

## **The Inner World of the Adopted Child**

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In anticipation of a talk I was asked to do at a national adoption conference I was looking through some of my client files. As a child psychologist, specializing in the effects of divorce or adoption on children, I always do a thorough intake interview with parents before meeting with the child. I wanted to review some of these interviews to remind myself of what issues would be important for me to address to a group of prospective adoptive parents.

As I read through 10 years worth of interviews, I was struck by one particular similarity. In fact, this theme became so pronounced that I started writing down the variations in which it appeared. These were comments made to me by parents of adopted children, and they included:

“Sometimes we just look at each other and ask what we got ourselves into”

“We knew this child would be different from us. But sometimes it seems we don’t know him at all”

“It’s narrowed down to keeping our marriage or this child, but not both”

“Every day I struggle with whether to give him back or not”

“I’ve lost control of my house and life to this child”

“Nothing I do or try seems like enough to help this child”

“We wonder how much longer we can stay committed to these children”

It is important to keep in mind that these comments were said in the context of a broader interview and certainly the parents expanded on the benefits of having an adopted child. Be it that they adopted because of infertility, helping out an extended family member, aiding abandoned children, or wanting to be a parent—even though single—most parents express that adopting their child is a life-changing event, with numerous rewards.

What we fail to sometimes take into account—and what many agencies don’t adequately prepare parents for—are the ways in which adopted children manifest with a variety of psychological characteristics that differ tremendously from other children. Sadly, many parents embark on the task of

raising an adopted child ill prepared for understanding or coping with the behavioral manifestations of a child who often feels like a throwaway kid.

Today about 1 percent of children in the United States are adopted. According to one recent survey, 29 percent of adopted children come from abroad. Curiously, New Mexico has one of the highest per capita adoption rates in the country.

Adults wishing to adopt a child typically have to go through an intensive—sometimes grueling—series of procedures which may involve home studies, adoption education, addressing cultural and language concerns, psychological evaluations, and background checks with employers, neighbors and legal authorities. In addition, adoption can be an expensive prospect when one factors in fees from attorneys and adoption agencies, as well as the cost of air travel. Depending upon the family structure (e.g., couple, single, gay, younger, older, rural, suburban, etc.) and type of child desired (e.g., age, gender, availability to take a child with special needs, willingness to consider all countries, etc.), the time it takes to receive a child, once the process has started, can be anywhere from six months to two years.

It is not inevitable that every child who is adopted will present with behavior or emotional disturbance. Some children are simply more resilient than others are and they assimilate the reality of being adopted just fine. When we take a look at the variables that potentially affect the life of an adoptee, however, it is easy to see why raising an adopted child can end up involving much more than the parents ever anticipated or were prepared for.

Adopted children are over-represented in mental health and correctional facilities, compared to other groups. What I always find surprising is the lack of attention paid to the role adoption might have had in leading to the emotional or behavioral disturbance. As an example, Time magazine recently categorized the major risk factors associated with many of the children who have fired weapons at other kids. Whereas they listed the role divorce, abuse, and peer relations might have played in these children's lives, they failed to acknowledge that at least two of the eight children profiled were adopted.

### **Child Development**

A child's development is affected by numerous factors. Increasingly, we are recognizing the role genetics plays in subsequent growth, learning, behavior and personality. Unfortunately, many adoptive parents have little, if any, information available to them about the adopted child's gene pool. One of the things we do know about adopted children is that many were born to parents with histories of impulsive behavior. Either because of age, substance abuse, or psychiatric disturbance, these parents engaged in actions that produced a child they were unable to care for. This is one of the reasons why Attention-Deficit-type behaviors are so prevalent in adopted children.

The other reality affecting adopted children is that many had their lives disrupted in an untimely way or at an awkward phase of their life. Though some children are earmarked for adoption before they are born, the majority are adopted after already having lived with birth or foster parents. Children, be it consciously or not, carry memories of any abuse, abandonment, chaos or trauma they may have witnessed or experienced before being adopted.

Children are born helpless and dependent. It is not until a child is approximately two years of age that he or she moves toward independence. Infants need to move away from their parents on their own time-line. They need to be afforded the chance to test and explore the world away from their parents on their own, retreating back to the safety of mom or dad when things get scary. If this process is disrupted, by divorce or adoption, between two and four years of age, the child learns it is not safe to individuate (because people leave or abandon you if you do), and often fail to develop trust in others. These are the children who typically grow up feeling anxious, resentful and angry.

Another major developmental factor affecting adopted children is the role of cognition. Children under age seven are very concrete in their thinking. That is, they are not able to conceptualize cause-and-effect relationships until mid-childhood. Whereas many adopted children know at a very young age they are adopted, often telling others their ‘adoption story,’ it is not until the child is seven or eight that the personal meaning of this sets in. When cause-and-effect thinking sets in, adopted children start to feel, on a whole different level, that they were given away. This is one of the reasons why most adopted children don’t manifest with severe behavioral disturbance until second or third grade.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that the inner world of the adopted child is one of ghosts. Whether they knew their birth family or not, adopted children inevitably carry real or imagined images of their mother, father, and siblings. In many respects, these ghosts dominate the adopted person’s life, asking for loyalty and recognition. The adopted child, however, may feel he has to keep the ghosts secret, lest the adoptive family feels betrayed by their presence. Whereas the adoptive family may hold the opinion that the birth parents relinquished their chance to raise the child—and should therefore be out of the picture forever—the child still holds on to whatever threads of connection he can maintain with these people.

### **Family Life**

I tell every adopted parent who contacts me that they can’t approach raising their child in the way parents raising a birth child can. Rather, I tell them to conceptualize their role as ‘therapeutic parent,’ where every interaction—and its result—with their adopted child is deliberate and thoughtful. For example, when a parent punishes a birth child, the child rarely believes that the ultimate

consequence will be parental abandonment. In the mind of the adopted child, however, parents leave. These children often believe that it is a matter of time before they are once again abandoned. If a parent fails to recognize this, relying instead on blind faith in their commitment to the child, they miss a vital life experience of the adopted child.

As anyone who has been dumped by a partner or spouse can tell you, being left by another person doesn't feel good. In addition, it leaves us feeling out of control of our lives. Issues of control are therefore paramount for adopted children. Many feel they have no control in their lives and thus they do whatever they can to get it. I've seen some adopted children who are so convinced they will be abandoned again that they purposely and brutally antagonize their family members. Their belief system becomes, "Yes, I will be abandoned. But at least this time I'll be in control, by causing it to happen."

Adopted children are also incredibly hypervigilant. Their survival depends upon it. Therefore, they cue into subtleties and an enormous amount of effort goes into anticipating the actions of others. This is what makes it difficult for parents, particularly those who are preoccupied or coping with other stressors in their lives. Slowly and deliberately, their child knows all their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. When the child feels threatened or out of control, he or she knows how to 'get' mom or dad. Only later do the parents realize the ways in which the child controls many aspects of family life, often solely determining through manipulative behavior whether they will all have a good day or a horrible day.

### **Anger**

Perhaps one of the major oversights adoptive parents make—one that agencies fail to adequately prepare parents for—is the role anger plays in the life of the adopted child. Many parents that I consult with mistakenly believe that a loving, stable home is enough for the adopted child; that a good home environment will make better all the losses or traumas from the past. To the adopted child, however, love isn't enough. They have lost a great deal and they typically get little validation for this from those around them. Instead, many get the message they should stop wallowing and be grateful.

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 mis-interpreted and the child subsequently gets labeled as defiant. I would say that the majority of school age adopted children I see have been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and prescribed medication. This reflects a poor understanding of adoptive child behavior. These children often don't have ADHD. They're angry and fearful. It is difficult to pay attention, sit still, and get along with others when your world is one of unrecognized loss.

### **Conclusion**

I am certainly not suggesting that adults stop adopting children. Nor am I insinuating that every adopted child will have behavioral or emotional disturbance. What I am pointing out, however, is that the needs and concerns of adopted children are unique. When we truly listen to the adopted child, we can better understand how he or she is attempting to make sense out of a life where they are asked to relinquish one identity and assume another. Further, by being sensitive to the inner reality of the adopted child, we let them know we understand how confusing it can be to live in a world of ghosts, surrogate parents, and loss.

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