learning to walk. We are so excited when they actually take that first baby step that we don't notice. The adoptee with a history of trauma arrives in the family with a myriad of developmental delays. As he progresses, he will need to regress. It is human design—not your parenting!

Know that You are Not Alone: I don't think I have ever worked with a family in which the Mom and/or the Dad have not questioned their ability to parent the adoptee with mental health issues. So, know that you are not alone! The adoption of a traumatized child challenges parents significantly. It makes parents re-think their entire life. It leads to significant grief and distress. It makes parents question who they are and what kind of parent they are to the very core. Often, post-adoption, parents are blindsighted by these life and self review processes. This is called a "parallel healing process." Next month, I will post a two-part blog about this. In the meantime, in the "reading and resources" I have provided the links to various parent support organizations and self-help books. If you are struggling, see if you can connect with another Mom or Dad who has been through this. Also, below in "related blogs" you will find previous posts that help "normalize" this experience for you.

Traumatized Adoptees Communicate Via a Transfer of Feelings: The adoptee arrives with expectations. She expects to return to her birth family. She expects that her adoptive family cannot love her. After all, she was too "bad" for her birth family to keep. How can her adoptive parents and siblings love her? Or, he believes that this will be another home in which he could be abused. The traumatized child communicates the feelings for all of his experiences and thoughts via negative behavior. He utilizes his behaviors to "show" you how he feels. In turn, you react to the behavior. Your reaction reflects the child's feelings. For example, parents who become infuriated post-placement, are living with a child who is angry.

The child who has been beaten, raped, abandoned, institutionalized, separated from siblings and/or moved from foster home to foster home has internalized intense feelings as a result of these traumas. Inside, she feels rage, sorrow, hopelessness, helplessness, profound sadness, frustration, loneliness and lost. Who wouldn't? *When transferred to you, you now have more intense feelings than you have perhaps ever had to deal with. This is why you are so, mad, depressed or nervous.*

In reality, your adopted son or daughter hopes that you will demonstrate ways to express these emotions. Consider changing the way you react to your adopted child's negative behaviors. The more calmly parents can manage their interactions with their troubled child, the sooner the child will resolve his feelings.

Recognize that Emotional Distance is Safe: In conjunction with the above, parental and sibling anger feel safe to the child who has had one failed relationship after another. Really, does anyone like to be "dumped" by a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife? The child with a history of complex trauma has been dumped time and time again. Anger, to this son or daughter, creates distance in familial relationships. Anger inhibits attachment. Thus, the traumatized child thinks, "If I don't get too close, it won't hurt so much when you dump me. Again, the manner in which you react is critical. When you can respond in a more composed way, the child will begin to attach. Children who attach give up lying, stealing, a totally messy bedroom, urinating on the floor, using their shirt as a napkin and so on. Attached children want happy parents.

In conclusion, you simply were not raised to parent the child who joined your family after a multitude of tragic events occurred in his life. Armed with the right knowledge and tools, you can go forward with self-confidence instead of self-doubt. You can know, you are the right parent for your child!