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

First published in Pact's Point of View © 1994
Do not reprint without permission.

Recognizing Loss

by Becca Martinson

At the tender age of 30 months, my daughter has long since shown a fascination for who belongs to whom. One week after starting a new day care at age 23 months, she was already identifying which mom and which dad belonged to which child, acting as town crier at the end of each day: "Megan! Your Mama's here!" "Jason! Your Daddy!"

Virtually every day since she began to talk, my daughter has verbally reminded anyone who would listen that I am, indeed, her Mama. "You Bryn's Mama," she'll say, for the umpteenth time that day. "Yes, I'm Bryn's Mama." "Not Kyle's Mama." "No, not Kyle's mama." "Not Briana's Mama! "My Mama." I note in her voice a combination of self-reassurance, possessiveness, and wonder. "Yes, Bryn's Mama," I'll reply, "forever and ever."

It's so hard at this age (probably at any age) to identify which of my child's issues are adoption-related. Being adopted is part of who my daughter is. She will never be not-adopted, so I'll never be able to compare her behavior to other circumstances.

Just before her second birthday, my daughter switched from her infant day care to the toddler/pre-school day care. She had been going to her infant day care virtually her whole life, starting with part-time and working up to full-time. Georgia, the infant caregiver, was a wonderful, loving, energetic woman who grew as fond of Bryn as Bryn did of her. Still, at the age of 23 months, Bryn clearly needed more challenge, more stimulation, and the company of older kids. She "graduated" at approximately the same time as the other three children at her day care. At the time, what seemed important was that she make a comfortable transition to her new day care, and she did. Within only a few days she'd begun to become attached to her new caretakers, and immediately loved the new space, the new activities and all of her new friends.

About five weeks later, we went back to visit Georgia. At first, Bryn clung to my leg and hid her face. We were surprised at how shy she had become in such a short period of time. But soon, it became clear that shyness had nothing to do with her behavior. Her lower lip trembling in pain and anger, Bryn couldn't even look at Georgia. How could this person she loved so much have disappeared so totally and so suddenly from her life? Georgia and I were totally taken aback. Never did we expect such depth of feeling, such complexity of emotions from such a young child. We felt terrible for not having anticipated the intensity of her reaction. But none of Bryn's fellow graduates had seemed to experience even a twinge of difficulty in the separation. So what made Bryn's experience different?

Again, I'll never know. It could just be due to the fact that she's a very sensitive child (which she is). Or, I suppose, it's possible she has a heightened reaction to separation due to the fact that she's adopted. I've read theories about how all adopted children, even those adopted at birth (as my daughter was) experience a long-lasting sense of separation. On some levels that makes sense to me. When Bryn came home to my house, she had to adjust to a completely different set of sounds and voices and rhythms than she'd experienced in utero.

In the days and weeks after our first reunion with Georgia, I put pictures of Georgia and Bryn around the house and worked on giving Bryn language to express her feelings and her hurt. We talked about Georgia a lot and began visiting her on a regular basis. Seven months later, Bryn is finally comfortable talking about Georgia (she calls her "my Georgia") and visiting her.

This week I got an unfortunate chance to "do it better" when my daughter's day care unexpectedly closed. This time I'm gathering pictures of her playmates and care-givers and making appointments for get-togethers so Bryn isn't left wondering what happened to everybody. I hope things are less painful for her this time, but it's probably not entirely a bad thing that we're getting to do it over again. We can probably both use the practice because somehow, I expect that separations will be an issue for the rest of Bryn's life - and thus for mine.

Becca Martinson is a former editor of Pact Press and former member of the Pact Board of Directors. She is the single adoptive mom of Bryn and Shea.