

Parenting the adopted child
Robert Allan Hafetz MS MFT
Education Director

There can be no more difficult a task in classic parenting than raising an adopted child. Unlike a child one has given birth to an adopted child comes with additional trepidations that few parents are prepared for or even aware of.

An adopted child comes to the family with memories of grief, a fear of attachment, and a feeling of inarticulate loss. The first years often appear to be normal lulling the parents into a false sense of security. Then when the child reaches the age of approximately six years a more complex pattern of self-exploration begins. This is when the child notices that he doesn't resemble his family while his peers look like theirs. This is also when the "who is my real mommy question" arises. Profound emotions that recall the separation of the first mother rise to the surface causing discomfort for the adopted child. Emotions such as grief, shame, anger, and a feeling of isolation can be experienced together, without any distinction among them. Children have limited ability to cope with uncomfortable emotions and will employ one of two options; they can act out and misbehave or they can repress their feelings and become compliant. This is the period when many problematic behaviors begin and the parents are often confused and bewildered by their child's behaviors.

Further complicating the adoptive family system is a memory process that is common among adoptees but little known by therapists, social workers, parents, and the adoptees themselves. There is a disconnection in adoptees between their emotions and their ability to identify them. This is the core issue in adoption and it is the foundation of most of the problems that occur in adoptive parenting.

Infants only a few days old can record long term memories. *"Infants do not think but they do process emotions and long term memories are stored as affective schemas"* (Geansbauer, 2002). An infant separated from its first mother will record a memory of that event. Memories of this nature are called preverbal memory representations and they have a unique quality that must be understood by adoptive parents. *"Infant memories are recalled in adulthood the same*

way they were recorded at the time they occurred. It is difficult possibly impossible for children to map newly acquired verbal skills on to existing preverbal memory representations”

(Richardson, R., & Hayne, H. 2007). An older adoptee who recalls an emotional memory will experience it the same way it was felt as an infant. Adoptees can have troubling memories that they cannot identify in words. This means that they cannot understand what they are feeling and without a vocabulary they cannot even ask for help. This leads to a cognitive /emotional disconnection. *“Children fail to translate their preverbal memories into language”*(Simcock, Hayne, 2002).

An adopted child will learn from his family that he is wanted, loved, belongs, and that they will never leave him. His emotional memories will trigger fears that are exactly the opposite. An adopted child can know he belongs but feel isolated. He can know that he will never be abandoned but feel that he will. He can know that he is whole but feel that a part of him is missing. He can know that he is loved but feel that he is not. This incongruence between thoughts and feelings becomes the foundation of poor attachment, problem behaviors, power struggles, poor academic performance, and attachment regulating behaviors mystify parents. The struggle to bring thoughts and feelings into coherence can be a lifelong task for adopted children. It doesn't have to be this way.

Enlightened parents can create a nurturing healing environment within the family if they are aware of this process and are proficient in how to deal with it. The knowledge needed to raise an adopted child is not readily available and few effective parenting programs can be found.

I have created a comprehensive one day workshop that incorporates the latest evidence based knowledge on human development and attachment. I have combined my insight as an adoptee with my education as a marriage and family counselor to create an effective user friendly workshop for adoptive parenting. I am devoted to making the adoptive family succeed to the best of its ability. A family is the best place for an adopted child to grow and heal.

Contact for time and dates:

Robert Allan Hafetz MS MFT

16 North Franklin St. 107

Doylestown, PA 18901 267-337-4548 roberthafetz@verizon.net

References

Gaensbauer, T. (2002). Representations of trauma in infancy: Clinical and theoretic implications
23(3), 259-277. doi:10.1002/imhj.10020.

Richardson, R. & Hayne H. (2007). You Can't Take It With You: The translation of memory
across development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *16*, 223-227.

Simcock, G., Hayne, H. (2002). Children fail to translate their preverbal memories into language.
American Psychological Society *13*(3), 225-231.