



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2008

Do not reprint without permission.

Director's Corner

Respecting Children's Pain

by Beth Hall

One of Pact's members sent me this short essay. I asked her for an attribution and she responded: "I wish I knew who wrote it. It appeared in a newsletter called 'Healing Woman.' When I rediscovered the framed quote it reminded me of so much that I've read from adoptees about being labeled 'angry' as if that was only a bad thing. The pressure to conform to certain ways of healing from trauma has such negative effects. Claiming the right to naming our experiences and choosing our path is so critical."

Respect My Pain

Respect my pain; it holds my power. It's been the only connection to reality for me, for a long time... the only thing that I could count on to be real after all other perceptions were labeled "crazy" and denied. When I no longer knew who I was or what was true for me, I still knew that I hurt.

Pain has been the only thing that is truly mine. No one could take it away from me as they had my body, my voice, my power of decision, my right to be safe, my right to exist as a separate person, my opinions, my trust, my childhood, my heart and my soul. So don't you dare even suggest that I give it up to you!

I have a right to my feelings and my experience. If it makes you uncomfortable, that's your problem. Don't tell me to notice beauty and strengths and all the positive things in my life. In time, at my own pace, I will notice them but that is not my focus at present.

I need to perceive my reality for myself and know the truth of it from within. Telling me from the outside what I should be perceiving only slows my progress, takes away my power to notice and choose, and invalidates my struggle to be real and honest. Instead, ask me how it is for me and be willing to listen to my perceptions, no matter how different they are from yours. It's okay that

I'm different, that's part of being real.

If you truly want to help, acknowledge my struggle and achievement.

When I read this passage, I think immediately of all the adopted adults who have described the experience of trying to express their pain to their adoptive parents, only to have their parents react by behaving personally hurt or defensive. This kind of interaction creates alienation instead of intimacy. Children feel cut off from parents who cannot or will not hear them share something that the parents themselves have never experienced. The voices of these adopted adults have inspired what I believe to be the best of my own parenting.

How do we as parents hold painful truths for our children, without giving them a message that imposes negativity or makes them feel alone?

Try to recognize your child's emotions, which often emerge in oblique ways. Helping children attach words to their feelings, especially strong ones, is one of the most important parenting jobs we do. In young children, feelings are often expressed in fantasy play or story-telling (which is why it can be extremely valuable to encourage this kind of play). If a young child says, "The baby feels bad because the mommy doesn't want to keep him," adoptive parents too often want to jump in to fix the pain. Instead, consider looking at the negative emotions as an opportunity for learning and intimacy. "It sounds like the baby thinks that only a mommy who doesn't care wouldn't keep her baby." Listening with empathy means mirroring feelings, acknowledging the sadness. "I think the baby feels sad. Does he feel mad too?" Later, after the feelings have been acknowledged, a toddler can accept a new point of view, so long as it doesn't dismiss his own. "Even though I think there are other reasons that mommies can't keep their babies, I can understand why that would make the baby feel bad.

I want to make sure the baby knows that he is loved.”

The older our children get, the more we can and must acknowledge their feelings first, before moving into problem-solving mode. “I see how hard this is for you. I want to help and be with you, but sometimes it seems like it is hard for you to share these kinds of feelings. I have some ideas about strategies that might help, but I need you to tell me if you want to hear them, because it is really important to me that you know that I am not trying to ignore your feelings.”

In the end, this is an aspect of parenting that has some similarity to potty training or getting our kids to eat their vegetables. We can control the support and guidance we offer, but ultimately even very young children control what goes in and what comes out of their body (most of the time!). A parent’s role is to help them notice what their body is telling them and to have healthy food options available when they are hungry. In the same way, we need to be available when they need us to help them process feelings, by helping them notice triggers for their feelings and having healthy advice at the ready WHEN THEY ASK FOR IT rather than WHEN WE ARE READY TO GIVE IT.

And isn’t it the hardest job in the world to just BE with our children, with anyone really, when they are sad or mad or just feeling bad? But does anything feel better than being seen and heard when we ourselves are feeling pain? Being close and staying connected is all about listening more than speaking, recognizing more than diagnosing. For many of us, this kind of listening doesn’t come naturally. We can practice using phrases such as:

- “How did that make you feel?”
- “That sounds really hard.”
- “It sounds like that made you very angry.”
- “That must have been disappointing.”
- “That is really sad, isn’t it?”
- “I can tell that really hurts you.”

We can also practice being comfortable with silence, not rushing in to fill every pause with anxious, well-meaning words. Wait a moment, count to ten, see if your child has more to say. It is probably not a coincidence that many important conversations take place while driving in the car, walking down the street, or in the dark at bedtime—moments when we are more likely to allow some quiet, thoughtful time.

Parents sometimes worry that by taking this approach, they may be introducing “negative” emotions that their children aren’t otherwise feeling. I have found that with my own children, as they got older, I could be braver in naming possible responses they might be having—and that hearing these possibilities spoken out loud worked really well for them. I remember saying to Sofia on occasion, “We haven’t talked about [your birth mother] in a while, I just want to remind you that it is OK with me if you love her. I know you love me too.” Most times she would listen with little visible response, or ignore me, but one time when she was about seven, she burst into tears. That was a clue! Something was going on, and my words gave her permission to share a piece of it with me. Generally kids don’t go to emotional places that don’t resonate with them. Don’t be afraid to introduce complexity – children will grab hold of it when they are ready.

If you know that you have trouble listening to and processing negative emotions, perhaps due to your own family history, you may need to do extra work on your own in this area. I believe the effort is well worth it. Through your words and actions, you can teach your children that they are being heard, that they can trust you with their most difficult, fragile emotions. Ultimately, respecting children’s pain not only gives them crucial support for their own emotional truth, it teaches them how to create and sustain healthy, honest, respectful relationships. What better gift could you give your child?