



Getting Started

Opening Chapter for
*Adoption Parenting: Creating a
Toolbox, Building Connections*

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Adoption Parenting 101

Why Do I Need This Book?

by Carrie Kitze, Publisher, EMK Press

As each of us takes the steps on the journey of adoption parenting, at some point, we come to realize that we need to reach outside ourselves to effectively parent the children who have come to us. For some of us it comes upon the return home with sleeping and feeding issues. For others, it may come later as our child discovers that to get the family they are with, they had to give up another. Wherever the challenges lie, it is so important to find a practical, accessible resource that understands the layers of adoption as they relate to parenting. We hope you will find this book to be such a resource.

This book is the vision of EMK Press, but its has been made possible by the collaboration and shared wisdom of the parents, parents experts, and experts who have come together to share what they have learned in parenting their children. Skillfully assembled by co-editors Jean MacLeod and Sheena Macrae, who understand that it takes a village to raise a child, this book comes from a wonderful global village of parents and children, reaching out across the world. It is composed of ‘tribal wisdom’, passed from parent to parent, enriching our community, but allowing each of us simply to use those tools and thoughts that work for us, based on each of our unique parenting perspectives and the circumstances and issues faced by our children. We call this the Adoption Parenting Toolbox, and it is something no adoptive parent should ever be without. Adoptive mom Bonnie Shute said it well...

“What makes more sense than thinking we have scaled the mountain is to understand that we need to take a toolkit on the climb. I may need different things in my toolkit than you do, but we all need the bag and strategies, re-regulating when things are all out of whack. This should be a goal for all our kids—those who have experienced early challenges may need a bigger bag, with more strategies than others. Some kids who have been in secure homes from the beginning have special needs in this regard, too. Our job is to make sure the bag isn’t empty.”

A Different Perspective

Imagine for a moment...

You have met the person you've dreamed about all your life. He has every quality that you desire in a spouse. You plan for the wedding, enjoying every free moment with your fiancée. You love his touch, his smell, the way he looks into your eyes. For the first time in your life, you understand what is meant by "soul mate," for this person understands you in a way that no one else does. Your heart beats in rhythm with his. Your emotions are intimately tied to his every joy, his every sorrow.

The wedding comes. It is a happy celebration, but the best part is that you are finally the wife of this wonderful man. You fall asleep that night, exhausted from the day's events, but relaxed and joyful in the knowledge that you are next to the person who loves you more than anyone in the world...the person who will be with you for the rest of your life.

*The next morning you wake up, nestled in your partner's arms. You open your eyes and immediately look for his face. But **it's not him!** You are in the arms of another man. You recoil in horror. Who is this man? Where is your beloved?*

You ask questions of the new man, but it quickly becomes apparent that he doesn't understand you. You search every room in the house, calling and calling for your husband. The new guy follows you around, trying to hug you, pat you on the back. . .even trying to stroke your arm, acting like everything is okay. But you know that nothing is okay. Your beloved is gone. Where is he? Will he return? When? What has happened to him?

Weeks pass. You cry and cry over the loss of your beloved. Sometimes you ache silently, in shock over what has happened. The new guy tries to comfort you. You appreciate his attempts, but he doesn't speak your language-either verbally or emotionally. He doesn't seem to realize the terrible thing that has happened...that your sweetheart is gone.

You find it difficult to sleep. The new guy tries to comfort you at bedtime with soft words and gentle touches, but you avoid him, preferring to sleep alone, away from him and any intimate words or contact. Months later, you still ache for your beloved, but gradually you are learning to trust this new guy. He's finally learned that you like your coffee black, not doctored up with cream and sugar. Although you still don't understand his bedtime songs, you like the lilt of his voice and take some comfort in it.

More time passes. One morning, you wake up to find a full suitcase sitting next to the front door. You try to ask him about it, but he just takes you by the hand and leads you to the car. You drive and drive and drive. Nothing is familiar. Where are you? Where is he taking you? You pull up to a large building. He leads you to an elevator and up to a room filled with people. Many are crying. Some are ecstatic with joy. You are confused. And worried.

The man leads you over to the corner. Another man opens his arms and sweeps you up in an embrace. He rubs your back and kisses your cheeks, obviously thrilled to see you. You are anything but thrilled to see him. Who in the world is he? Where is your beloved? You reach for the man who brought you, but he just smiles (although he seems to be tearing

up, which concerns you), pats you on the back, and puts your hand in the hands of the new guy. The new guy picks up your suitcase and leads you to the door. The familiar face starts openly crying, waving and waving as the elevator doors close on you and the new guy.

The new guy drives you to an airport and you follow him, not knowing what else to do. Sometimes you cry, but then the new guy tries to make you smile, so you grin back, wanting to “get along.” You board a plane. The flight is long. You sleep a lot, wanting to mentally escape from the situation.

Hours later, the plane touches down. The new guy is very excited and leads you into the airport where dozens of people are there to greet you. Light bulbs flash as your photo is taken again and again. The new guy takes you to another guy who hugs you. Who is this one? You smile at him. Then you are taken to another man who pats your back and kisses your cheek. Then yet another fellow gives you a big hug and messes your hair. Finally, someone (which guy is this?) pulls you into his arms with the biggest hug you’ve ever had. He kisses you all over your cheeks and croons to you in some language you’ve never heard before.

He leads you to a car and drives you to another location. Everything here looks different. The climate is not what you’re used to. The smells are strange. Nothing tastes familiar, except for the black coffee. You wonder if someone told him that you like your coffee black. You find it nearly impossible to sleep. Sometimes you lie in bed for hours, staring into the blackness, furious with your husband for leaving you, yet aching from the loss. The new guy checks on you. He seems concerned and tries to comfort you with soft words and a mug of warm milk. You turn away, pretending to go to asleep.

People come to the house. You can feel the anxiety start to bubble over as you look into the faces of all the new people. You tightly grasp the new guy’s hand. He pulls you closer. People smile and nudge one other, marveling at how quickly you’ve fallen in love. Strangers reach for you, wanting to be a part of the happiness. Each time a man hugs you, you wonder if he will be the one to take you away. Just in case, you keep your suitcase packed and ready. Although the man at this house is nice and you’re hanging on for dear life, you’ve learned from experience that men come and go, so you just wait in expectation for the next one to come along.

Each morning, the new guy hands you a cup of coffee and looks at you expectantly. A couple of times the pain and anger for your husband is so great that you lash out, sending hot coffee across the room, causing the new guy to yelp in pain. He just looks at you, bewildered. But most of the time you calmly take the cup. You give him a smile. And wait. And wait. And wait.

**How would each of us handle all these changes?
How would this impact us for the rest of our lives?**

Written by Cynthia Hockman-Chupp, Cynthia is an adoptive parent like many of us. She was a longtime school teacher for a variety of grades who has learned from her children how to parent a child with attachment issues. Analogy courtesy of Dr. Kali Miller.

Each of the chapters in this book is a Toolkit, filled with advice and experience from which we adoptive parents can select the tools with which to address the issues that we—with our intercountry/transracially adopted children—face. The chapters, like the issues, aren't discrete. They flow into each other and will overlap in ways that are unique to each family. This is not a book to be read at one sitting—but instead to be digested over time as understanding and needs allow. You will discover that as you create a personal adoption parenting toolbox, you may find tools in any number of the chapters that are helpful and allow you to look at something with a different perspective. You may also discover over time that your tools will change.

Adopted children come to us with a variety of pasts. Each child will have had different experiences—and the temperament and abilities to handle what life has dealt them. Parenting an adopted child is different from parenting a biological child. There are many places where your toolbox will be the same as parenting biological children, but there are places where your toolbox should be different. And that is primarily what this book addresses.

Why should the toolbox be different? Because we are parenting from loss! Our adopted children have an extra layer we need to parent. When we leave to go off to the store, they know deep down that there is a possibility that we might not come back. It has happened before and can happen again. It is the most fundamental, foundation shaking loss. Sometimes our children come to terms with it early in their lives, others in the teen years, others as adults. But it is there. It adds another layer to the parenting we need to do.

Is parenting from loss hard to do? Well, just like our children, each of us comes to parenting with the baggage of how we were parented and how we want to assimilate the things we have learned from home....or not. What we need is an understanding of where our children come from and where we come from and how to fit that all together. And as we put a circle of connection around the adoption triad, we also need to think about the impact our children's first families have on us and our children—and we need this, whether we have an open adoption or not.

The Most Important Tool—Perspective

Perspective is an essential tool. It is interwoven with almost everything we do as a parents; it also spills into everyday life. It makes us walk a mile in the shoes of others to help us understand who they are and why they do what they do. This overlays all the adoption parenting work we do; it's a powerful and fundamental tool. It's a tool which allows us to know to help our children, and also to empathize with them on how being adopted feels.

The seemingly simple analogy in blue on the preceding and facing page helps us understand our children's initial feelings on being placed with us, coming to us from loss of family, community, and country. It puts into perspective how our joy at welcoming them may have sat uneasily with their fear of us as new and strange. Our children have to learn that we care, and have to learn also that we would hold true to our pledge to care for them. And we have to understand their loss, anger, and contain it. We become the safe haven for them, the place where they learn that families are where kids grow, safely. No matter what, we are there to help and to catch them

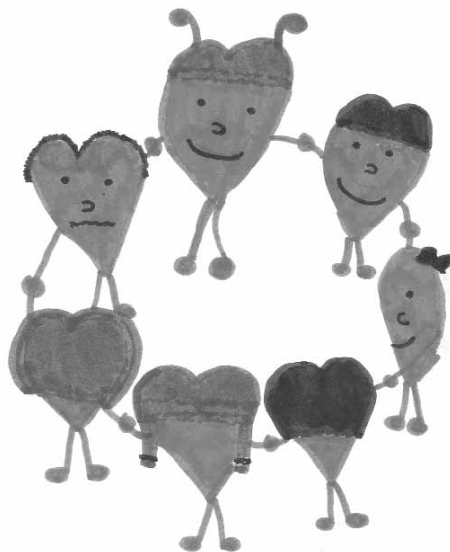
The most important thing that perspective teaches is empathy. Empathy for the feelings our children have that might not be what we would have thought. Empathy for where the behavior has come from, not just reacting to it. And empathy in knowing that we both need to understand where the feelings come from, and how to get them out to see the light of day so we can understand them, learn from them, and put them back inside changed. Sympathy, understanding, and care flow from empathy and it all flows back to connection.

The Hardest Tool to Use—Feelings

Another critically important tool interwoven throughout this book is learning how to recognize feelings, whether they are misplaced or on target. How our feelings make us act and react is one of the hardest tools for each of us to use, but one of the most essential ones we must learn how to access. Watching your child navigate big emotions can often trigger your own response to a similar emotion; resolved or unresolved. And we need to learn that creating calm out of chaos will only work for the short term if the big feeling underneath is unaddressed. Understanding feelings is so important; it's a process that is ongoing as we learn to help our children with their feelings and how we fit as a family. Understanding feelings and how to apply them is crucial to choosing tools in your adoption parenting toolboxes and having them truly work.

The following article "*The Parent/Child Connection: Shared Feelings, Strong Families*" by Jean MacLeod starting on page 7 details the ways we need to teach access to feelings to both ourselves and our children. It is the basic primer, the sharpening tool you need to understand and to really access the best of the other tools you may need in your tool box. In this book, we've utilized the research of Silverstein and Kaplan whose premise is that there are Seven Core Issues in adoption which are detailed on the following pages. These are basic and fundamental, and affect all parts of the triad (adoptee, adoptive parent, birth-parent) because we all share loss and gain in the making or the losing of our families. The premise behind these is simple and Jean's article takes you step by step through each of the seven. This article can be re-read as we read the book, and re-read as we return at later stages of our parenting journey.

This book is not the final resource on any given topic, rather a jumping off point. Visit our website www.emkpress.com for the most up to date resources and links associated with this book. Also, this book is not a substitute for professional guidance. But it can help make you aware of when you need to reach out to people skilled in helping families like ours on the journey.



The Parent/Child Connection

Shared Feelings, Strong Families

By Jean MacLeod

Love, anger, loss, and grief. Most of us would prefer to not have to deal with adoption fall-out. It is emotional, messy, complicated stuff that most of us were not raised to handle. But somewhere between the ages of four 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 if we come up short, they 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 with the tools 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 may 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. Many of our internationally adopted children 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

The seven core issues can provide parents with the insight and information needed to create a toolbox that will enable them understand the feelings of an adopted child. Deborah N. Silverstein, LCSW, and Sharon Kaplan Roszia, MS, have identified universal adoption issues that trigger emotions that are experienced, to some degree, by every single adoptee:

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

These seven issues are the basis for an adoptee's thoughts, feelings and reactions. They are

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 that we sometimes need to work to connect to. 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
and www.attach.org

a parent's key to understanding a child's perceptions of herself and her view of her biological and adoptive families. The seven 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 baggage, the seven core issues can be utilized by an adoptive 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' that 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 four prescriptive tools for parents to use to help them steer their children through the seven issues, and to alleviate some of the alienation and confusion categorized by Silverstein and Kaplan Roszia. Children who are dealing with core issues may be helped with one or more of the following:

Education Understanding Ongoing Awareness Acceptance

A parent's job entails 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. Mom or Dad might not be able to fix the world, or a child's losses, but according to therapist Dee Paddock, parents have an important role. 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."

1) Loss

Through abandonment and adoption, our internationally adopted children lost their birthparents and biological siblings, and their extended family of aunts, uncles and grandparents. 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, 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 attending 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.

Birthmother loss is especially poignant for an adoptee. [See **Loss & Grief** page 165] 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 may feel 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 express feeling 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 caught in birthmother loss and need concrete ways of processing:

- Include the birthmother in normal conversation with your child.
- Celebrate adoption day, your child's birthday, or Mother's Day with a birthmother honoring ceremony the day before ('Mother's Day Eve'). Help your child make the day of her own symbolic design, using letter writing, picture drawing, cake-baking, candle-lighting or moon-wishing.

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, past and present. Focusing on adoption loss does not equate with fixating on unhappiness.

There is no tool 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. Acknowledging loss is an important first step in acceptance and in moving forward for our children. 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 grow, 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.

2) 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 they may act in,

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Feelings Books for Young Children

Baby Faces

by Ben Argueta,

Today I Feel Silly

By Jamie Lee Curtis

When Sophie Gets

Angry...Really, Really

Angry By Molly Bang

A Boy and a Bear: The

Children's Relaxation

Book By Lori Lite

Feelings By Aliki

Wemberly Worried

By Kevin Henkes

Sheila Rae the Brave

By Kevin Henkes

Kissing Hand

By Audrey Penn

Sometimes I'm

Bombaloo

By Rachel Vail

Alexander and the

Terrible, Horrible, No

Good, Very Bad Day

By Judith Viorst

The Feelings Book

By Todd Parr

Words Are Not for

Hurting

By Elizabeth Verdick

The Way I Feel Books

(series, ages 2-5):

Scared/Angry/Jealous/

Sad By Cornelia Maude

Spelman

Michael Rosen's Sad

Book By Michael Rosen

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 learning the words to use may feel simplistic, but it is part of the prescription.

Does your child have words to identify and regularly express the four basic emotions that people are born pre-wired for?

Angry Sad Scared 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 their birth country 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 angry, why they are taking it out on their mom or dad, and why they carry so much inexpressible emotion. Once they become aware 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 number one fear is of abandonment, and they will suffer in silence if that’s what it takes to avoid causing the unthinkable to happen again.

3) Guilt and Shame

Guilt and shame are by-products of rejection. They are a child’s paralyzing, toxic reaction to the belief that something must be intrinsically wrong with them, or that they must have done something really bad, to have caused 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 is to blast it out in the open and help children understand that their ‘rejection’ and abandonment was not about them.

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.

4) 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 trauma. Children exhibit expressions of grief according to their experience and their temperament, and they may present 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 to help a child with grief:

Understanding Awareness Education Acceptance

A parent can gain valuable insight into a child's feelings by introducing sensitive or painful 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 'un-stuck', a child will repetitively play out his or her issues. A useful twist on 'misery loves company'; a therapeutic parent using the four tools can relieve a child's burden by sharing play and 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 the issue outward, re-shape it, and change a child's perceptions about it.

5) Mastery/Control

Paradoxically, post-institutional (PI) adoptees suffer from a lack of control over the early-life decisions made for them, and also suffer from taking too much of the unnatural kind of control, too young. Ideally, a child learns autonomy in steps, and learns control over their world under the watchful eye of their mother. A healthy bio infant/toddler trusts that their world is a safe place to investigate and master (control). An abandoned PI child skips over the trust, to desperately trying to control their environment in order to survive. A child who is having difficulty dealing with the seven core issues is unable to let herself believe that 'parent knows best' and will engage in continual power struggles with her parents, and anyone else in authority. These children must control friends, play-dates, conversations and parental attention. Some children will feel pushed to hoard food, tell lies, or even steal, in order to demonstrate complete control over their own world. A child lives through an orphanage experience by taking care of herself; to later trust an adult to take care of her feels dangerously life-threatening.

Part of 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 (a child's base fear for survival). Working on changing control patterns takes dedicated, non-punitive

action and lots of loving, but firm limit-setting. A parent needs to withdraw the unnatural control and decision-making from the adopted child and work at building a basis of trust and love. The adoptee has to learn to allow the adoptive parent to make good choices and decisions for her, while the parents continually demonstrate trustworthiness. Giving the child the gift of healthy, inner self-control is based in attachment-parenting plus parent control, enforced with kindness and affection. When an adoptee feels safe and in control of her inner self, some of the need to control the outward universe disappears. Although frustrating, the hard work a parent does with an adopted child on her post-institutional behaviors should be an affirming experience for both; shame is debilitating for a child and anger is self-defeating for the parent. [See **Discipline**, page 145]

6) 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 Roszia)

Helping a child develop an identity that includes the past, the present, and the future is integral for a child to feel whole. An adoptee’s realization of the blank space in their family history exacerbates the hollow spot they carry inside, with a profoundly sad result.

Past Identity: Without a foundation to build upon, a structure crumbles. Creating an honest life narrative, or Lifebook, helps provide a sense of history, or life structure, for adopted children. [See **Narratives**, page 221] Our internationally adopted sons and daughters come to us encoded with information that we can backtrack, react to, and connect with. Everyone has a story, but the facts of an internationally adopted child’s babyhood are not as important as how she feels about her early life, how she interprets pre-adoptive events, and how she views her place in the world. Resilience, a trait that allows a person to view and react to adversity as a challenge rather than as a trauma, plays a large part in how a child defines herself through ‘past identity’. A child who suffered a harsh orphanage experience had a difficult start in life, but can be taught by a parent to be re-defined by her bravery and courageously strong survival skills. A ‘powerless victim’ internal working model can be changed; not by ignoring sad facts, but by embracing them.

Resilience may not be innate to some, but it can be learned. Parents play an integral role in modeling behavior and feelings, and by demonstrating their own resilient responses to life. Resilience researcher, Dr. Steve Wolin, believes that the give-and-take, the emotional insight, and the support that are components of a healthy reciprocal relationship, ultimately generate self-esteem and permanent, integrated strength in an individual building internal reserves.

Present Identity: A child’s identity in the present is, to a large degree, 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 child derives strength from kinship and claiming behaviors! Emphasize family by celebrating connections, and by dedicating time and importance to building family. Building awareness and mutual acceptance entails that parents and children:

- work and play together
- describe the special attributes of each family member

- describe family goals
- talk about family unity
- design simple family rituals
- draw or talk about what families do to stay close (See Page 67, Raising Family Awareness)

Some adopted teens and adults cite feeling alienated from their adoptive families; it makes sense that time, effort, and priority should be put toward underscoring the fundamental need to be together. A strong family provides a safe base to explore from for a child, and a secure safety net for a teen experimenting with independence.

Future Identity: Family claiming and connection, life narratives, and Lifebooks are tools to help a child learn to integrate her past, understand the present, and take charge of her future. Giving a child ownership of her life story and her thoughts and feelings builds a foundation for further construction. Kaplan Roszia and Silverstein warn that 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."*

Helping a child develop an identity that includes the past, the present, and the future is integral for a child to feel whole. An adoptee's realization of the blank space in their family history exacerbates the hollow spot they carry inside, with a profoundly sad result. Reinforcing your child's whole identity, co-creating and re-framing her story while facing the difficult truths together, and giving her the tools to develop pride in that identity, will strengthen your child's trust in herself and help give her the resilient fortitude to live with past, present, and future shadows. (For more information on racial identity, see page 311.)

7) Intimacy

For a young child, 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 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 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 loss-laden '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 and Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb, authors of *Real Parents, Real Children*, suggest using the Pebbles Technique to open a conversation about a sensitive adoption

For Further Reading:

Lifelong Issues in Adoption By Deborah N. Silverstein, LCSW, and Sharon Kaplan Roszia, MS

Doris Landry, MS,
www.adoptionparenting.net

The Art of Resilience
 By Hara Estroff Marano
 Psychology Today.com

Orphans and Warriors, The Journey of the Adopted Heart
 By Dee Paddock, MA,
 MTS, NCC

The Resilient Self: How Survivors of Troubled Families Rise Above Adversity
 By Steven J. Wolin, MD
 and Sybil Wolin, PhD

Real Parents, Real Children By Holly van Gulden and Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb

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... essentially, throwing out a conversational pebble for the child to catch. If a child chooses not to respond to the pebble, the parent has still communicated a willingness and ability to talk about difficult subject matter. You can toss out another pebble at another time.

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 young 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, 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.” (van Gulden and Bartels-Rabb)

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. Adoption issues will continue to re-appear at times of transition throughout our children’s lives: entering school, moving, 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 emotions, and allow us the insight to guide them to self-awareness. We can’t fix the fall-out, but we can help our children with their feelings, and with their healing. We can demonstrate our own resiliency and teach our sons and daughters that their journey of adoption is more than survivable; that it has shaped them in remarkable ways, and with our help, it can also make them strong.

~ By Jean MacLeod