

Adoption's Lifetime Issues:
What Parents Need to Know
By Jean MacLeod

"...No matter how much we love and identify with our daughters, we must also realize, every day, how different they and their lives truly are from our own. So I made friends with the title ["The Lost Daughters of China"], letting it's truth sink in: that my daughter's past before the orphanage is truly lost to her, and she in turn is truly lost to the birthmother who gave her life and love before I could. She once was lost, before she was found, and a piece of her may be grappling with this fact forever."

~~Peggy Scott, on "The Lost Daughters of China" by Karin Evans

"I miss my birthmother. I never got to know her! I didn't get a chance to say good-by."

~~An 8 year old girl, adopted as an infant

Love and loss and grief. Most of us would prefer to not have to deal with adoption fall-out. It is emotional, complicated stuff that we were not raised to handle. But somewhere between the ages of five and ten, our adopted children begin to realize that in gaining an adoptive family, they have suffered some very significant losses. Suddenly, they need help interpreting both their positive and negative emotions and they need acceptance for what they're feeling on all levels. They look to us for help, and if we can't, or come up short, they lay their stuff at our feet and proceed on a long, lonely journey, all by themselves.

Adoption fall-out is an opportunity that parents should grab with both hands! It is a chance for you to stretch yourself as a mom or dad, and a chance to keep your child fully in your life. Typically, fall-out first begins in the car, on the schoolyard or at bedtime. It may start with a single question. It can enter your life with a child's amazing and bewildering breakdown, or creep in silently with a child's sullen look and angry silence. It is often attributed to "ages & stages", and it may go underground...but it doesn't go away.

Once we parents realize what we're dealing with, how do we ever equip ourselves to help? How do we teach our internationally adopted children to cope with the sources of adoption fall-out, and how do we give them what they need to grow? How do we help our children, mostly pre-verbal when adopted, express the feelings of anger, sadness or

confusion over the life choices that were made for them—emotions that they carry but can't explain?

Teaching our children to understand their emotions and allowing them to express their feelings about the beginning of their lives is a powerful first step toward fall-out containment. Most of our children from China come to us with very little history and a very big need to know the "facts" of how and why they began with one set of parents and ended up with another. They crave a structure of knowledge that will help them navigate the enormously complex feelings that accompany abandonment. They need hands-on context to aid them in keeping their self-esteem while dealing with feelings of unworthiness, and the ultimate core question: why didn't my birthparents keep me?

The Seven Core Issues in Adoption provide parents with the insight, information and context needed to understand and assist an adopted child. Deborah Silverstein and Sharon Kaplan have identified the universal issues that are triggered by adoption and that are experienced, to some degree, by every single adoptee:

- 1) Loss
- 2) Grief
- 3) Rejection
- 4) Guilt and Shame
- 5) Control
- 6) Identity
- 7) Intimacy

These seven issues are the basis for an adoptee's thoughts, feelings and reactions and are a parent's key to understanding a child's perceptions of herself and her view of her bio and adoptive families. The issues are inter-related and overlap, and they decisively affect most every aspect of an adopted child's life.

Rather than being viewed as a pile of negative emotional fall-out, the seven core issues can be utilized by a parent to guide a child to self-awareness, strength and resiliency. Some of the seven issues have a panacea-- "prescriptions" that a parent can apply to help a child grow and heal, while others simply demand acceptance. One of the hardest things for any parent is to see a child in pain and not be able to make the pain go away, or fix what is wrong. Especially in adoption, a parent's role must sometimes be the "facilitator" instead of the "fixer" we'd really like it to be. The facilitator role is an important one however, and it is essential to an adopted child and her family circle.

Psychologist Doris Landry has created a set of tools and prescriptions for parents to use to help them assist their children through the seven issues, and alleviate some of the pain and confusion categorized by Silverstein and Kaplan. A prescription would be applied to a core issue by a parent with one or more of the following tools:

- Education
- Understanding

- Ongoing Awareness
- Acceptance

A parent's job is guidance and support; it requires a mom or dad to allow and encourage a child to feel every emotion deeply, while using the education, understanding, awareness, and acceptance tools that give a child permission to move forward. For an adoptee stuck in a core issue, the world is a scary, insecure place. A parent might not be able to fix the world, or a child's losses, but according to therapist Dee Paddock, a parent "can model doggedness, mastery, moral courage, love and hope. Our adopted children can grow into adults who are optimists, who believe it is possible to transcend sorrow and fear, and that things do change."

Loss

Through abandonment and adoption, our children from China lost their birthparents and extended family of aunts, uncles and grandparents. Because of the way the one-child policy works in China, our girls were most likely second daughters and have each lost a biological big sister or brother. Our children lost their birth country, birth culture, racial identity and language. Some of our daughters and sons lost orphanage caretakers that they cared about, others lost foster families that they had loved and lived with since birth.

Children who have lost their birthparents or foster parents or primary orphanage caretakers, have had the rug whipped out from underneath them one too many times. They come to expect fear and loss as a normal consequence of loving and living; they know it can happen at any time and without warning, because it's happened to them before. Internationally adopted children can suffer from intense separation anxiety, and have difficulty with transitions and separations of even the innocuous kind. Camp, sleepovers, moving, or a new school are small hiccups that can re-awaken conscious, or unconscious loss issues. A parent's death, divorce, or hospitalization are severe trials that need to be recognized as major earthquakes for a child with a previous loss trauma. There is no prescription to "cure" loss, and there is no closure. A parent's understanding of a child's loss won't make the loss go away, but it will forge an empathic parent-child liaison based on honesty and trust.

Birthmother loss is especially poignant for an adoptee. A birthmother's rejection cuts deeply, sharply and permanently. If a child was adopted as an infant, the birthmother is the person the child "remembers" on an unconscious, primal level, and is symbolic of the "loss soup" that contains the overwhelming longing an adoptee feels for her previous life. As a parent you can give your child permission to love two mothers, one who gave her life and one who will take care of her, make good choices for her and love her forever. You can also give your child permission to feel anger at the choices a birthparent made for her. Abandonment may have been the birthmom's only choice, but even if a child understands this intellectually, it still hurts and the hurt needs to be expressed. Your child may even need permission to be angry with you – for not being there when she was a baby and needed you, or for "stealing" her away from her birthmother and country. Some children get temporarily caught in birthmother loss and need concrete ways of processing. Include the birthmother in conversation with your child. Celebrate adoption

day, your child's birthday or Mother's Day with an honoring ceremony the day before ("Mother's Day Eve") that the child helps design, using letter writing, picture drawing, cake-baking, moon-wishes--all dedicated to the birthmother. Reinforcing a place for two "real" moms within one family is a unifying gesture, and one that affirms the reality of a child's love and loss.

Focusing on adoption loss does not equate with fixating on unhappiness. Acknowledging loss is an important first step in moving forward for our children, and we have to stop ourselves from trying to amend their reality by painting an entirely rosy picture of their early lives—a rosy picture that may not entirely jibe with what they are feeling inside. Our children don't need us to make life pretty; to advance, they need to be taught to examine their feelings and be able to decide if loss is unfairly over-influencing an emotional reaction. Adoption loss can't be eradicated, but a child can learn to recognize it, own it, channel it and control it.

Grief

A pro-active parent can help their child explore the past, live fully in the present and develop the resilience necessary for the future. "Therapeutic parenting" is a term that describes the extra level of pro-active parenting that is required to help a child discover and recover from their childhood losses. Children experience levels of grief according to their experience and their temperament, and they may exhibit grief in very different ways. Some children display sadness by fighting, some are unable to play, and some children demonstrate little expression and no excitement about life in general. Others are excessively nervous or shy, and worry more than is normal.

A therapeutic parent uses all four tools (understanding, awareness, education, acceptance) to help a child with a prescription for grief. A parent can gain valuable insight into a child's feelings by introducing tough topics, by really listening, and by being watchfully aware of a child's activities. The content of a child's imaginative play is a window into what they are feeling, and by observing without interfering, a parent may be able to decipher if a child is trapped in the grieving process. Without skills to become "unstuck", a child will repetitively play out his or her issues. Remember misery loves company: a therapeutic parent using the four tools can relieve a child's burden by sharing conversation, and by examining and validating the child's emotions. Part of the miracle of therapeutic practice is that simply talking about an inner issue like grief can take it outward, re-shape it, and change a child's perceptions about it.

Rejection

A child's feelings of rejection are directly related to abandonment. Children without a way to express their confusion, fear, sadness and anger over their perceived rejection by their birthmother, may act out with inappropriate tantrums or behaviors (or act in, with depression, boredom and withdrawal). A child may be extra controlling, or exhibit intense anxiety about loss or separation. Adopted children may feel shame ("I must be bad/unlovable for my birthmother to have given me away") and live with poor self-esteem. Adoption is a lifelong process; understanding the ongoing need for

communication and beginning with Feelings 101 may feel simplistic, but it is part of the prescription:

Does your child have words to identify and regularly express the four basic emotions (mad, sad, scared, and happy)? Some children really have no idea why they are feeling the way they do inside-- no one has helped them make the connection between their lives/losses in China and their current feelings. They do not understand what is triggering their reactions, and over-reactions. They honestly do not know why they are feeling so angry (or why they are taking it out on their mom or dad), and why they carry so much inexpressible emotion. Once they "get it" their relief is often immense, and they can begin to work on coping mechanisms.

Does your child have your permission and encouragement to express her feelings? "I wish I still had my birthmother" is hard for a child to say if she believes her mom would be sad or angry in hearing the truth about what she thinks or how she feels. If the mom takes it personally it is far too risky for a kid to be honest ("my mom will leave me if I tell her this"). Our children's #1 fear is of abandonment, and they will suffer in silence if that's what it takes to avoid causing the unthinkable to happen again.

Guilt & Shame

Guilt and shame are by-products of rejection. They are a child's paralyzing, toxic reactions to the belief that something must be intrinsically wrong with them, or that they must have done something really bad, to cause their own abandonment. Shame is secret and silent. Adults understand that birthparents have grown-up reasons to relinquish a child, but children view the act personally as a reflection of themselves, and are deeply ashamed of not being "good enough" for a mother to keep. The prescription for shame and guilt is to blast them out in the open. As Doris Landry puts it: "Detect it, Expose it, Dump it". Shame and guilt can only exist in dark, untouched secret places. Bringing the reasons for a child's self-incriminating feelings out into the light and exposing secrets to the truth, will begin to eliminate shame, rejection and guilt's internalized triple grip.

Control

"The adoptee often feels as though he/she has had no control over the events of his/her life. Decisions surrounding relinquishment, choice of adoptive family, and information to be shared with them were all made by other people. The adoptee feels helpless and frustrated that life seems to be a series of uncontrollable events. As a result, the adoptee's need to be in control of "something" often becomes a problem." (Judy Bemig & Betsy Keefer)

Paradoxically, the prescription for control is more control. For a parent who is living with a child that tenaciously tries to control her family and friends, who must control conversations and parental attention, who views life as a control competition, this is an unsettling solution! But when an adoptee feels in control of her inner self, some of the need to control the outward universe disappears. Giving the child the gift of self-control,

as Doris Landry calls it, is based in attachment-parenting and limit-setting (aka control with love). A child whose basic safety and security needs are met can trust that a parent will make good decisions for her. A child who is having difficulty dealing with the seven core issues is unable to let herself believe that "father/mother knows best" and will engage in continual power struggles with her parents and anyone else in authority.

Half the control problem is solved when the parent and the child recognize what the underlying problem really is (an adoption issue), and what is fueling it (survival). Working on changing control patterns takes dedicated, non-punitive action and lots of loving, but firm limit-setting. The hard work a parent does with an adopted child on her behaviors should be an affirming experience for both; shame is counter-productive for a child and anger is self-defeating for the parent.

Identity

“Adoption, for some, precludes a complete or integrated sense of self... Adoptees lacking medical, genetic, religious or historical information are plagued by questions such as: Who are they? Why were they born? Were they in fact merely a mistake, not meant to have been born, an accident?” (Silverstein and Kaplan)

Helping a child develop an identity that includes the past, the present and the future is integral for a child to feel whole. For children five to ten years old, identity may be the consuming core issue. Their realization of the blank space in their family history coincides with the hollow feeling they carry inside, with a profoundly sad result.

Past Identity: Creating a story similar to the girl’s narrative in *At Home in This World* is one way to use general data to devise an intuitively realistic story to help provide life structure and a sense of history for your own child. Our children come to us encoded with information that we can backtrack, react to and connect with. Certain common-sense assumptions can be made from our children’s behaviors, post institutionally, or post foster-family.

Was your child physically well-cared for? Did she greet the world with a trusting smile? Did she grieve for her caretaker? These are signs of a child whose needs have been met, and who may have been genuinely loved by someone in her past. Was your child ill or underweight when you received her? Did she appear anxious or afraid? Was sleep difficult or night-waking frequent and fierce? This child may have had a more difficult or traumatic start in life, but can be commended for her bravery and strong survival skills. Reading "clues" and surmising a story can both shed light on a happy babyhood, or allow you to give an empowering spin on a less-than-bright period of your child’s infancy or youth.

A child who longs to know what her birthparents look and act like, may willingly engage in a discussion of her own personality traits, talents and physical attributes. Gazing into a mirror and talking about her attractive or individualistic facial characteristics may help a child to fill in the blanks of a faceless, nameless birthmother and father. The determined,

joyous, funny personality you brought home from China inherited much of who she is from her biological family, but allow yourself to tie your daughter or son's development to you, too. Your child may have acquired your sense of humor, body language or attitude towards life, and she needs to know it's okay to connect to and identify with both the nature/nurture of her birth and adoptive parents.

Giving a child an organized plethora of small facts will help them eventually come to grips with the larger emotional issues. Filling the empty unknown with a re-created story won't make a child's pain of loss or rejection disappear, but it will give her something to hang a personal history on, and a clearer sense of self. It is tempting to want to give a child a firm reason for their abandonment—to answer that important core issue "why" question in a way that gives closure, and makes a child feel loved and wanted. But creating a China adoption story means looking at all possibilities; discussing abandonment with your daughter or son is an opportunity to explore the sobering political, cultural and individually personal reasons for its occurrence, and also to talk about your child's opinions and beliefs. Political or cultural explanations will not ameliorate the emotional pain a child feels about her abandonment, but they play a role in your child's story and are part of her long-term process of insight and understanding.

Tough questions are part of adoption-parenting territory. There is no honest way to discuss your child's life story and past identity without talking about birthparent loss, the sad conditions that led to a happy adoption, and the feelings that these dichotomies engender. Using the thoughts and story line of the nine year-old protagonist in *At Home in This World* is a good starting place for beginning a personal history, and for opening intimate parent-child dialogue.

Present Identity: A child's identity in the present is part personal, part familial. It is a huge comfort for a child to feel that she belongs in her adopted family, that she has full membership along with her parents and siblings, and that the membership can never be revoked. A parent can emphasize family kinship by celebrating connections, as suggested by Doris Landry: work and play together, describe the special attributes of each family member, describe family goals, talk about family unity and draw or talk about what families do to stay close. Ask each member to list three things that make it difficult to stay close, then problem-solve the difficulties as a family. Some adopted teens and adults cite feeling alienated from their adoptive families; if an adoptive parent is willing to work on parent-child attachment and the seven core issues, it makes sense that equal effort should also be made to underscore the fundamental importance of family.

Future Identity: Lifebooks, Parenting Narratives (stories that strengthen by weaving in real-life), and current adoption literature for children are excellent sources to help a child learn to integrate her past, understand the present and take charge of her future. A child can learn to accept the "gray area" of her life when it is framed in the possible/plausible and normalized by the principal adult in their life. It's all about empowerment-- giving a child ownership of her life story and her thoughts and feelings. Our daughters and sons can have a warrior mentality or a victim mentality, and it all begins with us being truthful with them, and realizing that we can't take away their pain; we can only teach them to

cope. Ages five to ten are a gentle precursor to the identity storms that hit all children in adolescence. But "unlike other people, adoptees have no known beginning on which to base their identity" (Bemig & Keefer).

A "lack of identity may lead adoptees, particularly in adolescent years, to seek out ways to belong in more extreme fashion than many of their non-adopted peers. Adolescent adoptees are over-represented among those who join sub-cultures, run away, become pregnant, or totally reject their families," warn Kaplan and Silverstein. Reinforcing a whole identity, helping your son or daughter re-create their story and facing the difficult truths together, will strengthen your child's love for you and give your child the personal fortitude to chase away past, present and future shadows.

Intimacy

For ages five to ten, intimacy is measured in peer friendships, and in a child's relationship with her parents. If a child is grappling with adoption issues, it can interfere with all of her interactions; grief, shame, loss and rejection may motivate a child to steer clear of any relationship with potential to bring more of the same.

"Adoptive parents report that their adopted children seem to hold back a part of themselves in the relationship. Adoptive mothers indicate, for example, that even as an infant, the adoptee was "not cuddly." Many adoptees as teens state that they have truly never felt close to anyone. Some youngsters declare a lifetime emptiness related to longing for the birthmother they may never have seen." (Kaplan & Silverstein)

Working on the intimacy issue requires a great deal of trust, communication and vulnerability from children, and especially from adults. A parent must be willing to discuss topics that are uncomfortable (infertility, for example) and be willing to participate in painful conversations (a child wishing for her birthparents). It is up to the parent to introduce and normalize adoption subjects, and to be willing to accept a child's biological family as part of their own. A parent who is distressed, or embarrassed talking about personal issues or who refuses to visit the "dark" side of adoption, will not be helpful to their child and will probably not get many shots at parent-child intimacy, either.

Holly Van Gulden in *Real Parents, Real Children* suggests using the Pebbles technique to open a conversation about a sensitive adoption topic. "Pebbles are one-liners, not conversations, that raise an issue and then are allowed to ripple until a child is ready to pick up on it." An example might be mentioning your child's beautiful, black hair and wondering out loud if she got her hair from her birthmother...

Because adopted children are fearful of hurting their adoptive parents, and are unwilling to risk rejection, parents must be the discussion initiators. Parents must model behavior and leadership, and pro-actively be part of a child's internal world. An un-addressed intimacy issue can quietly decimate an important relationship, leaving a child alienated and a parent sad and confused.

How intimate we are with our five to ten year old children now will have direct repercussions on their teen years. "When an open, accepting environment in which the child can talk about and tackle adoption-related issues is established early on," Holly Van Gulden writes, "the child will feel freer to turn to his parents to talk about problems as a teen. If parents deny their child's feelings or sweep them under the rug, then the family—parents and child alike—will have no system for addressing them when they intensify in adolescence."

Adoption fall-out is a blessing in disguise. Our children's sadness, anger, confusion, and questions are all there for us parents to pick up and run with now, perhaps circumventing some of the bigger outbursts in adolescence. Adoption issues will continue to re-appear, not only at adolescence, but at times of transition throughout our children's lives: entering school, marriage, pregnancy and birth, divorce, medical interventions, deaths of friends and family, mid-life and old-age. How our children handle each challenge depends on their personality and on their preparation. The Seven Core Issues and parenting prescriptions give us tools to interpret our children's thoughts and feelings, allowing us the insight to guide them to self-awareness. We can't fix the fall-out, but we can give our children ourselves, and we can teach them that adoption issues, like all life issues, are survivable and in the end will make them strong.

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Jean MacLeod is a free-lance writer who has been published in *Adoptive Families Magazine*, *Adoption TODAY* and in the China adoption book *Passage to the Heart*. She has co-developed and facilitates a series of parent education workshops on adoptive family issues, and is a mother to three daughters, by birth and adoption. Her new book is *At Home in This World, a China adoption story*, published in September 2003 by EMK Press.

### **A Note to Parents**

Adoption-parenting can be challenging, puzzling and frustrating. Our children are huge joys, but they come with to us with a history and a worldview that we sometimes need to work to connect to. If the seven core issues have raised their head in your household and you are in need of an additional skill set to deal with them, there is help! Attachment or adoption therapists are trained to understand the needs of internationally adopted children, the issues of loss, and the effects of post-institutionalization. For parent-recommended therapists, and therapists registered with the national organization ATTACH, go to the following websites:

[www.attach-china.org](http://www.attach-china.org) and [www.attach.org](http://www.attach.org)

## Resources

*At Home in This World*, a China adoption story by Jean MacLeod (for ages 6-9)

*We See the Moon* by Carrie A. Kitze (for ages 4-12)

*Real Parents, Real Children* by Holly Van Gulden & Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb

*When You Were Born in China* by Sara Dorow

*Attaching in Adoption* by Deborah D. Gray

*Kids Like Me in China* by Ying Ying Fry

*Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption and Orphanage Care in China* by Kay Johnson, edited and with an introduction by Amy Klatzkin (available late 2003, Yeong & Yeong)

Common Issues for Adoptees, compiled by Judy Emig & Betsy Keefer, Parenthesis Adopted Adolescent Program

Seven Core Issues in Adoption, by Sharon Kaplan & Deborah Silverstein  
[http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong\\_issues\\_in\\_adoption.html](http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html)

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<http://www.michigancoalition.com/>

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