

August 2008

*Tuscarawas County Job & Family Services
Post-Adoption Link Newsletter*



**2009 ADOPTION CONFERENCE
August 12-15, 2009**

Mark your calendars early for the 2009 national conference sponsored by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC).

Next year's conference will be held close to home in Columbus, Ohio.

This is an exciting opportunity to hear nationally-acclaimed experts address issues of special interest to adoptive families and professionals.

Many families use this opportunity as a family vacation. Besides helpful seminars for the adults, there are activities for children ages 1 through 17 years and the chance to network with other adoptive families of North America.

If you are not familiar with NACAC, go to their website at:

<http://www.nacac.org>

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Self-Care: Barriers and Basics for Foster/Adoptive Parents

Fall 2005 *Adoptalk*

by Deena McMahon

A licensed independent social worker, Deena McMahon has worked with families and children for more than 20 years. She is currently director of in-home services at Therapeutic Services Agency, where she supervises more than 25 staff who deliver in-home services in nine east central Minnesota counties. She also conducts parenting assessments, provides attachment therapy, is a staff consultant for social services agencies, and presents at regional and national training events. Through the years, Deena has developed expertise in the areas of childhood trauma, childhood sexual abuse, grief and loss, family violence, adoption, and attachment.

When a foster or adopted child has special needs, parents must juggle appointments with mental health therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, psychiatrists, ophthalmologists, allergists, and asthma specialists. They must attend IEP meetings, keep in touch with the school principal and their child's teacher, check in with the social worker, and establish a schedule for personal care attendants (PCAs). Ongoing appointments and emergencies keep parents so busy that attending to their own feelings and needs may be put on hold.

Self-care, however, is crucial for foster and adoptive parents. The physical and emotional toll of caring for traumatized children can be overwhelming. Children can project hurt onto parents and, at the same time, blame parents for feelings of loss and despair. Parents must understand both the complexities of foster care and adoption, and their child's unique needs. With that knowledge and an ongoing commitment to self-care, parents can more easily remain effective and balanced.

Barriers to Good Self-Care

Unfortunately, adoptive and foster parents face many barriers to taking care of themselves.

To start, the phrase—"Take care of yourself!"—has become so trite that, for many, it has lost all meaning. When someone casually tells an adoptive mom whose kids have special needs to take care of herself, she may feel frustrated and angry. It's easy to say. It's not easy to do.

Second, many who choose to foster and adopt are natural caregivers. They have pets, partners, children, and aging parents who all require care and attention. Most days, the amount of energy they devote to others' needs far exceeds any energy directed to their well-being. In fact, many caregivers are uncomfortable being on the receiving end of others' attention and assistance. They don't want to be too needy, or seem like they are not up to the challenges they have taken on.

Third, many adoptive and foster parents really want to be there for their families. They want to remember birthdays with a homemade cake. They want to be the cheerful volunteer at their child's school. They want to deliver a meal to a sick friend, help out at church, and serve on task forces that

address children's needs. So, they work longer and try harder to meet their families' needs.

Fourth, too many parents simply do not know what would help them. They know something is missing, but can't put their finger on just what might make them feel better. Parents are often told, "Call if there is anything you need," but it is hard to call and ask for help, especially when you cannot even articulate what you need. This leaves many parents vulnerable and exhausted.

Even more significantly, too many foster and adoptive parents believe they somehow shouldn't need support. Many times I have heard parents say that they are in no position to complain or ask for help since they chose to foster or adopt their children. But even when parents know what challenges the child faces, it is often impossible to predict how living with a certain child will change a family.

Compounding matters, recent disasters—9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the earthquake in Pakistan, and the prolonged conflict in Iraq—remind us all that there are always other people who are worse off. We are taught as children to be happy with what we have since other people have it much harder. It is little wonder we sometimes feel guilty because our ongoing trauma pales in comparison to these catastrophic tragedies.

The Road to Good Self-Care

From working with parents, I know that to overcome social, mental, and emotional barriers to self-care, you must first come to understand the importance of taking care of yourself, and then build self-care into your daily routine. You must believe that you are worth taking care of, and that your happiness and well-being are not peripheral to, but essential for good parenting. Once you can accept that:

- **Give yourself permission to need something.** It is okay to ask for help. Having needs and trying to meet them is not a sign of incompetence or weakness. It is part of healthy family life. Thirst is your body's signal to drink and prevent dehydration. In the same way, when you feel stressed out, it is time to take a break so you can regain perspective and deal with the issue at hand more constructively.
 - **Keep it simple.** Make life choices that fit your family. Develop consistent routines. Create a safe environment. Understand and respect both your limits and those of your children. Resist the impulse to over-commit what little time you have. Prioritize. Save energy for things that really matter, and seek outside help as soon as you need it. When possible, take advantage of respite opportunities and PCAs to relieve some of the stress during really rough times.
 - **Stop comparing yourself to other adults and families.** They do not live your life, and they are not raising your children. Get comfortable with compromising and being different. Your child may talk, think, achieve, behave, and live differently than other children. Instead of measuring your family's worth by other people's standards, set expectations for your family based on your children's capabilities and your family's reality.
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- **Join a parent support group.** Meeting with other parents who have similar experiences and feelings is one of the most powerful and renewing activities for anyone raising children who have special needs. Just knowing that you are with people who “get it” is affirming. Group members may also be able to trade respite care with you. If a group is not an option, find at least one person outside your immediate family with whom you can be real, and whom you can trust to understand.
- **Have down time every day.** Maybe it’s a morning walk. It might be 10 minutes with the paper and a good cup of coffee. It can be writing in your journal before bed. It could be the drive into work, or times of silent prayer in church. Your mind, body, and soul need time to regenerate from life’s stresses. If you have no down time—a time without distractions and demands—you cannot benefit from moments of reflection and calm that may help you to center and stay balanced.
- **Routinely have something to which you can look forward.** Maybe it’s coffee with a neighbor after the kids are at school. Or a glass of wine Friday night. Or date night with your partner. It could be going alone to the grocery store Saturday morning or having an uninterrupted bath. Remember, waiting too long to reward yourself for a job well done is not an effective way to shape your behavior. Immediate positive reinforcement works for adults too.
- **Accentuate the positive.** It may not be easy, but as you step back to evaluate how you and the family are doing, find time to laugh at the silly situations that come up. Recognize the good in yourself and your children. Celebrate every step forward, no matter how small. Stay connected with your partner. Eat something you really enjoy. (Nutrition is important. Indulgence is wonderful.) Find affirmation in the process of raising an adopted child.

Caring for children who have special needs is a matter of the heart. Self-care is a mind-set and a positive choice. If you can find a balance between caring for your children and meeting your own needs, you will ultimately be much better equipped to do both.

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BATTLING THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL BLUES

Parents can make the first days of school fun rather than frustrating

© 2001 By Dr. Charles Fay

Too frequently, children begin the school year unprepared to succeed, quickly experience frustration and failure, and get turned-off to learning. However, kids can love instead of loath the first days of school; they just need a little help from mom and dad. Here’s how:

Tip #1: Give your children the gift of chores.

Children who regularly do chores at home find it much easier to do assignments at school. Why? Both schoolwork *and* chores require perseverance, delayed gratification, and attention to detail. When parents expect chores to be done without reminders and without pay, children also learn how to work independently and to enjoy the intrinsic rewards of accomplishment.

Tip #2: In a loving way, hold your children accountable for their chores.

Parents who nag and remind their children to do chores raise kids who expect their teachers to nag and remind them to do assignments. These children don't do well in school. Smarter parents ask their children to do their chores, bite their tongues, and let empathy and consequences do the teaching. Why empathy? When parents deliver sincere doses of empathy or sadness before describing consequences, their children learn responsibility *rather than* resentment. A parent might say:

How sad ... I love you so much, but you forgot to clean your bathroom today.

Now I don't have the energy to take you swimming. This really stinks."

Tip #3: Limit television, videos, videogames, and other "entertaining" activities.

Children who are used to being entertained during the summer by fast-paced TV shows, movies, games, and trips to the amusement park go into shock when they enter the classroom. Before long, they begin to complain about how "boring" their teachers are and how much they dislike school. Love and Logic parents help their children transition back to school by making their homes so "boring" that their kids can't wait to be back in class!

Tip #4: Have fun with reading and writing.

During the first week of school, teachers can always tell the difference between the children who've been read to during the summer and those who have not. Spend at least 20 minutes per day reading with your kids. Experiment with reading one page, asking your child to read the next, and alternating back and forth. Writing is important too! Experiment with having your child spend the two weeks prior to the start of school making and writing cards for friends and relatives. Your child's writing skills will grow ... and so will these relationships!

With these practical tips from The Love and Logic® Institute, you can give your kids an advantage in school that will last for months, years, and a lifetime! Parents around the world have benefited from the power of these four down-to-earth tips. Now it's your turn to give your kids the head start they deserve!

Dr. Charles Fay is a nationally known speaker, parent, and school psychologist with The Love and Logic Institute in Golden, Colo. His new video, *Hope for Underachieving Kids*, and his book, *Love and Logic Magic for Early Childhood*, provide a wealth of ideas for raising kids who are ready to learn and ready for the real world. For more information about Love and Logic parenting and teaching techniques, call **1-800-LUV-LOGIC** or visit www.loveandlogic.com.

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Adoption and School Issues Fact Sheet for Families

Author(s): Child Welfare Information Gateway

Year Published: 1993

Like all children, adopted children spend a good portion of their waking hours in school. Because school is such an important aspect of children's lives, adoptive parents, like all parents, want their child's school experience to be a positive one. When your child has a problem at school, you might find yourself wondering: Is this a problem related to adoption, or is it a "generic" developmental, educational, or school system problem common to all children?

This fact sheet will look at three areas. The first is how adoption impacts a youngster in school. We will discuss if, when, how, and why to talk about adoption with school personnel. Second, we will examine some specific educational problems that are common to adopted children and how to advocate for the educational and support services that they might need. Third, we will suggest ways to help students, teachers, principals, and other school personnel to become more sensitive to adoption issues.

At the end of this fact sheet there is an information sheet on positive adoption language that can be given to school personnel. There is also a resource section that provides names of consultants with expertise in adoption and school issues, adoption training curricula and programs, relevant audiovisual materials, and a bibliography. Child Welfare Information Gateway staff members would appreciate hearing about any other resources in the area of adoption and school issues. Please contact us at Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau/ACYF, 1250 Maryland Avenue, SW, Eighth Floor, Washington, DC 20024, or call 703.385.7565 or 888.251.0075.

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1. How Adoption Impacts Children at School

Adoption can impact children at school in two ways: educationally and socially. If a child is grieving for or fantasizing about his birth family to the extent that it affects his ability to concentrate and learn, that is an educational effect. If a child is teased on the playground by classmates who say that he must be bad because his "real" parents gave him away, that is a social effect. Yet the teasing can also affect self-esteem, which can affect school performance. Let's look at both of these areas in three general time periods: preschool and kindergarten, elementary school, and junior-senior high school.

2. Preschool/Kindergarten

When children attend day care or nursery school, they are exposed to many new experiences beyond the protected world of their immediate family. Often it is the first time they interact socially with a group of children. They make new friends, learn to deal with a new authority figure (the teacher), master routines,

sing songs, pet a guinea pig, and imitate adult roles in a housekeeping area just their size.

Educational goals for preschool children are normally low-key. Supporting the development of the child's self-esteem and self-confidence in the world beyond the family is usually the priority. Social skills such as taking turns, sharing, and following directions are emphasized. Gross motor development and creative expression are encouraged. Activities may center around colors, shapes, number concepts, and letters, among other things, but formal drilling in reading readiness or arithmetic facts is usually not a part of the curriculum. Most preschools want to help children gain self-awareness and a love of learning that will be a good foundation for their elementary school experience.

Children who are 3 or 4 years old and were adopted as infants or toddlers rarely show any adoption-related adjustment problems. Since they do not fully understand reproduction yet, they cannot really understand what adoption means. They may blissfully tell and retell the story of their adoption to anyone who will listen. Preschool children do not have prejudices about skin color (unless they are actively taught to have it by their parents or other adults) and are usually accepting of all children who behave in a friendly way towards them. Trans-racially and trans-culturally adopted children, therefore, probably won't experience prejudice during this time. However, children this age are aware of differences in physical features and may need some help to understand them.

Whether to tell the preschool staff that your child was adopted is a question with no absolute answer. If your child was trans-racially adopted, the topic will come up automatically. If there is a request to bring in a newborn photo for a bulletin board and you adopted your child at age 6 months, it will come up then as well. Claudia Jewett Jarratt, a Boston-area family therapist for 25 years and adoptive mother of seven children, suggests that telling or not telling the school about adoption is an individual matter. Says Jarratt, "You do what makes your child feel loved and affirmed in all areas of adoption." If you do tell, it is certainly not necessary to share all the details of the birth family's situation.

Since preschools and day care centers are often private and separate from the public school system, the preschool years are a good time for adoptive parents to practice interacting with school personnel about adoption issues without the fear that any labels will necessarily follow their child throughout his school career. Parents can start to get comfortable with the idea of sharing information about the child's adoption if they feel it is appropriate or that it can help the child's adjustment to school.

If the children and teachers in your child's class at preschool seem curious about adoption, you might want to make a classroom presentation. If so, you should emphasize that adoption is one of the many ways that families are formed. Lois Melina, an Idaho-based adoptive parent and author of several books on adoption, says the following points are appropriate for the preschool years:

There are different types of families.
People who live together and care about each other are a family.
Sometimes members of a family do not live together but they still care about each other.

Kindergartners have some understanding of reproduction, although Melina says they are probably more

interested in how babies are born than in how they are conceived. A detailed discussion of reproduction would probably not be appropriate for a kindergarten class. However, you probably could say that every baby grows inside a woman and that after the baby is born, the child may live with the woman who gave birth to him, or he may live with other parents.

3. Elementary School

First grade is when "real school" begins. Six-year-olds have reached the age when they can be required to sit still, pay attention, maintain order in line, and learn to read and write. They gain a new sense of independence and assurance as they ride to school on the bus alone, negotiate the cafeteria, receive a report card, and perform in the school pageant. They also begin to participate in group activities outside of school such as the soccer team, cub scouts, or ballet lessons—that help them to develop a variety of new skills.

At this age, adopted children begin to be able to grasp the fuller meaning of their adoption, including the loss and abandonment issues that may be associated with it. They may spend time fantasizing about their birthparents and wondering what they are like. They may feel that they were placed for adoption because they were not good, pretty, or smart enough to be kept. With mental energy tied up in these concerns, children can find it difficult to pay attention in class and to learn their lessons, even if they do not have learning disabilities. And because this is the first time that more intense educational demands are placed on the child, if a child does have a learning disability or a specific condition such as attention deficit disorder, this is when it may surface.

Children in elementary school are old enough to decide for themselves whether to tell their classmates about their adoption. They must be taught, however, that once they tell, they will not be able to "take it back." Also, you need to help your child recognize that people have different reactions to this information. You must give him the tools to respond to these reactions, especially if they are negative (see Information Gateway fact sheet *Explaining Adoption to Your Children, Family and Friends*).

Your experience with preschool teachers may help you decide whether to share adoption information with grade school personnel. If you feel it is important to discuss adoption with your child's teacher, tell your child exactly what you will be talking about and why. Good opportunities for adoption discussions are at the very beginning of the school year, at parent-teacher conferences, and on back-to-school night.

Some professionals and adoptive parents think it is unwise to share adoption information with teachers because they fear teachers will single out their children, make them feel different, or cause them to be made fun of, called names, or given special treatment. Others say that parents cannot expect teachers to become more sensitive to adoption issues, use positive adoption language, and help adopted children feel more secure if parents are not willing to share openly and affirm their own positive feelings about adoption.

Linda Yellin, an adult adoptee, therapist, and consultant from the Detroit area who specializes in pre and post adoption services, believes in most cases it is useful to share information about certain aspects of adoption with appropriate school personnel. Regarding preschoolers and elementary school age children she

states, "With the increase in openness in adoption practice, it is helpful for school personnel to understand that some adopted children continue to have contact with their siblings, former foster families, and in some cases, with birthparents and extended birth family members. If school personnel are aware and sensitive to these situations, they are more apt to respond appropriately."

Children Adopted From the Foster Care System

A child who is newly adopted from the foster care system at age 6 will have some of the same school issues as a 6-year-old adopted as an infant. He will be dealing with the grief and loss that all children living away from their birthparents deal with. He may also have some other difficulties. If he experienced abuse or neglect and more than one caretaker, he may not have received the emotional nurturing he required at a younger age. Interruptions in attachment, early deprivations, cultural differences, and moves can cause a child to act younger than he is. He may not be able to learn as fast as children his own age; and yet, if he is physically the same size as his classmates, he will be expected to perform at the same level as everyone else. These negative experiences may also cause a child to have low self-esteem, problems with authority, difficulties in getting along with other children, depression, or antisocial behavior, such as lying, stealing, or disrupting class.

A parent of a child adopted from the foster care system almost has to discuss the child's adoption with school personnel, so that they will understand these background factors and be able to plan useful interventions together with the adoptive family.

If your child has the potential to have some serious school problems because of his former birth family or foster care system experiences, you need to get school personnel to become a part of the problem-solving team with you, along with your child's social worker, former foster families, and other key players that you determine. To enlist their support, you should share relevant information about your child's background; however, you should be cautious in how much detail you provide, and to whom. There is no need to talk about the specifics of the abuse, for instance, or to reveal who the perpetrator was. The level of detail provided to a therapist or counselor is different from that provided to a teacher. The teacher needs to know just enough history so that he or she can understand some of the reasons for the child's current functioning in the classroom.

When you share this information, you should tell the teacher that you expect the information to be treated as a professional confidence. It is not to be shared freely with anyone who does not have a need to know.

If you think your child will need services not normally provided in the regular classroom, you need to advocate for those services. Unlike past adults in his life who were not trustworthy and who did not work as a team on his behalf, you and school personnel must work together. Your child needs to get the message: "You are important. We can make this work."

It also might be necessary for your family to seek other post-adoption services along with the school-provided educational services, such as psychotherapy or association with other adoptive families in an adoptive parent support group. For more information on this, see the Information Gateway fact sheet "[Post-adoption Services: A Fact Sheet for Families](#)".

School Assignments Related to Adoption

In many elementary schools, third or fourth graders are asked to make a family tree. You can help ease the possible uncomfortable feelings that your child might have about this assignment by talking with the teacher about the child's adoption ahead of time. If you have enough information about the birth family, perhaps your child's family tree can include information about both the birth family and the adoptive family. Lois Melina, in "Making a Family Tree Helpful for Adopted Child," points out the benefits to adopted children that such an assignment can provide. It is a natural opportunity to talk about adoption with your child.

In the 1990's there are many varieties of families. Children nowadays can live with adoptive parents, foster parents, one parent, divorced parents with joint custody, stepparents, grandparents, or two parents of the same gender. Most teachers in this day and age are aware of these differences. Hopefully they will take the opportunity to point out that each type of family is a "real" family, and that no one type is better than the other. You might suggest to the teacher to emphasize to the children that while families may look different on the outside, on the inside they are all the same—they are made up of people who care for and love one another. If handled in this way, the assignment should be a self-esteem builder for your child and all the children in your child's class.

Elementary school may also be the time when a teacher suggests what he or she thinks is an innocent-sounding science or social studies project for the class to undertake—adopt a whale, zoo animal, redwood tree or highway. While the intent is to impart positive messages about the need for all of us to take responsibility for saving endangered species and improving our environment, this kind of project can have negative effects on adopted children of this age.

These types of projects may lead school-age adopted children to conclude (because they are still concrete and not abstract thinkers) that all you have to do to adopt is pay some money. Adoptions of whales and redwoods must be renewed every year. Do their parents have to pay more money every year to keep them? And if their parents do not pay the money, will they be thrown out? You might need to mention to your child's teacher that the project is fine, but that the phrase "adopt-a-" is problematic. Such a project may require some sensitive explanation on the teacher's part to a class containing adopted children.

If your child is comfortable with the idea, presentations on trans-culturally adopted children's countries of origin are often well received by children of this age and their teachers. Slides, photographs, crafts, traditional clothes, and foods are particularly enjoyable. This type of presentation can sometimes be worked into social studies units, particularly in schools where there is already a multicultural population. Activities that are aimed at eliminating cultural stereotypes and getting children to see that we are a diverse global community where people have many differences as well as similarities are also useful.

4. Junior and Senior High School

Educational and social demands are much greater on youngsters in junior or senior high school. There are different teachers for each subject, rather than one dependable teacher to report to, and each one has different expectations. School assignments are longer and more complex, and exams are harder. The school itself is much larger, and the number of kids can be overwhelming. There are lockers and gym class, clubs to join, and cliques to figure out. Messages and music from the popular culture and media bombard the youngster. And with all of this, hormones are raging and causing all kinds of bodily and emotional changes.

Since teenagers are more capable of abstract thinking, adoption discussions in school can be more sophisticated. Teenagers know how a girl gets pregnant, and can understand why someone might not be able to care for a baby after it is born. They can also understand the concepts of child abuse and neglect, and that society has an obligation to protect children and provide a safe and secure environment for them. All this being said, adopted teens still may not have worked through all their feelings about their adoption. Precisely because they have more understanding, and because this is a time when sexuality and identity issues surface, their adoptive status may cause them to feel even more embarrassed or rejected than when they were younger. Teenagers sometimes render harsh value judgments about themselves, seeing only the black and white and none of the grey areas. You may still need to help school personnel see that adoption affects adopted children's performance and adjustment at school even when they reach junior high or high school age.

Discussions about adoption at the junior high and high school level fit in well in a family life, health, home economics, or sex education class. Lois Melina suggests that a panel consisting of birthparents, adoptive parents, and adopted teens makes a good presentation for teens. The birthparents and adoptive parents talk about why they decided on adoption and their feelings and experiences. The adopted teens talk about their feelings and experiences about being adopted, hopefully in a positive manner, while realistically discussing the special issues they have to deal with.

How do adopted kids in this age group do in school? Well, there is good news. According to a recent national survey conducted by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota, out of 4,600 adopted teenagers in the United States, 56 percent say they like school, and 20 percent "aren't sure." These percentages are not much different than those of non-adopted teens (54 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Two out of three adopted teens say they try as hard as they can to do their best in school, and three out of four say they plan to finish high school and go to college. Adoptive parents ask about homework and curriculum, help with homework, and attend meetings at school at the same rate as other parents. Thus, despite our worries, and even though some adopted teens struggle because of learning disabilities, school is a positive experience for most of them.

One cautionary note, however, is that this survey focused on teens who were adopted as infants or young children. If the survey included more young people adopted at a later age and as a result of birthparent abuse or neglect and placement in the foster care system, the results might be different. Just because one study finds that adopted kids do okay in high school does not mean that you can sit back and do nothing. The repercussions of adoption can last a long time, and as conscientious parents, you still need to stay involved.

5. Specific Educational Concerns Associated With Adopted Children

A number of articles have been written over the years saying that adopted children are more likely than non-adopted children to have learning disabilities, particularly attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity (see bibliography). It is not within the scope of this fact sheet to try to help you diagnose whether your child has a learning disability. The subject is so complex, and there are many other resources available to inform you about them—your local school district, the State board of education, and national support groups on specific disabilities are a few. For the names and addresses of some support groups for parents of children having developmental and/or learning disabilities, order Information Gateway's free fact sheet "[Adopting Children With Developmental Disabilities.](#)"

It is within the scope of this fact sheet, however, to discuss why experts believe adopted children are diagnosed with learning disabilities at a higher rate than non-adopted children, in order to help you help your child if he is so diagnosed.

One theory explaining why adopted children are diagnosed with more learning disabilities is the genetic component, that is, people who choose adoption for their children or whose parental rights are terminated may themselves have learning problems. Another contributing factor may be the prenatal environment of the child. If a child's birthmother did not have adequate nutrition, or if she drank alcohol, took drugs, or smoked cigarettes during her pregnancy, these environmental influences may have some effect. Abuse or neglect, if it caused physical injury, neurological damage, or emotional distress can also play a role in producing learning disabilities.

Another contributing factor may be that adoptive parents tend to be extremely watchful of their children. If a child shows the slightest sign of a problem, they tend to seek professional help; thus, adopted children may simply be diagnosed as having learning problems sooner than other children.

6. Learning Lag, Learning Problem, or Learning Disability?

For a child to have a "learning disability," specific criteria have to be met. Tests have to be administered and results examined to determine this. Not every learning problem or learning lag is a learning disability. It is important that a complete assessment, including a physical examination, be obtained to get an accurate diagnosis.

Poor school performance certainly is not always due to a learning disability. First, it is normal for children to have a bad day once in a while. Second, there could be many reasons for poor school performance. Maybe your child needs glasses and is not able to see the blackboard. Perhaps he is worrying about an adoption issue or a personal or family problem. In this case, psychotherapy with an adoption-knowledgeable therapist may help to resolve it in his mind so he can settle down to learn. Or your child may have a true attention deficit disorder that can be treated with medication and helped with some extra structure that a knowledgeable teacher provides. Your child may be able to stay in a regular classroom but in a lower grade. "Special ed" is not always needed.

As parents, adoptive or biological, you also have to be realistic. Your child's intellectual ability may simply not be at the level you expected. You may need to learn to accept your child as he is, and not expect a level of school performance that is unachievable. The most any parent can expect is for his/her child to perform at the highest level of which he is capable.

If your child does not qualify for special educational services, you may still want him placed in the setting most conducive to meeting his needs. The best setting may be a smaller class, a class where the teacher is more knowledgeable about your child's particular needs, or a different school. A tutor may need to be involved, or a speech therapist, or a combination of helpers. The most important thing is to get everyone involved to work together to help the child succeed.

Your job as a conscientious parent is to know your child well enough to get a realistic picture of his potential, interests, and motivation for performing in school. You are the one most able to note patterns and changes in your child's behavior. Then it is your responsibility to communicate with the school if you think some type of intervention may be necessary. Consult experts. Consult other parents. Ultimately, however, you must rely on your own instincts as to what is best for your child.

Remember that just because your child was adopted it does not mean that he will have problems at school. And if your child does have learning problems, they may have nothing to do with his being adopted. In either case, it helps to be informed and ready to act if problems do arise.

7. Increasing the Adoption Sensitivity of School Personnel

There are several ways that you can work to increase the sensitivity of school personnel to adoption issues. Maybe you will not be able to accomplish all of these, but hopefully you can achieve some.

Encourage principals, counselors, and teachers to use positive adoption language. To use it, they have to know it. Photocopy the information sheet on page 8 of this fact sheet and give it to as many school personnel as you can.

Donate a book about adoption to your school's library. If your child was adopted from another country, donate a book about the culture of that country. Round up other adoptive parents of children from other countries and have them do the same. Suggest other adoption-related titles for the school's librarian to include in the next order of new books. Bibliographies on books about adoption for children of different ages are available from Information Gateway and a number of other national adoption organizations. The National Adoption Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Adoptive Families of America in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children in St. Paul, Minnesota, are just a few organizations that can provide this kind of help.

Make a presentation about adoption to your child's class or to teachers at a faculty meeting, but think carefully about the messages you want to get across. Perhaps you will want to work in tandem with an experienced adoption worker from a local agency. If the principal wants to know why a presentation on adoption is relevant when only a few children in the school are adopted, point out the similarities between adoption issues and many other kinds of loss issues that children experience.

Provide school personnel with information about adoption conferences being held in your community that are open to the public. Or plan your own! Carol Dolber McMurray, a consultant in Richmond, Virginia (see "Resources" below), was able to develop a full-day workshop about adoption for a Virginia school system's staff development department that educated school personnel system-wide. She then developed a similar course for college students pursuing a degree in education. Imagine what an impact that is making!

Some schools already have support groups for children whose parents are divorced. Suggest the formation of a support group for adopted children and a person to facilitate it.

Volunteer for the family life education curriculum review committee. Make sure that positive adoption messages get into the curriculum.

The staff members at Information Gateway and other national adoption organizations are prepared to help you by disseminating information on adoption to your school system upon request. Feel free to use all of us to help educate your child's educators.

Written by Debra G. Smith, Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1993.

Using Positive Adoption Language

The words we choose say a lot about how we really think. Using positive adoption language (PAL) means choosing words that show respect for birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. When we use PAL, we say that adoption is a valid way to form a family, just as birth is. Both are important, but one is not better than the other.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Birthparent	Real Parent
Birthmother	Real Mother
Birthfather	Real Father
Birth Family	Real Family
Parent	

When Describing Family Relationships

Use terms such as:

"birthparent," "birthmother," and "birthfather" to describe the man and woman who conceived and gave birth to the child. All of us have birthparents, however, not all of us live in their custody.

"parent," "mother," "father," "mommy," "daddy," and "child" to describe the members of the adoptive family. It is not necessary to say "adopted child" or "adoptive parent" unless the situation specifically centers on adoption.

Avoid terms such as:

"real parent," "real mother," "real father," and "real family"—these terms imply that adoptive relationships are artificial and temporary.

"natural parent," "natural child," and "one of your own"—these terms imply that because they are not blood-related, the relationships in an adoptive family are not as strong or lasting as relationships by birth.

When Describing the Adoption Process

Use terms such as:

"make an adoption plan" or "choose adoption"—these terms acknowledge that the birthparents were responsible and in control of their decision.

"parent her child"—when a birthparent decides not to choose adoption.

Avoid terms such as:

"abandoned," "surrendered," "released," "relinquished," "gave up for adoption," "adopted out," or "put up for adoption."

"keep her child"—this implies the child is a possession and ignores the responsibilities of parenting.

For more information on PAL, contact Adoptive Families of America, 2309 Como Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, 612.535.4829 or 800.372.3300; or Patricia Irwin Johnston at Perspectives Press, P.O. Box 90318, Indianapolis, IN 46290-0318, 317.872.3055. Ms. Johnston also has a free article about programs that use "adopt" in the title (such as "adopt a whale" or "adopt a highway") called "Adopt-A-Confusion."

Children and Trauma

By Sandra J. Myers, L.P.C.C., C.S.T., C.T.

Guiding Grace Counseling, LLC

1347 4th Street NW

New Philadelphia, OH 44663

Adults and children alike, face unexpected crises in their lives that are beyond their control or understanding. Crisis and trauma are part of living here on the earth. Sometimes the source of a person's crisis is within his or her own family through divorce, abuse, abandonment, or death of a loved one. Other times, it is a result of manmade or natural disasters, such as Katrina. According to the American Association of Christian Counselors, six out of ten school children will face a significant crisis or loss before they finish high school. If there is trauma associated with the loss, the result is a grief process that could invade their lives for years to come.

The child's grief and/or trauma symptoms can be caused by legitimate or by perceived threats to his or her well being. The media, in their exuberance to give us every detail of a tragedy, is often guilty of traumatizing our children. Many children do not have the cognitive development to understand whether or not a danger is real or just perceived. Thus, they believe it is happening now or could happen to them. Sad to say, many children have a TV in their rooms and can go unsupervised for hours. As a counselor, I have had many children terrorized by horror flicks that are believed to be "just fun." The good news about all this is that children respond wonderfully to the right kind of psychological treatment.

Let's explain a little bit of how our brains process trauma. Our brain is divided into two sides, left and right hemispheres. These two sides have very different functions. When the brain is working efficiently, the left side is the leader. It is logical, verbal, has a strong sense of time, and is organized. The left side stores and processes life events in a very logical manner and does not connect emotion with the event. Often during and after a traumatic event, the victim's left hemisphere does not continue to function well. That results in creating chaos for the right brain.

The right side of our brain is our creative side and has many opposite duties. It likes to have the left side as its leader because it does not understand time, hates schedules, and is basically unorganized. It stores memories in pictures, emotions or by using the five senses (touch, taste, sound, smell, or sight). Since it has no sense of time, it often cannot understand whether an event is happening now or in the past. When that happens after trauma, it is called a "flashback." A flashback happens when fragments or reminders of a past event flash into the victim's brain and he or she feels as though the event was happening again.

In between the two sides of the brain is a handy little brain part called the corpus collosum. It's the messenger between the right and left brain. Research shows us that this brain part does not fully develop until age three. The corpus collosum slows down during trauma and can even be damaged as a result of ongoing trauma. Thus, before, during, and/or after trauma people may describe a feeling of "not being able to think straight." The victim may even forget an event completely, yet be able to recover the memory at a later time when their brain functioning is better.

When the left brain is slowed down and the corpus collosum is not sending clear messages, there may be some troubling results for the victim, such as:

- An inability to “get the story out” verbally
- Lacking a sense of how long an event lasted
- Experiencing a past event in the here and now
- “Avoiding” any reminder of the event or loss
- Hyper arousal states of stress, worry, or fear
- Nightmares or sleep disturbances (too little or too much)
- Irritability and other depression symptoms
- Physical ailments i.e., headaches, body or stomach aches
- Loss of behavior control or unusual behavior (especially in children)
- Feelings of isolation from others
- Overwhelming feelings, senses or images
- Feelings of having no control over one’s life
- Children may be moody, disobedient or irritable
- Children may regress to bed wetting or defecating

These reactions are normal. They are our bodies’ way of saying something is wrong and that we have lived through an abnormal event or circumstance.

The good news is that there are wonderful strategies for helping us recover from trauma and loss. Comfort can come in the form of a friend just listening and supporting us. Proper rest, nutrition, exercise and support from safe people can go a long way towards strengthening you or your loved one. If symptoms persist, there are professionals specially trained in the area of trauma. Be very careful to question the therapist beforehand to see if he or she has specific trauma training. Trauma therapy that re-traumatizes the victim is not helpful and can make the symptoms accelerate. Because of the effects of the actual trauma on the left (verbal) side of the brain, traditional talk therapy can be very difficult for the victim. They may not have the words. Some have described it as “trying to walk to the hospital with a broken leg.” In such cases it is important to use creative (right brain) therapies such as art, play, or music to release the memories in a non-threatening way.

We have seen wonderful recovery results while using creative trauma therapy. Should you need to consult with a caring and experienced professional, Guiding Grace Counseling has one therapist who is a Certified Traumatologist and two additional therapists who are in the training process. Guiding Grace Counseling can be reached at (330) 343-7400 or (330) 343-7411 or via e-mail at guidinggrace1@yahoo.com. Remember, no matter what has happened to you or your loved one, there are those trained to help.

Sharing the Experience: You're Not Alone

Adopting a child is a very personal experience. But it's also an experience that is shared by thousands of families each year. Being able to talk to and share experiences with other adoptive parents can be very helpful throughout the adoption process—from preparing for adoption to handling post-adoption adjustments. The Learning Center, an online service of the National Adoption Center, hosts moderated chats and offers computer-based training, a free online adoption newsletter, and other electronic resources.

COMMUNICATION!

We would love to hear from you . . .

Please let us know of topics you would like to learn about or to share information that you have learned which we could pass onto other families.

*Please e-mail editor
Andy Wing
at*

winga@odjfs.state.oh.us