



Parenting to Adoption Trauma: Reflection & Repair



Reflection

Living with a traumatized child can be difficult. Sometimes, to get appropriate behavioral results, a parent needs to throw adoption into the toolbox and recognize it as a highly effective implement. Understanding what might be truly causing your child to act up or act out, and applying empathy to a teachable moment, will shift both your perspective and your child's to the root of the problem.

"Those of us who weren't adopted cannot fully grasp the meaning of being given away. As I work with adoptive parents on listening to their child, this issue becomes paramount. From the adult perspective, the adopted child was taken out of an unsafe environment and this should be seen as good. From the child's point of view, however, something very valuable was taken away: their home, their identity, their family."

Children are quite adept at communicating their feelings. Strange as it is, adults consistently miss the messages. For the adopted child, anger is his way of communicating feelings of loss, grief, fear, and terror. Unfortunately, these messages get misinterpreted and the child subsequently gets labeled as defiant."

(Christopher Alexander, Ph.D, therapist and author, from *The Inner World of the Adopted Child*)

As adoptive parents, we need to stop and think what we are reacting to when our children act-out or misbehave. Adoption doesn't excuse bad behavior, but it should influence how we choose to deal with it. Sometimes, demonstrating our understanding, or pro-actively going for the "core issue", can nip a tantrum in the bud. We can:

- **Identify feelings.** Teach your children to use the "Four Feelings" (mad, sad, happy and scared) to identify and express what they are feeling inside. This takes practice; it helps for a parent to model verbal usage, too.
- **Ask ourselves:** What is REALLY producing the anger? *"For the adopted child, anger is his way of communicating feelings of loss, grief, fear, and terror."* Not everything goes back to adoption, but it is a big relief for a young child to be able to sort out the root of their feelings and behaviors with the help of a parent.

Repair

Helping a child understand and talk about his or her feelings opens a powerful parent-child pipeline. Openness and honesty feed a relationship--and it is the relationship that ultimately offers our families a healing lifeline.

"Many say that the "act of adoption" or the neglect/abuse that was sustained is what is traumatizing to a baby or child. This seems reasonable because we have come to understand "trauma" as an event. However, if we do this we render ourselves helpless in repairing the trauma. But, if we see the trauma as a "trauma of relationship" (lack of relationship OR



neglectful or abusive relationship OR loss of relationship) we are left with hope.... the hope that we can then repair the pain and suffering by repairing the relationship.

When we ask a baby or child to enter into a new (adoptive) relationship, even saying "if you do this with me you will reap the rewards of strong love and devotion" and they resist, it is then understandable, because you are asking them to enter into something that creates fear! If seen in this way we know what it is that we have to do—what we CAN do. We can repair trauma through building a secure, healthy parent-child relationship."

*(Doris Landry, M.S, Family Therapist and author of *Before I Met You*)*

We can repair trauma through building a secure, healthy parent-child relationship. A deceptively simple sentence, but an incredibly embraceable statement. There is hope for our babies, there is healing; it is within us.

By Jean MacLeod

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