pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Four Lifelong Issues in Adoption

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Response to Loss

→ denial → appropriate grieving & healing → hypersensitive responses to minor events

Response to Risk Taking

→ refuses to take any risks → able to take appropriate risks → reckless: takes unnecessary risks for fun

Response to Change and Structure

→ resists all change, clings to tradition → enjoys tradition and change → seeks change for its own sake, resists structure

Response to Connection

→ maintains relationships at all costs → builds healthy relationships → resists forming relationships

When children are placed for adoption they must make an adjustment into the new world and experience of the adoptive family they join. They can come to a place of feeling very comfortable in the new world in which they now live; they can be happy and adjusted. But they are also likely to carry some feelings and emotions of loss forward into their life experiences and choices, because no matter how happy they may be to become members of this new family, they must first lose the connection of being raised in their birth family to be available for adoption, and in some cases children have experienced additional losses of other caregivers or homes (and homelands) to get to this permanent placement.

Often parents ask us if children who are adopted at birth carry the experience of loss and readjustment. We believe yes. There is a growing body of evidence that we are all impacted by and maybe even conscious of certain experiences and emotions in utero. Certainly the infant is adjusted to the schedule of the birth mother, the sound of her voice, the rhythm of her life. The fetus is impacted by her stress level, what she eats, whether she is hot or cold…all kinds of things. an enormously large and scary process for an infant. If the cues that that infant had adjusted to in utero are removed and changed, where is the comfort that he or she needs? This infant, if adopted, must learn not only to adjust to the world, to breathing, to sucking, to digesting, to pooping, this infant must also learn to find comfort and familiarity, yes safety, in someone and in cues that are not initially comforting or familiar. They can and almost certainly will—children are resilient and they have an intense desire to thrive and be loved and cared for. But they will have to make an extra adjustment that many infants do not. Because they will make this adjustment at a preverbal level, this loss is deep and profound. We do our children great disservice if we discount this reality and its impact on their being. On the other side, this is not a wound from which they cannot or will not heal. In fact this experience will sometimes serve them as a strength, a positive outcome which can be applied to other circumstances. But first, parents must focus on the reality of the loss, begin to understand it, and then use it to become effective parents to their children.

There are at least five issues that we feel comfortable identifying as lifelong issues for adopted children: 1) response to loss, 2) risk taking, 3) response to change, 4) comfort with structure, and 5) need for connectedness. Each of these issues are significant in all of our lives but for adoptees they are likely to hold extra significance. Remember, adopted children have experienced loss at a pre-verbal stage. This means that their continued responses may well be visceral rather than overt. There are no set patterns, no pat answers. But as you parent and think through issues that your children are faced with and responding to, you must always take inventory of these issues and ask the question of their impact. The goal is to empower our children to understand who they are and learn to use their innate need and response to stimuli to their own advantage.

There is another significant point here. We have focused on children and the issues they are grappling with because of their own experience. If parents are to be effective, they must also inventory themselves and understand the issues that they bring to this experience and those issues identified as lifelong issues in adoption. Parents need to assess their own response to those same issues so they can make informed decisions and parenting choices. Let's look at some examples. Parents who come to adoption through infertility have experienced the loss of their biological or fantasy child. If their adopted teenager now responds to the loss of a close friend either by shutting down in total denial of their feelings or with a strong overreaction, as if the world is ended, how much of that parent's own experience will influence their ability and ideas about how to help their teen? The truth is that infertile parents' shared experience of loss can serve as a bond and bridge to understanding to their child's experience of loss and the commitment and new options and connections that can grow out of each loss.

But for that to happen, the parent must be conscious and aware or he or she may be fooled into misinterpretation. The child that refuses to let go of a relationship no matter how inappropriate may be responding to a visceral need for connectedness to the human race that somehow seems lost because of the separation at birth from their genetic family. By the same token a parent who hasn't worked through their own losses may see the child's appropriate separation from parents as a threat that triggers their fears that they aren't their adopted child's "real" parent. If you are part of a blended family, with birth and adopted children, who has not experienced infertility, you too may be responding to your own need to redefine connectedness and relationship because of the makeup of your family. You may have a need to overemphasize or underemphasize the significance of connections, especially biological ones. Unless you are quite self-aware, this will likely spill over into your response with your child's issues around connectedness.

The point is simply this. Parenting is a series of events and stimuli that children and families need to respond to. If you try to deny the significance of adoption as one of the issues that colors your child's and your family's response to the world, then you and your child are trying to respond with both hands tied behind your back. If, on the other hand, you are looking at the issues that adoption adds to the mix of who children are and who parents and families are as well, then you and most importantly your child will learn to respond to the world with the strength that comes from knowing themselves, recognizing their own issues, and hands at the ready to grab whatever opportunities come their way.