

# UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

November 2009

*Gabriel, age 7 is waiting...*

# UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



Jade, age 14 is waiting...

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If you are interested in any of the waiting children you see in this publication, please contact The Adoption Exchange at 801-265-0444 for more information.

NOVEMBER 2009  
Kathy Searle, Editor  
Lindsay Kaeding, Design Director

To submit articles or for a subscription, call (801) 265-0444 or toll free outside Salt Lake County call (866) 872-7212. This publication is funded by the State of Utah, Division of Child and Family Services. The Adoption Exchange prepares and prints the newsletter and the Division of Child and Family Services mails the publication. The mailing list is kept confidential. One can be removed from the mailing list by calling: (866) 872-7212 or 265-0444 within Salt Lake County.

# Who Will Cry for the Little Boy?

By Antwone Fisher

(Printed with permission.)

Who will cry for the little boy?  
Lost and all alone.

Who will cry for the little boy?  
Abandoned without his own?

Who will cry for the little boy?  
He cried himself to sleep.  
Who will cry for the little boy?  
He never had for keeps.

Who will cry for the little boy?  
He walked the burning sand  
Who will cry for the little boy?  
The boy inside the man.

Who will cry for the little boy?  
Who knows well hurt and pain  
Who will cry for the little boy?  
He died again and again.

Who will cry for the little boy?  
A good boy he tried to be  
Who will cry for the little boy?  
Who cries inside of me.

# Ambiguous Loss **Haunts** Foster & Adopted Children



From Winter 2009 Adoptalk

Adapted, with permission, from two articles by  
Jae Ran Kim

Ambiguous loss—a feeling of grief or distress combined with confusion about the lost person or relationship—is a normal aspect of adoption. Parents who adopt children with special needs may feel ambiguous loss related to what the child could have been had he not been exposed to toxic chemicals in utero, or abused and neglected after birth. Birth parents experience loss when a child is removed from their home.

For children placed in foster care, this type of loss tends to happen over and over again, and is incredibly hard to process. To help children better manage these repeated traumas, foster and adoptive parents, as well as child welfare workers, must be sensitive to the role ambiguous loss plays in foster and adopted children's behavior.

## **Ambiguous Loss and Child Welfare**

Ambiguous loss occurs in two situations: when a person is physically present but psychologically unavailable, or when a person is physically absent but psychologically present. The latter type is most common in foster care and adoption.

Children who enter foster care lose contact with their birth parents, physical surroundings, and sometimes their siblings, and enter an extremely envious situation. Will the child be reunited with the birth parent and siblings? Will the parent fight to get the child back? How long will this take? Will the child remain with the same foster family until he goes home, or will he move again? What if the child can never go home?!

A child who is placed with a family of a different race loses something else. As editors Sheena McCrae and Jane Macleod point out in *Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections*, transracial families cannot hide. The anonymity of being in a regular family vanishes when the "conspicuous family" goes on any public outing.

School can be another source of unsettling grief. When a child moves among several schools, both social and educational continuity is broken. The child loses chances to develop lasting friendships and keep up with peers academically. If a child has FASD or another learning disability, or simply missed a lot of school earlier in life, school is an environment in which the child can feel out of place, cut off from same-age peers and their activities, or even looked down upon. Youth may mourn and be angry that prior circumstances or disabilities now keep them from fitting in at school and having a positive school experience.

The symptoms of ambiguous loss often mirror those of post-traumatic stress disorder. A child will commonly experience:

- difficulty with changes and transitions, even seemingly minor ones
- trouble making decisions
- psychic paralysis or the feeling of being overwhelmed when asked to make a choice
- problems coping with routine childhood or adolescent losses (last day of school, death of a pet, move to a new home, etc.)
- a sort of learned helplessness and hopelessness due to a sense that he has no control over his life
- depression and anxiety
- feelings of guilt

Even children adopted before age one, who have no conscious memory of their birth parents, may experience symptoms of ambiguous loss as they approach their teens. In *Ambiguous Loss: Coming to Terms with Unresolved Grief*, author Pauline Boss states, "Although the birth mother is more conscious of the actual separation than is the baby...the birth mother is thought about often and kept psychologically present in the minds of both the adoptive mother and the adopted child."

Children whose adoptive parents rarely discuss the absent birth parents or birth siblings feel the loss more keenly. In a study of young adult adoptees published in a 2005 issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, sociocultural researchers Kimberly Powell and Tamara Afifi correlate heightened ambiguous loss symptoms with children and youth who lack information about their birth parents and have lived with a family who failed to honor the adoptees' connection with their family or culture of origin.

As Pauline Boss suggests, "the greater the ambiguity surrounding one's loss, the more difficult it is to master and the greater one's depression, anxiety, and family conflict." This holds true for the following reasons:

It is hard to resolve grief when one does not know if the loss is temporary or permanent. Children in foster care, and even some in adoptive families, often feel great ambivalence about accepting a new family when there is even the slightest chance the birth family may still reclaim them.

Uncertainty about losses prevents children from easily reorganizing roles and relationships in their family. Children who served as their younger siblings' caregiver in the birth family, for instance, can find it exceedingly hard to relinquish that role in a new family. In fact, separation from the birth family may make a child even more determined to fulfill the task of caring for her siblings.

Clear, symbolic rituals do not mark foster care and adoption losses. Society recognizes death through funeral ceremonies, but there is no somber equivalent to observe losses caused by separation from the birth family. Knowing that a parent or birth siblings are still somewhere out there can be confusing and anxiety-inducing for foster and adopted children. Will they run into members of their birth family by accident? Will their parents or siblings contact them someday?

The lost relationship is not socially acknowledged or is hidden from others. For adoptive families and their relatives and friends, an adoption is cause for celebration. Children who are adopted, however, may feel confused or guilty about expressing happiness over being legally disconnected from their birth family. Extended family members and members of the community may not fully appreciate that adoption is directly tied to losing one's birth family.

Others negatively perceive the circumstances that led to the loss. When children are removed from families in which they are neglected or abused and placed with foster or adoptive families, many believe that the children are being rescued. Children, however, even when parents mistreat them, often feel a fierce loyalty to their birth families. After all, life with the birth family may be all they know. It is familiar. Social workers and foster/adoptive parents who believe children should be grateful for being placed in better functioning families need to understand how very differently children in foster care may view their situation.

### **How to Help Children Deal with Loss**

When children—like those in or adopted from foster care—experience multiple losses, the psychological damage may extend well into adulthood. Ambiguous loss can erode trust, and adults who cannot trust typically struggle with relationships—sometimes avoiding closeness to forestall loss, sometimes clinging to a bad relationship due to deep-seated abandonment issues. The sooner children can address issues raised by ambiguous loss, the more likely it is they will learn better ways to deal with the fallout.

Below are some suggestions that can benefit children troubled by loss:

Help your child to identify what he has lost. In addition to losing birth parents, he may have lost extended family members and old friends, 5

his home and neighborhood, contact with people who share his heritage or looks, his family surname, or even his home country and native language.

Give voice to the ambiguity. Acknowledge and validate your child if she expresses feelings of loss. Show that you understand and sympathize.

Redefine the parameters of what constitutes a family. Boss writes, "Acting as if the membership list of an adoptive family is etched in stone may in the end be more stressful than explicitly recognizing that the family has some ambiguous boundaries."

Give your child permission to grieve the loss of his birth family without guilt. Suggest times and places where your child is welcome to express his grief, and ways in which he can grieve. Talking, journaling, drawing, or venting feelings through intense exercise are just a few options.

Create a "loss box." Debbie Riley, a therapist and author who works with adopted teens, guides clients as they decorate a box into which they can put items that represent things they have lost. By creating the box, youth participate in a ritual that acknowledges their loss, and construct a controlled vehicle for revisiting their losses in the future.

Include birth parents and other birth family members in pictorial representations of the adoptive family tree. One option would be to depict an orchard where trees grow side by side. The birth family, former foster families, or other significant people in the child's life can be other trees in the same family orchard.

Be conscious of how certain events—birthdays, holidays, adoption day, etc.—may trigger intense feelings of loss. Add or alter family rituals to respect the child's feelings. On birthdays, for instance, you could add an extra candle to the cake in memory of the birth family. Or you might make a point of saying something like, "I bet your birth mom and dad are thinking about you today."

Keep your expectations reasonable. A child's need to grieve over ambiguous losses will not be fully cured, fixed, or resolved in any predetermined time frame, if ever. Let your child know that feelings related to these losses will come and go at different times in her life, and provide a safe person to whom she can express those feelings.

Model normal, healthy responses to loss. If you or your parenting partner suffers a loss, share your feelings openly. Let your children see you mourn, so they can learn how you express sadness and anger about loss. For boys, seeing a grown man cry can be especially instructive.

Losses may loom especially large when children approach adolescence. Missing pieces of their history make the task of developing a confident self-identity much more complicated. Some will feel that they are destined to make the same mistakes as their birth parents, so foster and adoptive parents must be especially careful to avoid unflattering comparisons between the teen and a birth parent, and stress that a large part of an individual's identity is a matter of personal choice, not some preordained fate.

Parents must also recognize that, by parenting a child who has experienced staggering losses, they will realize losses in their lives too. Support from other parents who are struggling with similar issues is key. Conversations with other foster/adoptive parents may bring to light a new way to approach issues linked to ambiguous loss, or just help you to feel less alone. Loss is an inevitable part of adoption; acknowledging the role of ambiguous loss in children's perceptions and actions is the first step in the long journey of healing.

"From *Adoptalk*, published by the North American Council on Adoptable Children, 970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, MN 55114; 651-644-3036; [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org)."



**CHADD OF UTAH**

## **AD/HD Help!**

### **Parent to Parent: Family Training on AD/HD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)**

*A series of 7 two-hour classes for anyone who wants to learn about AD/HD*



#### **Class Series Endorsed by:**

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit Disorders (CHADD) of Utah; Utah State PTA Education Commission; The Utah Education Association (UEA); The Edward G. Callister Foundation; Intermountain Healthcare; The Intermountain Pediatric Society; Valley Mental Health; Davis, Weber and Ogden, Murray, Carbon, South San Pete, San Juan, Wasatch and Washington School Districts.

1. **Overview of AD/HD**
2. **From Assessment to Treatment**
3. **Developing Parenting Strategies & Positive Behavior Interventions- Behavior Management Part I**
4. **Strengthening Family Relationships – Behavior Management Part II**
5. **Educational Rights for Your Child with AD/HD**
6. **Building an Education Team: Bridging the Gap between Home and School**
7. **Resiliency, Teen Challenges and Future Success**

**From September 2009 to May of 2010, the class series will be taught in 11 areas of the State of Utah.**

**Cost:** \$60/couple (\$50/couple for CHADD members) for the entire series to cover the cost of materials. Limited scholarships are available based on financial need. **Pre-registration is required.**

Check CHADD of Utah website for updated class schedules: [www.chaddofutah.com](http://www.chaddofutah.com) or call Linda Smith at 801-292-2816 (For classes taught in Spanish please contact Julie Moreno at 272-1051 or at 867-2375)

#### **Class Location & Registration Contact Information:**

- (1) **Salt Lake City** – classes are held each Fall and Winter on a rotating basis at Valley Mental Health Children's Outpatient Services Building, Suite A170, 1141 East 3900 South. in Salt Lake from 6:30 to 8:30 P.M.  
**Contact:** Susan McDonald—467-8553.
- (2) **Davis County** – classes are held each Fall and Winter at the Davis School District, Kendall Building, Personal Development Center 75 East 100 North, Farmington, 6:30-8:30 P.M. **Contact:** Tammy Naylor 801-292-6233.
- (3) **Weber/BoxElder**—Class are held each Fall, Winter and Spring from 6:30 – 8:30 P.M at different schools in the Ogden area. **Check CHADD of Utah web site for current location. Contact:** Ed Williams 801-452-4589
- (4) **Utah Valley** – classes are held at American Fork High School, 510 N. 600 E., American Fork, 7:00-9:00 P.M  
**Contact:** Melanie Hatch at 801-789-3952.
- (5) **Cache County** -- **Contact:** [bsteiner.therapy@gmail.com](mailto:bsteiner.therapy@gmail.com) 435-232-8419
- (6) **Heber** – **Contact:** Lindsey Knight [lindsey.knight@hotmail.com](mailto:lindsey.knight@hotmail.com) 435-654-8060
- (7) **Price** – **Contact:** Debbie Henrie [henrie130@emerytelcom.net](mailto:henrie130@emerytelcom.net) 435-637-0824
- (8) **Vernal** – **Contact:** Shanna Wheeler [fishwheeler@ubtanet.com](mailto:fishwheeler@ubtanet.com) 435-790-5658
- (9) **Blanding** – **Contact:** Kristi Dewitt [csdewitt@hotmail.com](mailto:csdewitt@hotmail.com) 435-678-2054
- (10) **Manti** – **Contact:** Lorna Larsen [lorna.larsen@ssanpete.k12.ut.us](mailto:lorna.larsen@ssanpete.k12.ut.us) 435-851-0142
- (11) **St. George** – **Contact:** Jenni Heiner [jheiner@infowest.com](mailto:jheiner@infowest.com) 435-986-9001

Contact Linda Smith, Director of Education for CHADD of Utah at [klsmith9134@comcast.net](mailto:klsmith9134@comcast.net) 801-292-2816 if further information is needed.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities announces new, improved

# LD.ORG

*The New LD.org -- Designed with Parents in Mind*

We know today's parents are overwhelmed -- a struggling economy means parents are working harder than ever to make their time and money stretch further, while juggling to balance the needs of their most important responsibility -- their children.

NCLD has designed the new LD.org to help. LD.org offers busy parents a "one-stop shop" -- answering their questions about learning disabilities (LD) and providing free, helpful resources for their entire family as they move along their "LD journey."

## **SPEND LESS = GET MORE**

The new sections on LD.org mean parents spend less time online, while getting all the LD information they need.

### **LD Basics**

Provides "The Basics" about various types of learning disabilities and helps to make sense of the latest research surrounding LD and learning.

### **In the Home**

Offers real-life suggestions to help parents manage the day-to-day challenges and expectations of having a child with LD.

### **At School**

Information that teaches parents how to advocate for their child within the school system by empowering them with information about their child's rights.

### **College and Work**

Provides helpful strategies and tools for parents whose children are transitioning from high school to work or college.

### **On Capitol Hill**

Highlights education and civil rights legislation that directly impacts students with LD and their families.

### **Publications and More**

Parents, students and education professionals alike can access all of NCLD's high-quality resources about learning disabilities and other important related issues for free on LD.org

Visit the new LD.org today! Browse our topics, print or download our publications, sign up for our newsletters. ***Get informed on LD.org!***

# Heart Gallery

Finding Homes for Utah's Waiting Children

## HEART GALLERY 2010 UNVEILING

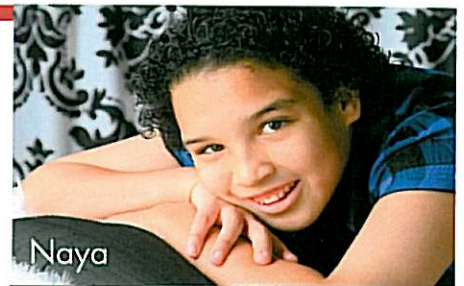
DATE: November 4, 2009

TIME: 6:30 pm

PLACE: Capitol Rotunda

AGENDA: Join The Adoption Exchange and local Government Officials as we unveil the portraits of children ready for adoption. Information will be available on how to inquire and adopt a child from foster care.

COST: Free



Naya



Moses and Aria



Danielle



Zackery and CeCi

 Utah  
Heart Gallery

 The  
Adoption  
Exchange  
Connecting Children and  
Families Since 1983

to view the children's portraits visit:  
[utdcfsadopt.org](http://utdcfsadopt.org)  
and click on "Utah Heart Gallery"

## BOOK REVIEW

By: Angie Rhodes

### REAL PARENTS, REAL CHILDREN: PARENTING THE ADOPTED CHILD

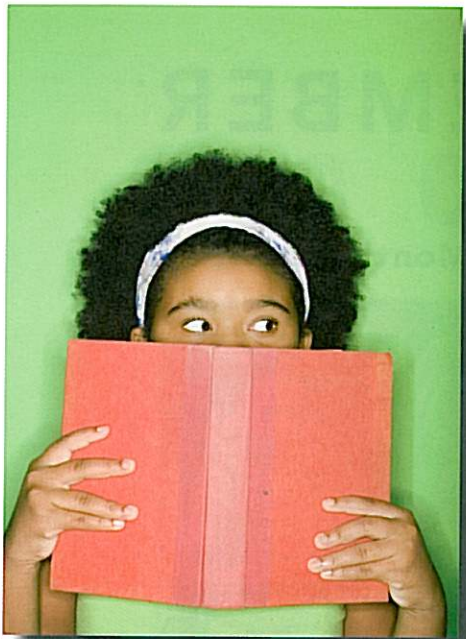
Authors: Holly van Gulden and Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb

This is one of the most comprehensive, well-written guides for adoptive families in print. The information has been thoroughly researched. Most chapters include a bibliography for more extensive reading on certain sub-topics. Section One includes a fascinating chapter on bonding and an eye-opening chapter on grief and loss for adoptees and adoptive parents. It also contains other chapters on such educational topics as identity and the adopted child and pre- and post-placement stress. Section Two follows the adoptee through different ages and developmental stages: early infancy, the older infant, the pre-school years, and on up through middle childhood and adolescence. After first giving the fundamentals of normal development, the book then teaches how each of the elements in Section One impacts the adoptee's life at each stage. It offers practical advice on how to help your child deal with emotional difficulties that may arise as well as how to talk to your child about adoption in each developmental phase.

Because of the empowering information found within its pages that can help one become a better parent, this book should be required reading for anyone involved in adoption. Whether you are just starting the adoption process or your family is complete, whether you adopted a newborn through a domestic agency, a toddler from Russia, or an older child through foster care, you will gain valuable knowledge and understanding.

**CHECK OUT THIS BOOK AND OTHERS LIKE IT FROM UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION LENDING LIBRARY. [WWW.UTDCFSADOPT.ORG](http://WWW.UTDCFSADOPT.ORG) OR 801-265-0444**





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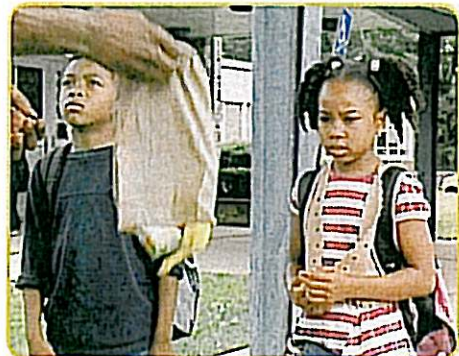
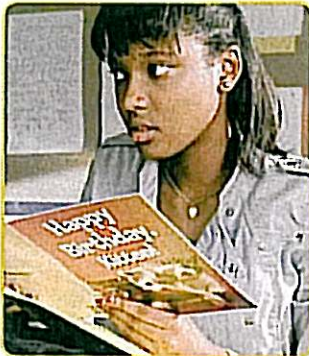
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Phone, Fax or Mail in order:  
The Adoption Exchange  
975 E Woodoak Lane, Suite 220  
Salt Lake City, UT 84117  
801-265-0444/ 1-866-872-7212 (toll free in state only)  
Fax: 801-265-0834

# Answering the Call

# NOVEMBER 2009

## National Adoption Month Activities



## You don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent.

Photos are from the national adoption recruitment campaign of the Children's Bureau, the Adoption Exchange Association, and AdoptUsKids, in conjunction with the Ad Council.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p><b>1</b></p> <p>Join forces with your local or regional adoption exchange to plan events for National Adoption Month.</p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p>Create a theme tailored to your community to help further your recruitment message.*</p>	<p><b>3</b></p> <p>Find foster care graduates who will help spread the message about the need for foster and adoptive parents.</p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p>Raise a banner over a busy street with the address for an adoption website.*</p>	<p><b>5</b></p> <p>Create pocket-sized photostating books to make it easy to share information about waiting children.*</p>	<p><b>6</b></p> <p>Host a family movie night and provide information and training to help families move through the adoption process.*</p>	<p><b>7</b></p> <p>Organize a matching event where prospective adoptive parents connect with waiting children by doing activities such as crafts or games together.</p>
<p><b>8</b></p> <p>Display a Heart Gallery photo exhibit of waiting children and agency contact information in busy local businesses.</p>	<p><b>9</b></p> <p>Partner with local banks in a "Children Are Banking on You" campaign to recruit families for children.*</p>	<p><b>10</b></p> <p>Coordinate with CASA to create a public display of paper stand-ups that represent local children waiting for families.</p>	<p><b>11</b></p> <p>Engage a local theater troupe to help adopted young adults tell their stories.*</p>	<p><b>12</b></p> <p>Sponsor a bowling party for prospective adoptive parents to meet waiting children.*</p>	<p><b>13</b></p> <p>Train local agencies to make quality videos of children waiting for families.</p>	<p><b>14</b></p> <p>Arrange for an electronic scrapbooker to show families how to make videos to share with waiting youth.</p>
<p><b>15</b></p> <p>Use targeted marketing to make the most of your recruitment dollars.</p>	<p><b>16</b></p> <p>Connect with a local university for help in evaluating your recruitment efforts.</p>	<p><b>17</b></p> <p>Use Information Gateway's Logic Model Builder to create a plan for postadoption support to share with potential funders.</p>	<p><b>18</b></p> <p>Encourage a large company in your area to send adoption information with employees' pay stubs.</p>	<p><b>19</b></p> <p>Meet with local Parent Teacher Associations to discuss adoption topics in schools and present information on waiting children.</p>	<p><b>20</b></p> <p>Encourage TV and radio stations to run the new AdoptUsKids PSAs (a partnership of the Children's Bureau and the Ad Council).</p>	<p><b>21</b></p> <p>Celebrate National Adoption Day at your local court; invite media to cover it.</p>
<p><b>22</b></p> <p>Partner with the community to form a choir of children waiting for adoptive families to recruit more families for youth.</p>	<p><b>23</b></p> <p>Connect with area agencies and pool resources to get more from your recruitment efforts.</p>	<p><b>24</b></p> <p>Visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website for successful recruitment strategies.</p>	<p><b>25</b></p> <p>Tell prospective parents about <a href="http://www.AdoptUsKids.org">www.AdoptUsKids.org</a>, where they can find adoption information.</p>	<p><b>26</b></p> <p>Enjoy Thanksgiving with your family!</p>	<p><b>27</b></p> <p>Ask a local artist to create a pin with your agency's logo and give information about adoption and waiting children with all sales.</p>	<p><b>28</b></p> <p>Host a Parent Appreciation Dinner, invite speakers to talk about adoption, provide child care, and feature pictures of waiting children.</p>
<p><b>29</b></p> <p>Ask local businesses to sponsor a golf tournament to raise money to recruit new families.</p>	<p><b>30</b></p> <p>Update your organization's website with clear links to <a href="http://AdoptUsKids.org">AdoptUsKids.org</a> and State adoption photostating services websites.</p>	<p>*Submitted by adoption organizations named on <a href="http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/nam">www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/nam</a></p>				

### Adoption Month Resources:

**AdoptUsKids**

[www.adoptuskids.org](http://www.adoptuskids.org)

- Adoption Month Toolkit
- Answering the Call Publications
- Training and Technical Assistance

**Child Welfare Information Gateway**

[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

- National Adoption Month Website
- National Foster Care & Adoption Directory
- Adoption Assistance by State

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



CELEBRATE NATIONAL  
ADOPTION AWARENESS MONTH  
WITH



SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14,  
2009

11:00 AM—2:00 PM

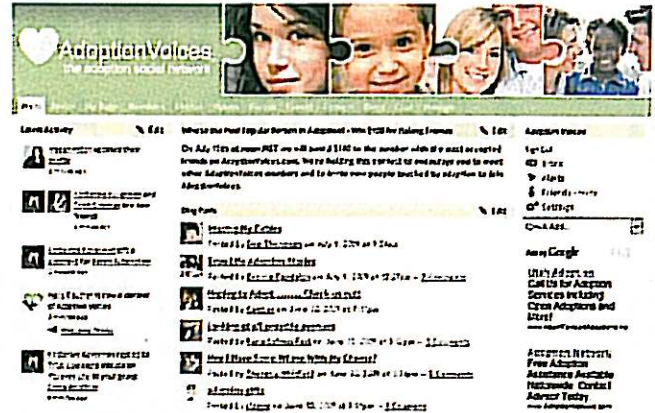
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LOCATED AT 75 SOUTH FORK DRIVE  
DRAPER UTAH

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**Fun Center**

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1 PASS VALID TO CHOOSE FROM THE  
FOLLOWING ATTRACTIONS  
GO KARTS, SLICK TRACK, ROOKIE  
GO-KARTS, ROCK WALL, LASER TAG OR MAXFLIGHT  
ROLLER COASTER SIMULATOR.

# AdoptionVoices.com – The Adoption Social Network

In June 2009, an new adoption social network was born. [AdoptionVoices.com](http://AdoptionVoices.com) is like Facebook for adoption. It allows people who are touched by adoption to easily connect and build relationships with others who have similar adoption interests. Members can share blog entries, forum posts, videos, photos and events. Members can even create and join sub-groups related to their adoption connections and interests.



At the time this article was written, AdoptionVoices.com had been live for less than two weeks. However, in that short time, this adoption social network has already had 1,100+ registered members, 1,000+ photos posted, 100+ videos posted, many forum discussions, 67 events added, 71 sub-groups created, and 79 blog entries posted. It's off to a great start.

You can join this new adoption social network for free and share your adoption voice at [AdoptionVoices.com](http://AdoptionVoices.com).



## Save the Date...

Date: Thursday, November 5<sup>th</sup>

Time: 7:00 p.m. ~ 9:00 p.m.

Place: Business Alliance Building – DATC

450 S. Simmons Way

Kaysville, UT 84037

- The Utah Fetal Alcohol Coalition and FASD Center for Excellence are sponsoring a Parent Seminar
  - Dan Dubovsky from the FASD Center for Excellence will be our speaker

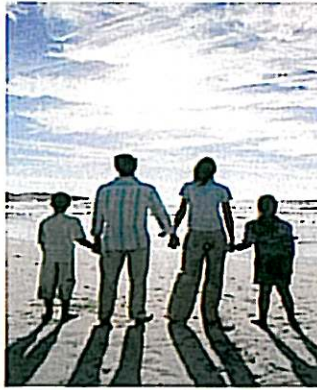
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To register contact: Kellie Butcher Email: [kellloggs182@yahoo.com](mailto:kellloggs182@yahoo.com)

Please include name, phone and number attending.

Or call at: 801-663-5562

The Utah Valley University  
2009 Conference on Adoption



## Exploring the Miracle

Utah Valley University Sorensen Student Center

November 2, 2009

9am to 4pm

So that all families can participate, this event is being offered free to the public.

Presentations include informative sessions for professionals, those considering adoption, placing and adoptive families  
CEU's are available

Keynote presentation by Michael McLean

**UVU** College of  
HUMANITIES  
& SOCIAL SCIENCES  
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY



**UVU** UTAH VALLEY  
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# Holidays Can Bring Up Lots of Emotions

By Lois Melina

Holidays are times when families gather to celebrate in traditional ways. Each of these elements of holidays—family, tradition, and recurrence—contributes to the joy. But each can also contribute to stress. In adoptive families, the associations that different family members bring to these elements may create different expectations or more intense feelings.

Our culture has created the expectation of Hallmark holidays. Families are seldom greeting-card perfect, and adoptive families are no different. Yet, during the months and years we waited for our children, the fantasy of our ideal family may have crystallized into a holiday image. I remember one Easter Sunday, a few weeks after my husband and I had filed our application for our first adoption. As we sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast, we watched across the street as a four-year-old girl hunted for colored eggs. All our longing for a child was wrapped up in the joy of seeing a little girl in a ruffled dress and ski parka race around her yard clutching an Easter basket. Is it any wonder that, once we had children, our Easters would include an egg hunt that had never been part of my family tradition or my husband's?

When a ritual carries more meaning for some members of the family than for others, it may cause stress. My hus-

band shared my association between an Easter egg hunt and my dreams of what my family would be like. But what if he hadn't? If he'd made even a casual comment that perhaps the children were getting too old for that sort of thing, it would have struck me as gross insensitivity.

Other aspects of "family" can also cause stress. If extended family members make insensitive remarks about adoption or a child's ethnic or racial group, if they favor the cousins who were born into the family over the ones who were adopted, or if they have little patience for the behaviors of children with special needs—all of these things can cause hurt feelings. Parents don't look forward to spending the holidays biting their tongues, but at the same time, they may not want to disrupt the occasion to deal with the problem either.

For infertile parents, seeing nieces and nephews who look like their parents can trigger feelings of loss they thought they had overcome. For children, the emphasis on being with family members whom they don't see often can remind them that they have a biological family somewhere else. This can be a tremendous loss for children old enough to understand that they have birth relatives, but who have no memory of them. Yet, we hold the hope that the holidays are a time for adopted children to celebrate being part of their new families—not

grieve for families they don't remember.

### **The Impact on Older Children**

As adopted children reach adolescence, they begin to question what makes them part of a family and sometimes have difficulty believing that they are authentic members of their extended family. Family traditions that are distinctly ethnic may be problematic for the adoptee who does not share her adoptive family's heritage. For example, non-Jewish children adopted into Jewish families may question whether their own religious identity is valid.

Children adopted at an older age may have memories of holidays with birthfamilies, or traditions that aren't practiced in their adoptive homes. And they may have unrealistic expectations that they will hear from their biological relatives at holiday time. Holidays are usually times of indulgence for children, so they may be disappointed if all their wishes don't come true.

Some families find that holidays are stressful because it is difficult to make arrangements to spend time with all the grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Open adoptions add more layers of family; more relationships to negotiate; more expectations to satisfy.

### **A Time of Mixed Emotions**

Because the holidays are idealized as times of joyful celebration, people can be surprised that they feel sad, or unsupported if they express that grief. Parents may come home from a family gathering reluctant to admit feelings of loss at not having a child who looks like they do. Children may take to heart the admonition You'd better not pout, better not cry, believing Santa Claus will not come to their house if they are sad.

Claudia Jewett Jarrett, author of *Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss*, says the emphasis on "being good" at Christmas can stir up children who believe they were placed for adoption because they were bad. In the book *How It Feels to Be Adopted*, author Jill Kremetz quoted one boy who thought if he was bad he would get coal in his stocking and be sent back to his birthparents.

Children who were removed from their biological families due to abuse, neglect, or substance abuse may associate the holidays with traumatic times. Rather than approaching them with a sense of joyful anticipation, these children may unconsciously associate holidays with disappointment or violence.

### **How to Minimize Holiday Stress**

Acknowledge that holidays can bring up a variety of feelings. Take the opportunity to talk with your children about them. Use stories, like Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, to discuss how people sometimes feel they don't belong be-

cause they don't look like those around them.

Let go of any expectations that your family needs to experience holidays in a certain unvarying way to be a real family. You may find it works better for your family to rendezvous with a few relatives at a ski resort and save the big family gatherings for less emotionally charged holidays, such as the Fourth of July.

Admit that holidays don't have to be "perfect." All the food that grandma used to make might not get made-but you can still have a meaningful celebration. Talk openly with your children about expectations you have for the holidays and how you may change them or let some go. Tell them you feel sad about some of them not being realized. Be sure to take ownership of those feelings so that your kids don't feel they have to make up for what you're missing. The point is to model the reality that holidays sometimes don't live up to our expectations and that we own the expectation.

Sustain a relationship with your child's birthfamily in an open adoption all year long so that the relationship doesn't depend entirely on the holidays. With open communication all year long, and opportunities for contact throughout the year, there may be more flexibility during the holidays.

Examine the patterns of your holidays. Rather than repeating those patterns each year and hoping for a different outcome, change the patterns. Develop rituals and traditions to fit your family, even if they may be different from the rituals and traditions you had growing up or those you imagined your family would have.

Recognize that the human experience brings sadness as well as joy. Children could not experience the benefits of adoptive families without the loss of the birthfamily. Often, adoptive parents would not experience the joy of family without the pain of infertility. Holidays are not failures if they bring both sadness and joy. The abundance and joy of the first Thanksgiving would not have happened had there not been near starvation the previous year. The deliverance of Hanukkah would not have happened without there first being death. A Redeemer's birth would not be celebrated had there not been human failings.

*Lois Melina, author of the highly regarded books *Raising Adopted Children* and *Making Sense of Adoption* has published *Adopted Child* newsletter since 1981. Melina's newsletter has gained an international reputation as a trusted resource for adoptive parents. © 2001 Copyright Adoptive Families Magazine.*

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