



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

*First published in Pact's Point of View © 1995*

*Do not reprint without permission.*

# Fostering the Autonomy of the Adopted Person

by Susan Harris

Fostering the autonomy of a child is no simple task. When one adds to the equation the variable of adoption, the task becomes that much more complex. The adoptive parent not only provides for the child just as a birth parent does, s/he must provide loving attention and astute guidance and care to the needs which stem from being surrendered.

After encountering so many adopted people who spoke of either having an extremely enmeshed relationship or a detached relationship with their parent(s), I became interested in the "dance" (the "dance" between the child and the parent). For example, how does the parent nurture, love and protect the child without making the child completely dependent while at the same time attempting to foster the autonomy of the child without making the child feel rejected, unloved or abandoned? The task for the parent is making the "dance" flow as smoothly as a waltz. There are no simple answers or easy solutions to this question; however, the following general principles can help create an atmosphere that fosters the autonomy of the adopted person:

- Be capable of acknowledging and willing to acknowledge various ways an adopted person can be affected by difference.
- Differentiate the parent's needs from the child's needs.
- Provide an atmosphere of unconditional love for the adopted person.
- Provide an atmosphere that reinforces the reality that the parent(s) will not abandon or reject the child regardless of the child's behavior.

- Do not overly-protect the child.
- Provide a setting where there is ongoing dialogue regarding race and ethnicity issues, so that the child does not feel as if s/he has to protect the parent's feelings.
- Provide a setting where there is ongoing dialogue regarding the birth family, so that the child does not feel as if s/he has to protect the parent's feelings.
- Get as much of the child's birth information as possible and become comfortable sharing that information with the child over time.
- Make sure the parent does not give the child mixed messages about race or search.
- Live in a community that validates the child's existence.

These approaches are just a few ways in which parents can assist in helping their children develop into whole, healthy, autonomous human beings. The challenge is grand. In an atmosphere of love, consistency, positive structure, patience and a clear understanding of the lifetime issues of adoption, the outcome for the parent and child can be wonderful.

*Susan Harris 1995 all rights reserved  
Not to be printed without permission*

*Susan Harris, a Clinical Social Worker who is also a member of Pre and Post Adoption Consulting Team in Boston, is a reunited transracially-adopted person.*