

Still Parenting After All These Years

by Gail Steinberg

My husband and I have been adoptive parents for twenty-five years, and we wouldn't have missed a second if it—not even the terrible teens. We know that this is the family we were meant to have and that a force more knowing than ourselves brought us all together. Perhaps because infertility made it so difficult for us to make our family, we are more aware of what a privilege it is to have a family, how short childhood is...what a miracle it is to be parents.

In his book *Shared Fate*, H. David Kirk was the first to talk about acknowledging the differences in families built by adoption. He recommended that we accept the differences and take a compassionate attitude toward ourselves.

I believe what we must acknowledge are the losses which cause the adoption: infertility and the child's experience of abandonment. Our kids experienced loss before they came to us, and we cannot change that. They were forced to make the transition between their birth mothers—different smells, rhythms, voices—and us, at a pre verbal stage. It takes a lifetime to process this experience. We can't make it not matter.

As adoptive parents, we had extra baggage when making decisions regarding our kids, whether we were conscious of it or not. We had no role models. Even today, very few families are in contact with others experiencing the subtle and not so subtle issues of shared loss. We've found it helps to talk about them.

Three issues seemed to have been big when my kids were teens and still continue to be so. I call them the Fairy Godmother Syndrome, the Mystique of Intimacy, and Plain Old Enabling.

The Fairy Godmother Syndrome

My idealized vision of family pushed me to be a fairy-godmother-mommy driven toward perfection, with little compassion for reality. My husband and I wanted to protect our kids from any possible hurt. Did this rob our children of the chance to learn how to process their own pain? You bet. Did it bring out their anger? You bet. Let me tell you a story.

When our youngest was twelve, her fashion set required skin-tight, low cut, jail-bait clothing. We, with different goals, loudly praised the kind of clothes worn by children in parochial schools. Perhaps you overheard our debates. Reports from China of our conversation were accurate to an amazing degree.

Our desire to protect our daughter was in conflict with her need to grow up. The job of a teenager is to separate from parents. She was only doing her job. My husband and I had to remind each other that our kids have a built-in reason to be angry. Nobody asked them if they wanted to be adopted. It seems that this original, pre verbal injustice fueled a lot of issues in our house. It was no fun to be the target of their anger, but as their parents, we were safe. They knew we wouldn't reject them. That they trusted us to receive their rage was a bonus.

The Mystique of Intimacy

It was a big moment for me when I realized that, despite all the people I've spoken to about infertility, I'd never shared my feelings of loss with my children.

A much deeper sense of the shared fate between us developed after I disclosed my grief to them. Healing is made possible by being seen as a real person, being accepted for all of who we are. I let down my protective shield and began to talk to them about the sadness I sometimes felt when I realized that none of them looks like me. I admitted I had twinges of jealousy when my daughter gave birth to my granddaughter. Sharing my feelings shifted something in our relationship. Something good happened.

Plain Old Enabling

Watch out for this one! I'm talking about all the times when my helping harmed my kids—when I returned their library books, paid their traffic tickets, removed rocks from their paths and stripped them of the joy of saying, "I did it myself." In attempting to keep them from being hurt, an enabler promotes weakness by protecting others from the consequences of unproductive behavior. *Mea culpa*.

On the other hand, my children have grown to be the kind of adults who refuse to take no for an answer, people who have the skills to get what they want from their lives and be happy. And that's a wonderful accomplishment.

As an adoptive parent, it's difficult to remain conscious of these parenting issues. Perhaps the best advice I can give is that what really matters most within the family is the capacity for sharing pleasure. Think about this: If it's not fun, change it.

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