

Dancing with Ghosts

Birthmother Loss and the Adopted Child



By Jean MacLeod

At some time in their young lives, every adopted child will realize the losses he or she has incurred to become a happy member of their present family. An internationally adopted child will have lost her country, her native language and her family heritage. Most painful of all for a child to comprehend: she will have lost her birthmother.

Some adopted children will manage to cope with their “adoption losses” equably, but some will need a parent’s help to sort out the pain they feel from the ultimate rejection, and from the aching sense of missing an unknown mother.

Children expressing pain over adoption, or birthmother loss, are generally happy within their adoptive families, and love and appreciate their adoptive parents. What they are looking for is a way to process and integrate what was lost to them at an early age; a way to live with the lingering ghosts of an earlier life. These children need parents who can discern feelings that the child may find difficult to verbalize, and who can provide support for the child’s life-long adoption experience.

How can a parent help a son or daughter work through the complex emotions associated with a child’s pre-adoption childhood? Dr. Jane Liedtke, of *Our Chinese Daughters Foundation*, talks about the importance of giving an internationally adopted child a “cultural toolbox” to use and fall back on when dealing with issues of his or her birth country and sense of self. However, in addition to Dr. Liedtke’s cultural toolbox, parents need an “emotional toolbox” to help themselves understand their child, and to enable them to guide the child to a strong, healthy self-awareness and a peaceable co-existence with their past.

What’s in an emotional toolbox for parents? What tools can parents use to help a child ‘stuck’ in birthmother loss, adoption grief or anger? Psychologist Doris Landry instructs

parents to use four fundamental steps when addressing adoption issues, in order to support an adopted child:

- ◆ Educate- teach the adoptee about adoption facts AND feelings
- ◆ Understand- provide empathy; acknowledge adoptee's thoughts and emotions
- ◆ Awareness- help adoptee to see 'the big picture' and the options to make personal choices
- ◆ Acceptance- incorporate / normalize the unchangeable; accentuate opportunities for empowerment

These four fundamental steps also require a parent to understand that both birthparents and adoptive parents are *equally* important to an adopted child, and they oblige a parent to acknowledge and incorporate the extra layer of history an adopted child brings to a family. Helping a child become comfortable with their missing birthparents and loss issues means a parent must be comfortable with these issues, too.

Parents can begin to facilitate a child's healing process and a family's comfort level by consciously applying the *Educate, Understand, Awareness, Acceptance* fundamentals with the following emotional tools:

1) NURTURE-- provide an emotionally safe, loving 'place' in your arms for a child to routinely express her grief or anger, without her having to fear alienating, or hurting, the feelings of the adoptive parent.

2) TALK IT OUT—bring up tough topics without flinching! Regularly take the talk-initiative, and show your child your willingness to address difficult emotional issues.

3) GRANT PERMISSION-- give your child permission to love two mothers, one who gave her life and one who will take care of her and love her forever. You can also give your child permission to feel anger at the choices a birthparent made for her. Your child may even need permission to be angry with *you*—for not being there when she was a baby and needed your mothering.

4) USE NARRATIVES-- use alternative materials to re-create an honestly-surmised history for a child with few details about her early life. A Lifebook can provide an adoptee with a foundational piece of her pre-adoption story, and can be co-created to contain the child's own words and pictures (see the two excellent books on generating a Lifebook, by Cindy Probst and by Beth O'Malley).

5) CREATE SYMBOLS-- include the birthmother in conversation with your child. Celebrate adoption day, or your child's birthday, or Mother's Day with an honoring ceremony the day before ("Mother's Day Eve") that the child helps design: letter writing, picture drawing, cake-baking, moon-wishes--all dedicated to the birthmother. Use or create adoption jewelry as a concrete symbol of the importance of two sets of parents.

6) ENCOURAGE CONNECTION-- your daughter may be musical, athletic or very smart. She may have thick, luxurious hair, long fingers and strong teeth. Tell your daughter that you attribute these things to her birthmother, and that her birthmother must have taken good care of your daughter while she was growing inside her. Obviously, your daughter's birthmother must be a beautiful and intelligent woman, because your daughter is, too! Imbue your child with tangible connections to both of her birthparents, and encourage genetic 'ownership'. (*note: birthfathers can always be included in conversations, but it is usually apparent that the birthmother figures most prominently in a child's early thoughts about adoption).

7) GIVE IT TIME-- loss issues don't ever 'get cured' and go away...but time and the four fundamentals will help an adoptee (and adoptive family) learn to *process* loss. Teaching a child to use healthy coping skills will help her to become a centered, strong individual.

8) CONSULT PROFESSIONALS-- most moms and dads did not grow up to intrinsically know how to "adoption-parent", and have few realistic models to fall back on. A therapist specializing in adoption, attachment or loss can be an enormously helpful resource to consult, especially if a parent is dealing with understandable, but unfamiliar issues.

Some of these emotional tools are difficult for parents to use, and some are heartbreakingly painful. It's easy to read about "having empathy" or "giving permission to love two mothers", but so much harder to do in real life when it feels like your child's loss issues are a side-ways rejection of you as her parent...

9) DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY!-- Resist feeling rejected; focus instead on taking the leadership role, and teach your children to face the invisible. Help them gain strength from accepting *and* taking charge of their pain and loss.

And most importantly,

10) MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU. There *is* room for two mothers; realize there is world-expanding potential in all-inclusive love and acceptance. Your support of your child will benefit *both* of you, and ultimately, your entire family. Seize the tough but unifying opportunity that dancing with ghosts presents, and deal with birthmother loss hand-in-hand, as an indomitable parent-child dance team.

Copyright 2002-2008 MacLeod, All Rights Reserved

Jean MacLeod is the author of *At Home in This World, a China adoption story* and co-editor of *Adoption-Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections* (EMK Press). See www.TheWriteMagic.com