



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## How Did You Get So Close?

By Holly van Gulden

As a family built through marriage, birth, adoption, and re-aligned through divorce, we have shared many joys and faced many challenges. My children are all adults now. Colin, to whom I gave birth, was our first child and is now 21. Deena, our second and youngest child, came to our family at 4 months old and is now 20. Chad, who joined us last, as an 8-year-old, is now 26. I am proud of each of my children. I am proud not just of what they do, but of who they are. I am proud for their spirits and their souls.

Parenting adult children is different from raising children. Watching my young adult children spread their wings and move into the world is joyous. Yet I am frightened when I think, accurately or not, that they may singe their wings flying too close to the flame. Sometimes being a Mama whose children no longer live at home is lonely. But I feel I am quite close to all three of my children. Like all parent/child relationships, we have had our tense moments. We have had our disagreements and conflicts, but we have always been able, sooner or later, to air our concerns and respect our differences. I firmly hope my children share in my certainty that we will always be able to feel the love, acceptance, and support we have for each other even when we stumble as individuals or as a family.

Many of my peers have observed first-hand my closeness with my children and envy the intimacy of our relationship. Frequently I am asked, "How did you become so close?" I too, have pondered this question a great deal, especially as each adult-child has launched him- or herself out of the family homes (their Dad's and mine respectively) and into the world. Our closeness is tangible. It is the strength, the glue, that binds us together at this phase of life, when none of us live together. We are a family, once defined in part by sharing our days, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, at the same address. With the divorce, our closeness suffered, changed, and eventually, painfully, grew to encompass two homes and the times of separation when the

children lived with their Dad. Now our family is defined by a belonging together that transcends physical and geographical togetherness.

Our journey to this point has been tumultuous. We have faced, endured, and indeed triumphed over many crises, crises that I, as a mother, wish I could have spared my children. As a parent I have made my mistakes; just ask my children. Still, we have grown and flourished. What is our strength? Is it love? In part it is love, but love alone is not enough to bridge the tensions and the trauma of life. From the core of love, built on commitment, comes the willingness to face life's challenges.

I firmly believe that the greatest resource I offer my children is the willingness, though sometimes reluctantly and often with pain, to face the inevitable normal and not-so-normal losses and gains that life sends our way while offering as well the ability to deal with the choices we make. I first became a parent by giving birth to Colin after several miscarriages. I, we, added to our family through adoption twice. We chose to be parents by birth and by adoption. Our children chose neither life nor adoption. They choose instead how to live life and how to deal with the pluses and minuses life presents. Based, I hope, in part on our modeling, our support, and our acceptance, our oldest, Chad, and our youngest, Deena, both of whom joined our family through adoption, choose how to deal with the losses which made adoption necessary for each of them. Colin, our first and middle child, chooses how to deal with the turmoil brought to his life by the entrance of two siblings with special needs and different color skins. He lost his position as the oldest child in our family. He lost much normal, necessary attention when first his sister and then his brother arrived with extraordinary needs and demanding behaviors. Later, when the decision to divorce was made, all three of our children lost their sense of family unity and security. As their Mom, I wish that I could have protected each

of my children from the pain life has brought: the pain of absent and/or abusive birth parents, the pain of competing as a “normal” child with siblings who have special needs, and the pain of divorce. I was unable to protect them from these life experiences. However, I was able to help them, guide them and occasionally prod them to face the pain, anger, sadness, and despair and to learn to mourn their losses.

Adoption offers us as parents the marvelous and painful opportunity to recognize losses in our own lives and in our children’s lives; to support mourning, a normal, necessary, and natural — though painful and scary — process; to model how to integrate losses and move on; to accept people, our children, fully for who they are, not for who we want or need them to be; and to learn to love unconditionally while setting structured limits to guide behavior.

Children who joined their families through adoption did so because they needed parents to take care of them. Whether maintaining contact with genetic kin or not, these children need family because they lost the opportunity to be raised by and with their genetic parents. The need is met, but the losses experienced are not erased. Losses in life, especially important ones, must be mourned. The closeness I share with each of my children is due in part to my/our willingness (sometimes reluctant) to address the issues of loss inherent to adoptive families. Monitoring my own losses;

striving to model healthy acceptance and expression of feelings; trying to accept my children for who they are, not for who I needed, need, or want them to be; embracing their personal histories and heritages has enhanced our relationships. Being present for their grief, their sadness, anger, then yearning for their lost opportunities as well as for their joy, laughter, and triumphs has forged a deep, enduring connection. Striving to accept my children as they are, as each one is, to love the person and guide the behavior, to accept the feelings and to redirect when necessary the expression of those feelings, has offered me a chance to be a better parent and a better person. I have failed many times to achieve my goals. Still, I have tried to recognize my mistakes, not always gracefully, and to apologize and correct them. Accepting my fallibility and concentrating on being an effective parent has allowed both my children and me to grow as individuals and as a family. The issues of adoption, of loss, of attachment with belonging, of identity, individuation, and acceptance are really life issues for all individuals and families. The losses which bring adoptive parents and their children together highlight these normal and critical life issues. Accepting the challenge to address the losses and accept our children as unique beings who need guidance, not molding, can result in stronger, healthier bonds. The blessing of adoption is the challenge to learn. I bless the opportunity that this life path has presented me. My children and I are close because each of us has chosen to value ourselves, each other, and our family.

*Holly van Gulden is the parent of 3 children, two of whom joined her family by adoption. She is the author of [Real Parents](#), [Real Children](#) and [The Dance of Attachment](#).*