



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

*First published in Pact's Point of View © 1998
Do not reprint without permission.*

Proactive Parenting

How to Recognize Issues and When to Seek Help

by Dee A. Paddock

When I went first through infertility treatments and then through the applications, home studies and other steps of adoption, I was trained, like a well-behaved golden retriever, to respond to whatever others asked, demanded and expected of me. It was a very reactive and powerless process and, and it was in this reactive posture that I began as an adoptive parent. What I know now from parenting three adopted children, and from my work as a therapist in adoption, is that adoptive parents need to be proactive and to anticipate the issues their children may face. We need to try to prepare for our children's adoption challenges and to plan ahead about how we will help as parents. We shouldn't let normal and predictable issues in adoptive family life surprise us or cause us to overreact. In many things adoptive families will face, a competent therapist can provide helpful support.

The number one myth about adoption which can lead to surprises is the expectation that adoption is a wonderful, incredible, admirable, unbelievably magical experience. Certainly I have had moments of that magic in my life as an adoptive mother. But I also know that before adoption becomes a win/win relationship for birth parents, we need to know more about the issues of loss in our families, so our adoption can be more real, normal and less idealized for us and for our children. Adoption can become more normalized when we, as adoptive parents, accept that there are predictable issues and developmental bumps in the road for our children because they are adopted. Adopting children is different from creating children by birth.

So what are the issues? One of the most common issues I encounter in my therapy practice is adopted children who are angry. We don't often acknowledge that while adoption can be a wonderful way to build families, kids don't always like it. They can be angry that adoption happened to them because they want to be like all the other kids, and most children in our communities are not adopted. They can get angry that their birth family felt unable to parent them, and they may fear that they themselves are to blame for that

decision. We're raising children who, from time to time, really wish their lives had turned out differently. Reactive parents panic with angry children and struggle to "fix" that anger. Proactive parents need to know that adopted children naturally get angry about adoption. Proactive parents tell their children that these feelings are okay and that anger is a normal developmental issue in adoption.

But how do you know when anger has become a problem, rather than a normal phase, for your child? When anger is affecting your child's emotional growth, or if it's preventing him or her from building and maintaining relationships with family and friends, it may be time to be more proactive and find an adoption therapist for your family, one who will focus treatment on helping your child find positive and appropriate ways to express adoption anger. My clients tell me that they often hear, "Oh you're in counseling, I'm sorry to hear that." Reactive parents feel judged and guilty, but proactive adoptive parents respond, "No, we're in counseling because that's a normal supportive resource for many families, including adoptive families."

Another important adoption issue for proactive parents is attachment. Today's popular attachment theories view children as either instantly attached or completely unattached, and adoptive parents as attached and unwavering. We need to consider our own attachment to our children as well as their attachment to us. I believe adoptive relationships are ambivalent relationships — "naturally" ambivalent, because they are created out of loss. If we can let our children express some of their ambivalence about being adopted, if we can share with them some of our own mixed feelings about parenting or other issues in our lives, we can strengthen the attachments between us. Maybe I can say to my son, "You know what, it's taking me time to fall in love with you, too." He might then believe that his own struggle to accept and embrace his new parents is okay, that love and trust between us (or anyone) doesn't have to be instant, according to any timetable, or "all or nothing." Neither of us

is bad or weird for having questions or wanting to step back from time to time. In short, if you and your child are sometimes ambivalent about your relationship, you're normal.

But what about when attachment really isn't growing between parent and child and its absence may be causing delays in emotional development, negative relationships and trouble with self-esteem? What symptoms will proactive parents see? You will experience a pattern of rejecting behavior from your child. The closer you try to move in, the more rejecting the behavior becomes: lying, stealing, hoarding, gorging food, aggression, poor eye contact, indiscriminate affection with strangers. Attachment therapy must focus on the family and on the reciprocal nature of healthy attachment, not just on the adopted child. A good adoption therapist can help families strengthen attachments through behavior modification, negotiating and coping skills and family support.

Depression and anxiety are other normal issues for adopted children. Just as anger is an appropriate response to an adopted child's grief, we can also anticipate that our children will experience depression as an appropriate response at one or more points in their development. Our children will show us that they're depressed through their behavior. We may see children having temper tantrums, eating and sleeping problems, substance abuse, academic underachievement, running away, or demonstrating unusual hyperactivity, disobedience, or delinquency. Anxiety may

be a response to the powerlessness and helplessness that children experience as the unwitting victims of adoption plans. Through clinging and demanding behaviors, by being difficult to comfort or satisfy, and by showing tremendous anxiety about, and difficulty with, transitions, anxious children can show you how worried and unsafe they feel. When depression and anxiety don't seem to improve, therapy and medication can be very helpful.

What should you look for in an adoption therapist? You need a therapist who is knowledgeable and experienced in working with the adoption circle— birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted children — and who plans treatments that include all circle members, in spirit if not in person. Effective therapists acknowledge the impact of adoption on families while honoring the reality that we can't focus on adoption as the only defining aspect of our family. Effective therapists help us to normalize the adoption issues we face as adoptive parents and support our need for alternative approaches to improving attachment and enhancing our children's development. Parents striving to be proactive seek to create new norms of healthy, adoptive family life and will need therapists who are well trained to support and promote these norms. Most importantly, adoption therapy must address the on-going issues of grief and loss in adoptive families over the life span. Adoptive family therapy often works best when the family and the therapist create a relationship that can be picked up and put down when adoption needs arise and as the family experiences the calm times and the crisis times of everyday life.

Dee A. Paddock, M.A., MTS, NCC, is a psychotherapist, consultant and speaker who specializes in "Families With A Difference"® issues: Adoptive Parents, Professional training on adoption issues, Adopted People, Birth Parents in Adoption Infertility, Parenting Children with Special Needs, Women's issues, Spirituality. She speaks to many groups and organizations nationally and internationally, and has a private psychotherapy and consulting practice in Denver. Dee is the adoptive mother of three Korean children.