

"Am I the 'Right' Mom for this Child?"

By Arleta James, PCC

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.

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)

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. You can visit many of our previous blogs to create a new tool box for yourself:

- Another Crazy Whopper: Understanding and Dealing with Lying – Part One and Part Two
- Throw Away the Stickers! A Perspective on Reward Systems
- Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?
- Shhh!: "Quiet" Parenting Zone Ahead
- Getting Started with Quiet Parenting
- Nurture: The Ring that Holds the Keys – Part One and Part Two.

If this topic is or has been an issue for you, we'd love to hear from you. Please leave a comment below. And again, please come back Thursday as we continue to understand why you are the best parent for your child.

2

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)

"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

3

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)

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 blind sighted 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 to 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!

4 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)

5 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)