

The Art of Praising Your Adopted Son or Daughter

By Arleta James, PCC

As many adoptive parents know, a moment of praising, complimenting or “patting the adoptee on the back” can cause a sudden period of poor behavior! As soon as Mom or Dad says, “Wow, you have been good all week!” or “You’ve been getting along so well with your sister”, things go downhill—quickly!



Yet, all parents want to give their children “kudos” for a job well done! So, what is a parent to do?

Let’s first understand that the root of this problem is self-concept. Adoptees—international and domestic—adopted older or as infants—feel a profound sense of shame. The act of being abandoned, no matter if the birth parents made a plan out of love for the child, or the rights were terminated by a foreign government or an American child welfare agency, feel inherently defective. They think, “My birthmother gave me away because I was ‘bad’, ‘dumb’ or ‘unlovable.’” Once the adopted son or daughter understands that there was another family, a thought process is put in motion about these birthparents. The child questions “why” they aren’t with the family of origin. Frequently, the conclusion drawn is—unfortunately—due to self.

Abuse, residence in an orphanage or multiple moves compounds this matter. These circumstances frequently cause children to think (This list is not exhaustive, but designed to cover some of the more predominant irrational beliefs),

- “I should have been able to stop the abuse from happening to me.” This belief may be intensified for boys due to the socialization process, which instills in boys thoughts regarding their physical strength and a capacity to take care of themselves.
- “I am damaged goods.” Who will want to date me as a result of what happened to me sexually? “Who could possibly love me after what happened to me?”
- “I am very different than other kids my age.” Imagine sitting with peers during lunch or being on the playground for recess and listening to other children discuss the latest style, the movie they went to see over the weekend, Girl Scouts, etc. Such normalcy is in stark contrast to the experiences of the child who has been sexually abused.

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

- "At times, I was happy that my sister was picked instead of me." Siblings are often aware that their brothers and sisters are also being abused. Fear and their young age prevent them from stopping this abuse. Children in such situations struggle with feeling relieved that, at times, the abuse was occurring to their brother or sister rather than to themselves. They worry that their siblings are mad at them for not helping them more. They feel guilty that they did not do more to stop the abuse from occurring to their siblings. Institutionalized children have these same thoughts regarding their orphanage mates.
- There is a component of sex that feels good at any age. Physically, the body is primed to enjoy sex. Once adopted, the child comes to understand that in "healthy" families children don't engage in sexual interactions. So, at some point, the child becomes guilty because he or she may have experienced pleasure during acts of sexual abuse.



- "What is happening to my birthmom now?" Many children are preoccupied with the status of their birthmother who lived as a victim of domestic violence. They question her safety. They question whether or not she is alive or dead. They feel guilty that they are not present to protect her. Frequently, children will comment, "I am older now and I could help take better care of her."
- Children who reside together in orphanages develop ties to each other. They think about the children left behind at the orphanage. They have difficulty comprehending that they can be happy while these children reside in conditions far less plentiful than what their adoptive family has to offer. Such "survivor guilt" is difficult for these children to overcome.
- "I was not behaving and this is why I was abused." or "I made my birthmom mad and this is why she hit me." As with sexual abuse, children who have experienced physical abuse believe that they were the cause of the abuse.
- "She (birthmom) picked him (her boyfriend or the birthfather) instead of me. I guess she loved him more than me." Other children realize that their birthmother could have removed herself and her children from a harmful situation. These children feel doubly rejected. They ask, "Not only didn't she pick me, she chose to stay with someone who was so mean to her. Why?"

We can't leave emotional abuse out of this equation either. *Emotional abuse* is the constant bombardment of one person by another with negative words or behavior. Criticizing, blaming, isolating, belittling, rejecting, corrupting, harassing and terrorizing a child are all examples of emotional abuse. Withdrawing affection or exposing a child to a violent or sexually inappropriate environment also constitutes emotional abuse. Low self esteem and feelings of worthlessness that often last into adulthood typify the outcomes of such abuse. Overall, children believe they are what adults say they are!

These thoughts are triggered when praise is offered. The adoptee thinks, "No, I am not good" so, "I must act bad to show you." Compliments and accolades also signal attachment. Children with [attachment difficulties](#) or [Reactive Attachment Disorder](#) fear this intimacy. So, their behaviors create the distance they feel they need to protect their hurt hearts.

In doling out kind words, keep in mind:

- Changing the irrational thoughts of your traumatized son or daughter is a key. When the adoptee understands his past, he can move on to accept himself as a worthy individual, and as deserving your kudos. Locate an adoption and trauma competent therapist at [The Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children](#).
- Consider "specific" rather than "global" praise. State, "You did a great job cleaning your room today." "Your history report is wonderful." "I'm happy with the way you acted at the store today." This type of praise is like giving a "slice" of praise. Many children can handle such a "piece" rather than a "whole" chunk.



- "Indirect" praise is often successful as well. Mailing a note to your adopted son or daughter. Or, for that matter, all kids love to get mail! So, include sending notes to the brothers and sisters as well. Receiving a short note or a card doesn't require accepting the compliment directly. Another example of indirect praise is to call a friend, grandma or the weather—when your adopted son or daughter is within earshot—and state, "Wow, you will never believe what Billy accomplished today!"

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He weeded the flower beds all by himself!" Again, Billy gets a direct message in a more diffused manner.

- Parents can "teach" the child to accept an accolade. "Sallie, I know when I compliment you, you often feel the need to act up. But, I'm going to tell you anyway how much I appreciate you helping with dinner today. I hope someday you can learn that parents are supposed to praise their children for a good job. In the meantime, if you feel the need to give me some behavior, I'm ready for it." This is a *paradoxical intervention*—"telling the child to do what you know he or she may do anyway." The paradox is a very powerful parenting tool. Paradoxes make children think. More often than not, they will make the choice you are hoping for.
- Think carefully about the situations in which praise should be provided. It seems we want to praise children for just about everything today. Sitting in your seat at school is "normal" and should be expected! It doesn't deserve a sticker. Not stealing is "normal" and doesn't require lunch at McDonald's. Praising children for every little thing makes it routine. Praise is like a good dessert. It should be savored and reserved for special occasions. Otherwise, it becomes "old-hat." It is rendered no longer special and delectable!
- Frequently, the child with difficulties winds up in charge of the family fun (Keck and Kupecky, 2002.) It goes like this. The parent says to the adopted son or daughter (or to any of their children), "If you are good all week, Saturday we'll go to the mall." Faithfully, by Friday evening some rule violation has occurred and the trip to the mall is taken away. Or, because punitive consequences have piled up all week, the family decides to stay home so Billy can wash the kitchen floor, rake the leaves, vacuum and carry out all kinds of other chores. The troubled child has determined the family's weekend plans. As a result, Billy and an angry family remain at home. Who could develop self-esteem under these circumstances? If you want to go to the mall, the beach, a museum, the zoo, etc. — just go! Visit my article, 5 Tips to Help Adoptive Families Have Fun this Summer.
- When children become able to accept your compliments, they will ask you 1000 times, "Did I do a good job vacuuming today?" Or, they will tell you 1000 times, "I was so good at the birthday party today!" Keep repeating yourself and validating their comments. They are really trying "good" on to see if fits. This will pass with time.
- Self-concept is built on achievement. Prevent yourself from rescuing your child from day-to-day failures. Your son (or daughter) will gain confidence in himself when he remembers his own backpack. Reduce your reminders, warnings and threats in situations that allow failure safely. Parent by the Michael Jordan quote,

"I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Praising the traumatized child (actually parenting the traumatized child!) is an "art" rather than a "science." We must help them draw a picture of themselves and family life that allows them to fill their canvas with good thoughts of themselves. Helping them accept the praise deserved for a job "well done" is one way to accomplish this.

Also, don't forget to give yourself a "pat on the back" each day you help your adopted son or daughter take a step closer to your family!