

"You are the Mom": Helping Your Child Join Your Family

By Arleta James, PCC

Frequently, I speak to groups of parents. Recently, I have been providing workshops to parents who have adopted from the foster care system. I have noticed how common it is for these moms and dads to continue to refer to the birth mom as "Mom" years after the adoption has been finalized! Frequently, it takes me several minutes—as they ask questions specific to their situation—to realize whom they are talking about! Internationally adoptive families do this to a degree as well. Often, it is stated, "Her mom abandoned her on a bridge." "Her mom left her in a hospital, and she was taken to the orphanage."



In light of the above and in time for Mother's Day, it is important to post about "psychological separation." Really, **the "Mom" or the "Dad" is the person who carries out the responsibilities that go with these titles. If that is you, then you are the Mom!** The "birthmother" is just that; the child's "birthmother."

Each mother must be acknowledged for the role they have in the child's life. This helps the child psychologically separate from the birthfamily and join the adoptive family. Psychological separation includes that,

- the child understand his/her adoption story, and
- come 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.

Vera Fahlberg in her book, *A Child's Journey Through Placement* helps us understand this concept of psychological separation:

"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

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>)

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."

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 "real" Mom and Dad. Certainly, this is easier said than done, and this depends on the developmental age of the child.



Other factors that contribute to psychological separation include how well the adults are dealing with the abandonment, parental expectations and systemic practices.

Comprehending Abandonment

It is difficult to comprehend a birthparent whose addictions lead to the loss of his or her children. It is implausible the types of abuse committed against children. It is also challenging to understand the abject poverty or governmental policies, which force abandonment and a subsequent institutionalization. Frequently, parents and professionals become as traumatized and grief-stricken by these circumstances as do the children. We all become "stuck" in the abandonment. Years after the adoption is legalized parents state, "Why didn't she work harder to get her children back?" "What did they get out of having sex with a four-year-old?" "It was so hard to leave the other children behind at the orphanage. I still have nightmares about those children." "She was so close to having her children back and then she just signed her rights off one day. I never thought we would be adopting our daughter." Parents re-play the abandonment as do the children. The past continues to haunt each member of the adoptive family.

Parental Expectations: "I want you to love me"

Again, quoting Fahlberg,

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“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.”

In situations in which this expectation is operating, children sense that speaking about their birthmother or early life experiences is too painful for their mother or father. Thus, they are left to attempt to deal with their issues on their own, or to simply stifle their thoughts and feelings. Psychological separation—attachment—cannot occur under these conditions.

Systemic Factors

Systemically, especially in domestic adoption, there is great emphasis placed on the rights of the birthparents. While we are a system that operates in the “best interest of the child”, daily, we usurp their rights. We give them little information about what is happening in their life. They have no opportunity to initiate the process of integrating their past and present. We present their birthparents as “having problems” which minimizes the birthmother’s and birthfather’s actions. Simultaneously, especially in cases of foster to adopt, we undermine the authority and nurture of the family to be. We stress the need to keep connections between children and their birthfamily members. We provide little guidance as to how to do this and what to do when these relationships prove deleterious to the child’s emotional well-being. Overall, we often put the birth family before the adoptive family.

This Mother’s Day and every day, think about the information above and ask yourself,

- Has my child truly attached to me as well as need be to develop into a healthy adult?
- How am I coping with my own grief and trauma about my son or daughter’s pre-adoptive experiences, and what I—myself—experienced prior to the adoption?
- Am I allowing systemic beliefs to influence the well-being of my child?
- Does my/our child call us “Mom” and “Dad?” Many children refer to their adoptive parents by their first names or never call their Mom and Dad anything! They make a request, “Can I go outside?” “Will you buy me that shirt?” Yet, it is never, “Mom, can I go outside?” “Dad, will you buy me that shirt?” What can I/We do to change this?
- Lastly, how can I acknowledge the birthfamily, yet make our family the priority? We are the child’s family. We are the “Mom” and the “Dad.”

As the Mom and Dad, you need to be first and foremost—present—in your son or daughter’s life!