

ICING ON THE CAKE

adoption-parenting your 5-10 year old

by Jean MacLeod

When my husband and I adopted for the first time in 1996, our Social Worker prepared us with her recipe for success. Children who have been adopted are like layer cakes, she told us. They come to us with a few more layers than a child born to us would have, and it would be up to us as adoptive parents (pastry chefs?) to be aware of what potential issues lay below the surface. We smiled brightly and nodded, but we were confident that we would love our baby enough that love alone would solve all possible multi-layer problems...

And that was our sole preparation for the explosions in our home “cake bakery” 4 years later. Our intense little girl experienced an intense reaction to adoption issues, centered we later discovered, on sadness over birthmother loss and anger at the outside forces that had controlled her young life. She was living a subtle mutiny, but she was unable to tell us what was making her so contrary, so anxious, and so unhappy.

I called a psychologist friend who specialized in adoption and attachment issues, and described what my daughter was going through. I told her that most of the time things were fine, but that I felt my daughter was both sadder and angrier than she had any reason to be. What could possibly be going on?

My friend listened, then told me that adoptees grapple with life transitions at different points during their child- and adult-hood. Sometime between the ages of five and ten the transition includes a realization that in gaining a family, the child has suffered significant losses. An adoptive parent needs to be prepared and proactive in order to assist their child, she said. Children need help interpreting both their positive and negative emotions and need acceptance for what they’re feeling on all levels. Adoption, my friend added, is like a cake with many layers...

This time I understood. But how was I supposed to know how to be “proactive and prepared”? Nothing in my upbringing had taught me how to parent a layer cake, and no one had ever alluded to the specific challenges of being a mom to an adopted child. I quickly learned that adoption parenting was a two-way learning opportunity and that in order to help my child integrate her emotional life, I would need to examine my own.

Layer One- Understanding Your Inner Parent

I use the term “Inner Parent” with a grin and a grimace. Psychologist Doris Landry warns, “You are your parents—you will parent like your parents parented (which can be good or bad), unless you make a conscious effort to change.” We all carry the remnants of our childhood inside of us, and sometimes our children’s issues can re-awaken issues we’ve had in the past within our own family of origin. What does this have to do with adoption parenting? Our past and present relationship with our parents has influence over what we are able to do for our children. We cannot effectively help an angry son or daughter if we fear their rejection. We can’t guide our children through abandonment fears if we haven’t healed from a parent’s divorce. To be a better parent, our childhood must be addressed.

“You will make mistakes” is part two of Ms. Landry’s message. “But healthy parenting includes being able to admit your mistakes—and they don’t have to be the same mistakes as your parents made”. Adoption parenting could also be termed “conscious parenting”—making conscious choices that connect you to your child, and allow you to deliberately refrain from mimicking unhealthy patterns from the past.

Dr. Dan Siegel, in his new book *Parenting from the Inside Out*, stresses “the first step in raising happy and healthy children is to fully understand and learn from your own childhood experiences.” He also presents new research in neurobiology and attachment, and explains how interpersonal communications can actually affect brain development. Our adopted children come to us with their own genetic line-up, but there is decisive evidence that our relationships with our children can affect permanent, positive (or negative) change in them.

Layer Two- Understanding Your Adopted Child

Helping a child who is experiencing normal adoption issues can be overwhelming for a parent who is not sure what is going on or where to begin. Children without a way to express their confusion, fear, sadness and anger 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 the basics may feel simplistic, but it is a necessary place to start:

1) 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.

2) Does your child have your permission and encouragement to express her feelings? Can you initiate a conversation that would allow the child to convey her emotions, even when the thoughts she then expresses might be perceived as “negative” toward you?

"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.

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...

3) Through the process of adoption, our children lost birthparents and an extended family of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and even siblings. Internationally adopted 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.

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 fix their reality by painting an entirely rosy picture of their early lives. Our children don’t need us to make life pretty; to advance, they need only our support, and our empowering, shared vision of their future.

Layer Three- Parenting With Awareness

There are several innovative tools that you can use to help create a solid self-awareness for a child dealing with core adoption issues, but half the battle is simply:

- Utilizing honest, open communication
- Discovering the child’s reality, POV, and the actual basis for her behaviors
- Validating and empathizing with the child and her losses, and her reasons for anger, fear or sadness

Creating Lifebooks, using Parenting Narratives (stories that strengthen by weaving in real-life), and reading current adoption literature for children are excellent tools to help a child learn to take charge of her past and present. It's all about empowerment-- giving a child ownership of her life story and her thoughts and feelings, and helping her through the dark. 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 our children's pain. We can only help them get strong.

How we choose to parent 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."

It takes effort, patience and compassion to understand the burgeoning issues and emotions of our five- to ten-year-old adopted children. Love may be the key ingredient of our families, but love alone is not enough to be an effective adoption-parent. Moms and dads need to be especially aware of their parenting style, and it's influence on family closeness and communication. Our kids need words for their feelings, tacit permission to express all that they feel, and they need our help to navigate and integrate their multi-layered lives. The parent-child intimacy that develops from working through tough life issues together is a wondrous by-product of dealing openly with some very painful truths. This essential connection with an adopted child is a parent's greatest reward; it is trust, it is love, it is icing on the multi-layered cake.

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Resources:

Parenting from the Inside Out by Dan Siegel, MD & Mary Hartzell, M.Ed.

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

Adoption Lifebook: a Bridge to Your Child's Beginnings by Cindy Probst

Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child by Beth O'Malley

Parenting with Stories Workbook by Joanne May www.familyattachment.com

Tapestry Books Online Catalog (adoption books): www.tapestrybooks.com

Bio:

Jean MacLeod is a free-lance writer who has been published in *Adoptive Families Magazine*, *Adoption TODAY* and in the adoption essay 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, *At Home in This World, a China adoption story*, was published in September 2003 by EMK Press.

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