

When Love Isn't Enough: Part Six - Abandonment/Multiple Moves

By Arleta James, PCC

Abandonment

No form of adoption evades the psychological presence of the birthparents. As soon as the adoptee—even if adopted as a young infant—comprehends that he was not born to his adoptive parents, he becomes aware that another mother and father “gave him away.” Ken Watson, adoption professional, points out,

“Adoption is not just a legal act that transfers parental rights but an event that profoundly changes all of the participants for the rest of their lives. The bottom line is that adoption, no matter how early or how successful, means that the child always experiences a painful loss of the birth family. When families fall apart, the children do not leave their trauma behind. Such a loss can be a serious blow to an adopted person’s self-esteem.”



The child does not always recognize the safety risks that were involved in his day-to-day living situation with abusive or neglectful parents or the birthmother’s decision that the child would have more opportunities with an adoptive family. The child’s perception is that he was somehow defective or that she made her birthmother angry and thus the abandonment occurred. Examples follow,

Carl, now age 8, adopted from a Kazakhstan orphanage at the age of three, is certain that his birthmother left him, as a newborn infant, at the hospital due to his being born with Cerebral Palsy. He genuinely believes that if his legs were like those of “other kids” she would have “kept me.” Carl’s condition was diagnosed when he was 2 by a team of American doctors who were visiting his orphanage. His birthmother had no idea that he had Cerebral Palsy when she abandoned him.

Susan’s birthmother became angry with her due to Susan’s mishandling of a glass doll, a fourth birthday gift from the birth grandmother. As a result of Susan’s inability to handle the doll correctly, it shattered. The birthmother subsequently dragged Susan up a flight of stairs and dropped her over the railing. This resulted in Susan sustaining

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several broken ribs. Susan and her older siblings were quickly removed from their birthmother's care. The children never returned to their birth home despite a significant family reunification effort. In therapy, at age 13, Susan stated, "If I hadn't made her mad, we would still be with her."

Kenneth, age eleven, resided in a Russian orphanage for six months after his birth. He is very angry that his birthmother did not "keep me." Additionally, he questions why there was "no one in the whole country who wanted me," and he inquires, "Why didn't the orphanage ladies take me home?"

Kenneth's story makes clear that international adoptees have an additional layer of abandonment issues. They feel unwanted by an entire country.

In most instances, a child loves birthparents no matter what the circumstances. This is often difficult for adults to understand.

Kathryn, the adoptive parent of a 15-year-old son, was quite saddened when her son stated that he continued to have strong feelings for his birthmother. His sentiments were articulated in therapy four years after being adopted by Kathryn and her husband. He expressed that his birthmother would change if she knew how her actions had affected him. He believed that if only he could talk to her she would be "sorry." Thus, she would make the changes necessary for him to live with her. Kathryn struggled with this information for quite some time. She felt that all of her efforts as a "good mom" had been in vain. She stated, "I have been the mom helping him with his homework, taking him to his baseball games and virtually just doing everything to give him a good life. After years in our family, he still wants her. He wants the mom who beat him and sold him sexually in order to support the family. What have all my efforts really meant?"

Kathryn's sentiments are best clarified by Vera Fahlberg in her book, [A Child's Journey Through Placement](#),

"Resolution of the grief process for children separated from birthparents means acceptance of having two sets of parents. Many times it is adults who adopt with the expectation, "I want a child to love me," who have the greatest difficulty accepting that the child has two mothers or two fathers. The attitudes of parents who are threatened by the importance of other caregivers in their child's life may pose the biggest obstacle for him. Although most parents readily accept the fact that they can love more than one child, many have difficulty accepting that children can love more than one mother or father. The child may love each in different ways, but it does not have to be one over the other."

Continuing with Fahlberg,

"Each mother must be acknowledged for the role she has in the child's life. This helps the child psychologically separate from the birthfamily and join the adoptive family."

According to Fahlberg, psychological separation includes

- [the child understanding his/her adoption story](#), and
- coming to the realization that there is no ability to return to live with a previous care giver—birthmother, favorite orphanage care giver, foster parents who did not opt to adopt the child, etc.

"Children cannot make optimum use of their placements until they have resolved their grief and formed new attachments. Unresolved separations may interfere with the development of new attachments. New attachments are not meant to replace old ones. They are meant to stand side by side with existing relationships. The success of a new relationship isn't dependent on the memory of an earlier one fading; rather the new one is likely to prosper when the two relationships are kept clear and distinct (Bowlby, 1980.) Interference with the development of new attachments may occur when the child's focus is on the past rather than the present (Fahlberg, 1991.)"

In essence, the child must be helped to come to terms with the abandonment and any other early traumatic experiences. Once the past is placed in perspective, the child is free to move on and accept the adoptive parents as his Mom and Dad. Certainly, for many adoptees, this will be easier said than done. Psychological separation tasks and reaction also vary depending on the [developmental age of the child](#).

Prospective adoptive parents must gain comfort with this concept of the child loving “them” and “another.” It is the adoptive family that will be helping the child process the grief about the abandonment.

Multiple Moves

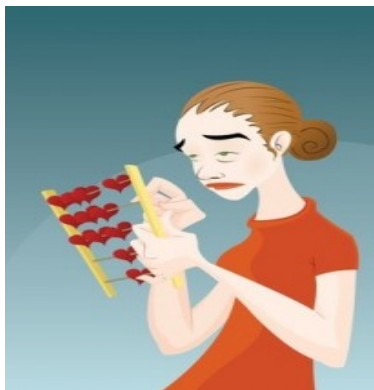
Overall, the majority of children available for adoption—international or domestic—have experienced more losses than only that caused by their abandonment.

The new son or daughter flying from abroad to America with his or her new parents is experiencing at least a third move—birth family to orphanage to adoptive family. The international adoptee experiences loss of birthfamily, orphanage caregivers, [siblings](#), [culture](#) and so on. Luis, for example, feels he lost a “brother” in his transition to his adoptive family.

Luis resided in an orphanage in Mexico for almost six years. He developed a close tie to another boy who was in the orphanage. He refers to this boy as his brother to this day. Luis has ongoing guilt regarding the fact that he now has a rich life full of food, toys and family members while this brother remains in residence in grim conditions. Luis has a profound sense of sadness over the loss of this brother.

The longer a child remains in foster care, the more placements he or she is likely to have. Thirty-seven percent of foster children in 1998 were reported to have had three or more placements (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001). This means that the child has lost at least three sets of parents, siblings, friends, school mates, pets, communities, toys, clothing and holiday rituals. Each new family has a unique set of values, beliefs, and ways of celebrating.

Stop for a moment and really think about the losses the waiting children have experienced! These losses are overwhelming whether an international or domestic adoption!



Donna summarizes the thoughts of many children who have experienced multiple moves,

Donna, currently 18, was adopted at age 10, after three failed reunification efforts and four foster care placement. She states, “It was hard for me to move from foster home to foster home and settle down to a family that cares. Trying to

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trust them and love them back is really hard, because it got messed up somewhere in between all the homes I've been in. My adoptive family has bent over backwards to show their love for me, but it is still hard for me. I know in my head that they won't do the things to me that my birth family did, but there is still that side of me that says, be careful, someone might leave you or you might get hurt."

The child feels that he has lost everything that is most important—time and time again. As a result of these multiple, repetitive losses, people and things begin to lack meaning.

Toys can be removed for behavioral infractions and the child is not fazed.

Things are often lost or broken. There will be more at the next house.

Living is based on today, because tomorrow could mean another move, on to new people and new experiences.

There is no point getting settled and making plans. There is no point getting attached.

Additionally, children who move are at great risk. Repeated moves jeopardize their opportunity to develop secure attachments and trusting relationships with adults. A body of evidence links multiple placements with behavioral and mental health problems, educational difficulties, and juvenile delinquency (Barber, Delfabbro & Cooper, 2001; Children and Family Research Center, 2004; Cooper, Peterson & Meier, 1987; Dore & Eisner, 1993; Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers & Testa, 1999; Palmer, 1996; Pardeck, 1984; Proch & Taber, 1985, 1987; Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain & Whaley, 2001; Stone & Stone, 1983.) Thus, any family adopting a child who has moved may need to access a variety of services to help this child recover.

This entire process of moving children into adoptive families is so critical to the well-being of each member of the adoptive family that I devoted two full chapters to the topic in [Brothers and Sisters in Adoption](#). They are Chapter Five, "Joining 'Waiting' Families and 'Waiting' Children: Matching is Not an Exact Science" and Chapter 6, "Moving, Through the Eyes of the Child."

In conclusion, the loss of birthfamily and the subsequent losses experienced by today's "waiting" children contribute to the arrival of a grief-stricken child from foster care or a foreign orphanage. As adults, we have many misperceptions about children and grief. We may think that

- children don't grieve (Trozzi and Massimini, 1999). There is a desire to deny that children experience loss.
- children will simply overcome unpleasant life events; the adoptee will just move beyond or forget about being raped, abandoned, beaten, abused, losing siblings and friends, being left in an orphanage and so on. This is very unlikely!
- children need to be helped to "get over" their grief and move on. Actually, children will experience parts of their pain for the rest of their lives. Loss—and thus grief—is developmental.
- children are too young to understand what happened. Remember the implicit memory system from [Part Five](#) of this series? If not, go back and review.
- children need to be shielded from grief. "It would hurt her too much to talk about it." Actually, what hurts are the traumatic pre-adoptive experiences! Allowing children to struggle silently with their trauma is unacceptable!

Children who are not provided opportunities to grieve are at risk for

- [decreased social, emotional and cognitive developmental growth](#)
- attachment difficulties

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- regression to earlier stages of development for an extended period of time
- inability to concentrate—impaired academic progress
- physical difficulties—fatigue, stomachaches, appetite changes, headaches, tightness in chest, shortness of breath, low energy, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- depression
- anxiety
- engaging in risk-taking behaviors
- withdrawal from friends or extra curricular activities.

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