



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in *Pact's Point of View* © 1997
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On Being Adopted Older with "Special Needs"

By Carol DeMuth

I have been involved in the field of adoption for over 20 years, but have never considered myself qualified to speak on the subject of "special-needs adoption." Recently, however, I realized that my own adoption falls into the category of special-needs and that some of my memories of moving from foster care to adoption might be of value to others who are considering the placement of an "older child," a child beyond infancy.

In some ways, the circumstances which led to my adoption more closely resembled a typical infant adoption of the 1950s: young single woman in high school becomes pregnant and is sent away to another city to await the birth of the child whom she immediately relinquishes for adoption. What the young woman does not know, however, is that the child has been born with a medical problem, which will require therapy and surgery and will delay her adoptive placement for four years. During those years, she remains in the same foster home and becomes quite attached, especially to the foster mother, whom she calls Grandma.

I actually have very few memories of my time in foster care — being burned by an iron, being nipped by a dog, and swinging on a garden gate in front of the house. Admittedly, I have scars to remind me of these things and am not relying on memory alone. I do, however, rely totally on memory for one of my strongest memories: the image of a woman (who I imagine was my foster mother's daughter), dressed in a white uniform. Before leaving for work every afternoon, she would lean over and kiss me good-bye as I lay down on a big double bed for a nap. I also rely totally on memory for my recollection of the woman's daughter who was about 4 years older than I and who was my constant playmate. I might have had pictures of my foster family, had not some well-intentioned social worker cut these people out of the dozen or so pictures which accompanied me to my new adoptive home. Looking at it all from a child's perspective, I did not understand why people who were such a part of my daily life had suddenly been erased in every way. I wish there had been an attempt to preserve the first four years of my life, both the developmental milestones and the "stories" which are part of every child's early years. Agencies and foster parents are doing more now, with life books, photo albums and developmental calendars, to chronicle a child's life before adoption, and that serves the child well.

When I left this foster home with clothes, a few stuffed animals and all else that I possessed in a cardboard box, setting out with my social worker on the drive to my parents' home. I occupied myself by asking my social worker what happened to someone who ran a red light, two red lights, three red lights, etc. Clearly, I was concerned with what would happen to me if I broke the rules or failed to measure up.

I had been prepared by my social worker for the fact that I would be moving to live with my forever family and I looked forward to it joyfully. But after the initial excitement of new surroundings, new toys, and new people to welcome me, I was not prepared for the sadness that would overcome me. Perhaps social workers today talk more with children about the mixture of feelings they will have, and better prepare adoptive parents to deal with the feelings of loss the child will experience. My parents were somewhat threatened by my foster parents, who had located my new address and sent me cards and letters. A planned exchange of letters might have been more acceptable and might have benefited me as well. I believe children need to know that, while foster parents may want them to have an adoptive family, they too feel a loss when the children leave and that they think about them. Frankly, children don't want to think that it was easy for their birth or foster parents to let them go!

My parents were prepared for a "period of adjustment" which the social worker said would follow my placement. They felt fairly confident, as they were already parents to my sister, who had been born to them seven years earlier. It soon became obvious to my parents, however, that my sister and I were quite different in both temperament and personality. Words and methods of discipline which had worked with my sister seemed to fall on deaf ears with me. My parents had not anticipated the amount of testing I would do, and many tears of exasperation were shed by my mother during those first few weeks. I had my own ways of showing the stress I was feeling: bed wetting, sleep-walking, and throwing up at the dinner table. While these overt signs of stress eased after the first few months, my mother feels it took about a year for me to feel completely at home and not worry about being left or being "sent back." Our continued contacts with the social worker helped with the transition.

A major concern of my parents was that perhaps I was developmentally delayed or a slow learner, as I could not even hold a pencil when I came to them. The more they tried to get me to succeed, the more frustrated I became. Usually, these sessions ended in tears on both sides. My mother has since shared with me that she and my father talked shortly after my placement about the possibility that perhaps this adoption was not going to work out. She was afraid she just couldn't handle me, and my father was not sure it was fair to my sister to have a child who was going to require such special help and attention to succeed academically. The social worker reassured my parents that I had tested "above average" and that my delay was a combination of a lack of stimulation in foster care and the stress I was feeling about the move. She encouraged them to drop their intensive efforts to teach me to hold a pencil, which they did. As it turned out, my grandmother taught me my alphabet, how to spell and how to hold a pencil and write. More patient than they, she created a more relaxed atmosphere, since she was not as invested in the outcome of it all. She made learning seem like fun, and I didn't feel like I had to measure up to any standard. Sometimes older relatives and extended family can be a real life-saver!

One area of continuity for me turned out to be the medical care required after my placement. My parents continued to take me to the same doctor and my mother participated in some of the same exercises with me which had been started in my foster home. I believe this made me feel like something in my life was constant, despite all the other changes. Often, children come into placement with histories of physical and/or emotional abuse, and if at all possible, it may be beneficial to continue their care with the same counselors and medical providers. When changes are so major and losses so profound, even the smallest things kept the same can be quite significant and stabilizing.

While all parents want to experience the joy of naming their child, an older child's name is so wrapped up in his or her identity that it is usually not advisable to introduce yet another significant change. My name at birth was Carolyn Ann. My parents dropped the Ann, and named me Carol Lynn. This made them feel they had a part in my naming while still retaining enough of my original name so as not to be confusing to me. Another thing I was able to hold onto were the clothes that came with me from foster care. I was extremely attached to these clothes, which my mother seemed to understand; when I outgrew them, she cut them down to fit one of my big dolls. They remained a part of my surroundings for quite some time. I still have the dress I came home in.

I have always appreciated my parents' openness about my adoption. Because our appearances are so different (they are Greek and Italian; I am German, English and Irish), I believe the opportunities for openness presented themselves more than in some adoptive families. I could tell from the matter-of-fact way my parents responded to outsiders' questions that being adopted was something positive. What I was not prepared for, however, was dealing with adoption outside my family when I got to school. I could tell that the kids did not share our family's belief that adoption was such a neat thing! I was never actually teased, but I got surprised or pitying looks when I would say I was adopted, and children asked me questions I was not prepared to answer. I talk with parents today about the importance of preparing children to deal with adoption on their own outside the family. It helps when children are prepared for different reactions and some of the questions they might encounter.

My parents had been given very little information about my birth parents and so were unable to answer some of the questions I had growing up — of which I expressed very few. They were not prepared for one of the most difficult aspects of adoptive parenting — dealing with the painful aspects of adoption the child will have to work through. I am sometimes asked what I wish my parents might have done differently, and I always respond with two things: 1) tell me the truth about what they did know; and 2) be more able to tolerate my pain about being adopted. My parents did not want me to suffer from the stigma of illegitimacy which was still very real in the 1950s and were afraid that I would blurt out to others anything they might tell me about my background — which was true! So when I told my mom one day in the car — "I would fight really hard to keep my first baby — how come my 'real' mother didn't fight to keep me?" - she answered, "Well, you weren't their first, they had a lot of other children, and couldn't take care of another one." She followed it up with words of reassurance that I had been loved and that my parents had wanted me to have a better life, and so on. My mother was sensing the pain I was feeling at the time and wanted desperately to make me feel better. Now that I am a parent myself, I understand her desire even better. But the pain of adoption is one of those things that parents cannot "fix." Children sense when a subject makes their parents uncomfortable — even though they may not understand why. Parents help most by staying, listening, acknowledging, and sharing the child's sadness. With help, parents may be able to impart even difficult information in a productive manner.

In closing, I offer these thoughts to parents considering adopting children who are beyond infancy:

- *Children need parents who will accept their past, preserve their history, and help them integrate their pasts into the present. It is not helpful to attempt to have children "put their pasts behind them."*
- *Children and parents will have a period of adjusting to each other. The adjustment may be aided by education and preparation prior to placement, an extended transition into placement and ongoing support after placement.*
- *Children benefit when their parents are open in their communication about birth parents, the circumstances which led to the child's placement, and circumstances which led the parents to adopt.*

I had always thought of adopting children before I thought of giving birth to them. I used to think it was because I came into my family through adoption. It wasn't until my mother came to help me after the birth of my first child that I realized the reason I wanted to adopt was that I thought I owed society a debt for being adopted by such wonderful parents. During my mother's visit, she talked to me in great depth about how badly she and my father had wanted a second child after my sister was born, how they wished they had not missed out on the first four years of my life, and what a need I filled in their lives. My parents filled a need in my life — but I realized that whatever debt I had once felt had been paid.

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