



UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

MAY 2013

Preston, age 16 is waiting...

Photo by: Brekke Felt

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

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QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



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

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one Bite at a Time

By Carrie Dahlin

I set the table for dinner anticipating another meal with Katie crying and not wanting to eat. She is our 2-year-old foster daughter with a long list of special needs. As we sit down at the table I start trying my usual tricks to try to get her to eat some food, she finally takes a bite. I clap with excitement and give her praises. She responds with a huge grin.

So, as she takes each bite, my husband and I clap and cheer along with our three other children. I didn't get to eat much because I was spending my time clapping after every time her fork headed toward her mouth. By the end of the meal my husband and I look at each other and laugh. We both realize it was one of the silliest meals we have had in a long time.

Later that night I was standing at my kitchen sink cleaning up from our meal listening to the kids play in the living room and I feel a bit of success. Even if it was just one meal, Katie ate an entire plateful and we had a fun as a family. I wonder what it would be like if we eagerly clapped after every bite, while out at a restaurant? Having children with special needs means maybe you don't always do things the typical way, but it doesn't mean you can't try to have a good time through the hard moments. Earlier in the day I felt defeated but one dinner of excitement made me feel like I could do this, I could get through these new struggles if I can be creative and have patience with my children.

I decided a while ago to keep a journal. I want to keep reminders of our accomplishments and moments of joy. There will be more days to come when I feel drained and out of ideas. I want to remember the moments that we finally had a break through.

I got this idea after I ran into a friend at the store. She hadn't seen Katie in almost a year and she was near tears after seeing how much progress she had made.

My friend was so shocked by Katie who is social and talkative, even if you couldn't understand all of her words. Katie was able to ride in the cart and engage with out being in a constant state of distress.

I was so struck by her reaction. I realized I see Katie on a regular basis and don't always notice the changes. I wanted to remember her reaction as a reminder that there is hope. Katie will continue to grow and improve. Some day she will eat her meals and we will think back to the days we clapped through dinner. It is easy to get discouraged when we go through a trial that lasts longer than we think it should. We can get stuck focusing on what isn't happening or going our way. Instead, we should keep our eyes focused on our goals and progress we make.

There are days when I am so thankful that we only take life one bite at a time. I don't know if I could handle more than that. These children we take into our homes come from such tragedy and we have the responsibility to walk through it with them in a way that shows them we accept them right where they are. It is my hope that I will continue to cheer Katie on, even in the little things.



Healing the Invisible Wounds: Children's Exposure to Violence

A Guide for Families

Young Children, Ages Birth–6

It can be hard to know what's bothering a very young child. Even children in this age group who know how to speak may not be able to express what's wrong.

Young children who have seen or been hurt by violence may:

- cry more than usual
- be difficult to calm
- change eating habits
- change sleeping patterns (have difficulty falling asleep; wake up several times during the night)
- scream and panic during sleep—but appear awake be quieter or less responsive than usual
- startle more easily
- become more fearful
- have trouble separating from Mom or Dad or another caregiver
- have more temper tantrums
- have bad dreams
- complain of headaches or stomachaches
- repeatedly hit, grab, or shove other children while playing
- ask many questions about the event
- go back to behaviors they've already outgrown (for instance, a 5- or 6-year-old might wet the bed, suck his thumb, or talk like a baby)



Don't get hung up on ticking things off the list above. Look for changes in a child's behavior. Is he acting differently?

What if a child is too young to tell you what's wrong? Try to understand his feelings from his behavior. For example, when a child is clingy, it might be because he's afraid of being alone or worried that something bad may happen to you.

Sometimes it's hard to tell what's normal and what's not. For example, preschoolers often fight, pinch, or hit each other. But if a child does these things more and more often, to the point that he can't learn or make friends, his behavior might point to a bigger problem.

Here are some ways you can help young children express what they're thinking and feeling:

- Provide comfort with a security blanket, a pacifier, or a special toy.
- Ask questions that will help them tell you their feelings, for example, "You look scared. Would you like me to hold you?" "You look sad. What would help you feel better?"
- Use storybooks to help you talk to them about how they're feeling.
- Let them draw pictures showing how they feel or what they know. Ask questions about what's in the pictures or why they used certain colors.

Here are some things you can do to help young children feel safe and in control:

- Soothe them by rocking, holding, or singing.
- Follow their leads (if a child wants to be picked up, do so).

- Allow children to show fear and provide support by staying close and remaining calm.
- Tell them that what happened is not their fault.
- Keep a regular schedule or routine or establish new, consistent routines.
- As much as you can, don't let them watch violent TV shows, read about violence in books or magazines, play violent video games, or listen to violent music.
- Don't leave them alone or with people they don't know well.
- Answer questions without giving more information than needed. You don't have to explain everything, as you would to an adult. For a 4-year-old, for example, it is enough to say, "Sometimes grownups do bad things and that can be very scary."
- With any change or transition, such as when people come to visit, let children know what will happen ahead of time.
- Let them make decisions such as picking what clothes to wear, books to read, or games to play.

School-Aged Children, Ages 7-11

School-aged children sometimes feel guilty about violence they witness or experience, particularly if the violence occurs at home or against a close friend. They think that if they had done or said something differently, the violence would have lessened. They also feel bad about not being able to protect their parent or another loved one. Some children are more sensitive to home or community violence than others. Some things that can increase the impact of violence on a child in this age group include:

- direct involvement in the violence
- exposure to violence for a long time
- the child or a family member has had mental illness or behavior problems
- ongoing stress such as starting a new school, having family financial difficulties, or not having friends

If school-aged children see or are hurt by violence, they may:

- feel responsible for or guilty about the event
- suddenly want to be left alone
- seem more sad than usual
- become very active or hyper
- become more aggressive or fight a lot
- seem "spacey" or distracted
- become startled by loud noises
- return to old fears or develop new ones
- not want to go to sleep
- have nightmares
- eat more or less than before
- get in trouble more often at home or in school
- have trouble concentrating
- complain of headaches or stomachaches



Again, don't get hung up on ticking things off the list. Look for "unspoken" signs that something is wrong. Have the child's behavior, appetite, or sleep patterns changed? Does she seem anxious or upset?

A child's symptoms can become worse when she moves to a new home or school. The problems may also worsen when one of her parents dies, leaves, or is taken away from home.

It's important to listen to school-aged children and tell them that it's OK to feel the way they do. Doing so will keep them from:

- thinking that the violence is normal
- becoming confused and blaming themselves
- thinking that it's not OK to ask about violence or discuss it
- learning to deny their feelings or hold them inside
- feeling that they are crazy
- feeling lonely and isolated from their friends
- forming unrealistic beliefs about the causes of the violence, such as blaming themselves

Here are some ways you can help school-aged children express what they're thinking and feeling:

- Listen without judging.
- Respond calmly, without becoming anxious or angry. For instance, you might say, "I'm so sorry you had to see me get hurt. I had no idea you were so sad about it. It must have been very hard for you."
- Help them identify feelings. For instance, you might say, "What happened today in front of your school seemed pretty scary to me. How did it make you feel?"
- If you don't know the answer to a tough question, admit it. Then help children find the correct information and talk about it.
- Write down children's specific worries and talk about each one.
- Encourage children, when they're ready, to write or draw their thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Here are some things you can do to help school-aged children feel safe and in control:

- Tell them that what happened is not their fault.
- Help them find a safe place they can go when they feel overwhelmed (a cozy reading corner, a quiet place to listen to music).
- Make a plan for how they can respond to "triggers" (loud voices, sounds, or actions that remind them of the scary events). They might plan to listen to music or take a walk.
- Enroll them in a mentoring or out-of-school program where they feel safe.
- Be careful about what you say in front of them. Don't make hateful or angry comments.
- Respond to their questions clearly and appropriately for their age. For example, talk about concrete things their school is doing for safety, such as not letting strangers in the building.
- Let them make decisions such as where to do homework, what books to read for pleasure, and what activities to do.
- Model or teach conflict resolution skills such as listening to the other person's side in an argument and then coming to an agreement and expressing feelings rather than hitting.
- Don't make promises you can't keep. Instead of saying, "I'll always keep you safe," say, "Let's make a plan together to help you feel safe when you're scared."
- Help them make a plan for staying safe the next time violence happens. (See box on page 3.)

Teenagers, Ages 12–18

You may not be the first person a teenager will turn to when he's upset. Teens are most likely to talk with their peers. Don't take it personally. Be mindful of your own reactions to the event and of the fact that adolescents need the support of calm caregivers. They may also fear that, as an adult, you will discount or underestimate the significance of their feelings. The best you can do is listen, remain open and available, and let them know you're there for them.

If teenagers see or are hurt by violence, they may:

- talk or think about the event all the time
- say the event didn't happen
- use violence to get what they want
- rebel at home or in school
- stop being concerned about how they look
- complain about being tired all the time
- refuse to follow rules
- spend more time away from home
- not want to leave the house
- get scared when thinking about the event
- have nightmares
- have difficulty paying attention in class or concentrating on work
- do risky things (such as driving fast, jumping from high places)
- want to seek revenge
- change friends or dating relationships abruptly
- become perpetrators or victims of violent dating relationships*
- drink and use drugs*
- start skipping school*
- think about wanting to die or committing suicide*
- break the law or destroy things *

**Take these actions seriously and seek professional help.*

A teenager may feel embarrassed to talk about what happened, but he won't want you to know that. Try to make him feel comfortable about talking to you. But don't force him to talk if he doesn't want to. Don't downplay his feelings by saying things like "Don't worry" or "Cheer up." Try not to make judgments or give advice. Instead, let him know you're there to help him find solutions.

Here are some things a teenager might do if you try to talk to him about violence:

- ignore you
- change the subject ("I'm hungry")
- blame others for the violence (for instance, by saying, "If you were nicer to him, he wouldn't hit you" or "You should have done what he said" or "Those kids were just asking for trouble")
- run to his room and slam the door
- say, "Don't worry," and try to cheer you up
- try to hit you
- listen quietly without saying anything
- say, "Whatever"

Don't take any of these responses personally. Try some of the strategies listed below. *Remember that healing takes time, and teens need you to be patient.*

Here are some ways you can help teenagers express what they're thinking and feeling:

- Reach out to teens by asking, in private, "what's wrong?" Use conversation openings such as "You haven't seemed yourself lately," "You seem kind of down," or "Is something bothering you?"
- Encourage teens to talk about their feelings and tell their side of the story.



- Expect some difficult behavior but don't let teens break the rules out of sympathy.
- Respond calmly to what teens have to say.
- Don't judge.
- Keep anniversary reactions in mind. For example, a teen may feel upset on the date the violence occurred, even years after the event.
- Show you understand by repeating in your own words what they said or felt. Let them know that the feelings are normal. For example, "It sounds like you really hated Dad when he was hitting you."
- Help them identify and label their feelings. For example, "I can understand why this made you angry."
- Praise their efforts to communicate their thoughts and feelings. For example, tell them, "I'm glad you are talking with me about this."
- Respond supportively when they tell you about the event. Don't disagree or try to lessen the intensity of their feelings.
- Encourage them to write about their thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Encourage them to talk to people with whom they feel comfortable. They might choose to confide in close friends or a trusted teacher, coach, or counselor.

Here are some things you can do to help teenagers feel safe and in control:

- Be extra patient. They may be distracted and forget to do chores or turn in school assignments.
- Give straightforward explanations, whenever possible, for things that may worry them.
- Find out what's making them feel unsafe and help them make a safety plan. (See box on page 5.)
- Support them to engage in comforting routines—listening to favorite music, playing sports, keeping a journal, looking at photographs. These can bring a sense of hope.
- Provide them with safe and fun physical activities to release the tension. Good choices of activities include those that they do well or enjoy.
- Enroll them in programs that teach conflict resolution skills.
- Don't make commitments you can't honor. Don't say, "You'll be safe from now on." Instead you might say, "Let's make a plan to keep you as safe as possible."
- Suggest concrete things they can do. You might start by saying, "I'm sorry that this is happening to you. You're not alone. Let's take a look at your options."
- Help them think of positive ways to keep busy, such as playing sports, going out with friends, or making art or music.

JAMAL, AGE 17 IS WAITING...

Jamal is an outgoing and athletic teen who enjoys being active. Being respectful and caring, and finding humor in life situations are just a few of his best qualities. Making and keeping friends comes easily to this fantastic young man. Two of his hobbies are BMX bike racing and playing baseball.

An eleventh grader this year, Jamal would do well in an academically supportive environment. He is benefiting from counseling, which will need to continue after placement.

Jamal is a great guy with a caring personality who is in need of a loving, stable, and secure home. If your family can offer him these things, we urge you to inquire. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

This is a LEGAL RISK ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT. In a legal risk adoptive placement, it is expected that the family will eventually adopt the child, even though the birth parents' rights have not been fully terminated at the time of placement.



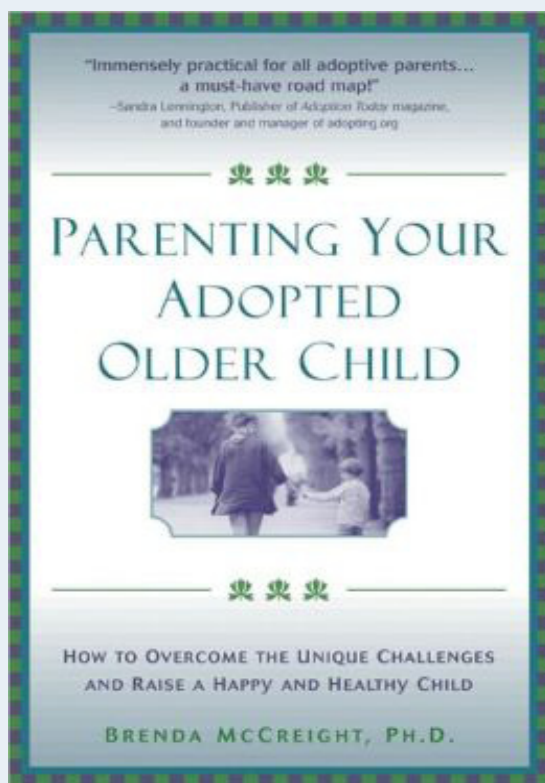
Contact The Adoption Exchange at 801-265-0444 for more information.

Parenting Your Adopted Older Child:

How to Overcome the Unique Challenges and Raise a

Happy and Healthy Child

by Brenda McCreight, Ph.D. New Harbinger



For families adopting an older child, Brenda McCreight's new book is a godsend. Parents can refer to it again and again as they cope with the initial adjustment and address issues that can have a lifelong impact on the entire family.

McCreight offers comprehensive information about what parents can do on their own, or in addition to psychotherapy—presented in a way that non-specialists can grasp. Her chapters invite parents to read a few pages at a time, think about the ideas and suggestions, and find a way to apply them.

McCreight addresses many challenges that are not easy to face, such as wrongful accusations of sexual abuse. She encourages parents to come to terms with their own personal and family-of-origin issues so that they can cope better with the complexity an adopted older child brings to the family circle.

This book does not address challenges specific to parenting the newly arrived, internationally adopted youngster. However, the far-reaching issues of RAD, FAS, and PTSD are all included, and the information is both accurate and full of practical suggestions. This book is a superb resource for anyone adopting an older child.

Reviewed by Jane Brown, M.S.W., creator of Adoption Playshops for Children.

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REACTIVE ATTACHMENT DISORDER: *A New Understanding*

Reactive attachment disorder (RAD) is a mental health diagnosis listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IVTR)* under disorders usually first diagnosed in infancy, childhood, or adolescence. RAD was initially introduced to the mental health community some 20 years ago. Since that time, much of the information regarding this disorder has painted a dismal and often dangerous picture of these children. Books and articles have compared children with RAD to serial killers, rapists, and hard-core criminals. Intensive and often physically aggressive therapies have been developed to treat these children. Additionally, unconventional parenting techniques have been taught to parents in order to control these children—children referred to as “disturbed” or “unattached.”

The main premise of RAD is that the child cannot socially connect or attach to others in interpersonal relationships. Behaviors inhibiting attachment to caretakers are often demonstrated by children diagnosed with RAD. Some of the behavioral symptoms published in literature include the following: oppositional; frequent and intense anger outbursts, manipulative or controlling; little or no conscience; destructive to self, others, and property; cruelty to animals or killing animals; gorging or hoarding food; and preoccupation with fire, blood, or violence.

Wow! Read that list again. Many of these behaviors sound downright frightening. It is hard to imagine that a child can do these things. Yet, while these behaviors certainly appear abnormal for anyone, especially a child, they are actually quite reasonable reactions to the experiences these children have endured. Read on....

There are many life events that can cause attachment trauma between the primary caretaker (usually the mother) and the child. These include an unwanted pregnancy, separation from the birthmother due to adoption, death of a parent, premature birth, inconsistent caretakers, abuse, neglect, chronic pain, long-term hospitalizations with separations from the mother, and parental depression. Such life events interrupt a child's ability to learn to self-regulate through the relationship with the parent.

Typically, when a baby or small child is in a state of stress, he cries and the parent attends to the child's needs, whether by feeding, rocking, or simply holding him. Each and every one of these interactions with the parent plays a critical part in assisting the development of the child's neuro-physiological control system—the system that allows the child to return back to a calm state. It is truly through this parent-child relationship that we as humans learn how to self-regulate in order to stay balanced and easily shift from a state of stress back to a state of calm. This regulatory mechanism within us is not “online” at birth, and brain research has shown that it takes up to thirty months before this part of the brain is fully developed. Within this thirty-month timeframe, a well-attuned parent has connected with this child to calm his stress response system thousands, if not millions, of

times. How critical these first thirty months are to a baby! It is through the parent-child relationship that a child's self-regulatory ability becomes engaged. This internal regulatory system then sets the foundation for the child's neurological, physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social development.

When a child does not receive loving, nurturing care, the child's ability to develop a sufficient regulatory system is severely compromised. In cases of severe neglect and abuse, the child's life is literally at risk. For these children, their internal survival mechanisms become activated, dedicating all the body's resources to remain alert in "survival mode." These children perceive the world as threatening from a neurological, physical, emotional, cognitive, and social perspective. These children operate from a paradigm of fear to ensure their safety and security. Hence, we see an overly stressed-out child who has difficulty interacting in relationships, who struggles to behave in a loving way, who quite often cannot think clearly, and who swings back and forth in his emotional states due to an underdeveloped regulatory system. While perceived by most professionals as dangerous, a child with RAD is essentially a scared and stressed child living out of a primal survival mode in order to maintain his existence.

With this understanding, the term "attachment-challenged" becomes more appropriate to use with children instead of the traditional label of "RAD child." In times of stress, this child is challenged to connect and his ability to make connection is restricted. In fact, we all become attachment-challenged to some degree when we're stressed. Reflect for a moment on the last time you were overly stressed: How did you react when someone tried to interact with you? Be honest! Perhaps you had difficulty interacting appropriately. Stress causes confused and distorted thinking, and it constricts us emotionally, leaving little room for relationships. Thus, a child with a traumatic history who is living in a stressful, fear-based state, simply is not capable of nor equipped to be in a relationship. From a behavioral standpoint, a child living in a state of fear simply cannot act in a loving way. The frightening behaviors listed above are only external reflections of the internal fear and chaos within these children. They are simply behaviors that are intended for survival.

Treatment for the attachment-challenged child needs to address this internal fear. When the child's stress state can be soothed, and the deep wounds driving the fearful behaviors can be acknowledged, the child has an opportunity for healing. Yes, healing is possible, but it takes intense work and many, many repetitions of positive experiences to recondition the body's reactions. It is also essential that the therapeutic attachment techniques and parenting paradigms enlisted for these children be grounded in neurological research and based in love and compassion. Such techniques can offer ways to create peaceful environments within the home that work to recreate safety and security in the insecure foundations set within these children.

A word of caution from the author: Some therapists specializing in attachment therapy work from a fear-based platform and recommend techniques that are confrontational, aggressive, child-centered instead of family-centered, and fear-based. While these

techniques sometimes offer short-term results, families using them are often faced with more severe long-term pain and challenges. Many of these therapists and therapists have separated themselves from dangerous techniques that have resulted in the tragic death of children in the past; however, they continue to lack compassion and are grounded in fear. Some examples of these techniques include instructing parents to force eye contact with their children; have children do excessive chores to feel a part of the family system; send children to respite care out of the home for making poor choices; give up their need to communicate love to their children; and put locks on the outside of children's doors to keep them "safe." When looking for appropriate interventions for families, be alert to these specific techniques.

Be aware, as well, of techniques that talk in general about gaining control of a child and viewing the child as manipulative. These techniques are child-blaming, parent-controlling, and devoid of scientific research. It is counterproductive to feed more fear into an already scared child. When seeking help, it is highly recommended that you have a thorough understanding of the basis for each therapy being considered.

When parents first begin realizing that they are dealing with an attachment-challenged child, they have likely already experienced many severe and disruptive behaviors in their homes. In these experiences, they themselves often begin to slip into their own fear and see the child as a threat (at times so threatening that they simply want the child out of their home, forever). Because the behaviors can be so intense, it is easy to lose sight of the child's reality—that of a young person living in a world of pain, fear, and isolation. Resources are available, and hope for these families is real. Suggested resources on the Internet include:

1. Beyond Consequences Institute: www.beyondconsequences.com
2. Center for Victory: www.centerforvictory.com
3. Child Trauma Academy: www.childtrauma.org
4. Therapeutic Fairy Tales: <http://foreverchild.net/>

As a therapist specializing in working with attachment-challenged children, I am overwhelmed by great sadness every time I initially speak with a parent seeking help for their family. This sadness stems from the realization that all of these wounds and pain could have been avoided. Babies are born in a spirit of love, but it is life's circumstances that shift them into a spirit of fear. All it takes to maintain this spirit of love is high quality care giving; it takes an emotionally available parent to create a secure and loving base for a child. Attachment Parenting in the formative years, from conception to three years old, sets the foundation for all future relationships, and it gives the child's body's own internal regulatory system the opportunity to develop to its fullest. The old adage, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" says everything in the context of Attachment Parenting.

If you're currently struggling with a child(ren) exhibiting symptoms of RAD who's early beginnings were far from nurturing and secure, I want to encourage you to have hope.

Several years ago, I found myself in the same situation, waking up every morning wondering how I was going to make it through the day. In learning more about my children and understanding that their behaviors were driven from a deeply wounded place, I was able to parent them in a way that allowed healing to begin. Yes, it is hard work and it takes endurance and faith, but creating a peaceful home is possible!

Heather T. Forbes, LCSW
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Heather Forbes, LCSW, is the co-founder of the Beyond Consequences Institute, LLC. Ms. Forbes has been training in the field of trauma and attachment with nationally recognized, first-generation attachment therapists since 1999. She has been active in the field of adoption with experience ranging from pre-adoption to post-adoption clinical work. Ms. Forbes is an internationally published author, with her most recent book titled, *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: A Love-based Approach for Helping Attachment-Challenged Children With Severe Behaviors*, endorsed by Sir Richard Bowlby, son of John Bowlby. As a speaker, her passion for families is known throughout the nation.

Ms. Forbes consults with and coaches families both nationally and internationally who are struggling with children with severe behaviors. Much of her experience and insight on understanding trauma, disruptive behaviors, and attachment-related issues has come from her direct mothering experience with her two adopted children.

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May 18th * JORDAN RIVER PARKWAY



Angels on Earth

By Jessica Strach

There are lots of children in the world who wish they could pick their parents. I was lucky enough to have my parents pick me. Early in life I had a failed biological home and a failed adoption. After years of pain and uncertainty, the most amazing thing happened; I met my parents.

Times were tough growing up as the middle child of girls. There was the oldest that always got the new clothes and the youngest that always got coddled. Me, I played with dirt and always ripped the hand-me-down jeans on the trees I would climb. I have fond memories of growing up with my biological parents; however the bad memories are more predominant in my mind. Before I was ten years old I saw both of my parents get arrested on more than one occasion. My mother tried to kill my father. My father tried to kill my mother. Honestly, I don't know how we survived. The life-altering moment happened when my older sister called the police and told her that my father had raped her. Only two months prior did my sisters and I come clean to one another about what our father was doing. We had made a pact to protect each other. It wasn't always easy but we tried. Finally my sister told someone she thought could help. The immediate emotion that came over me was sadness and grief from losing my family. This is all I had ever known for the first eleven years of my life. I thought moving around from house to house, state to state, or relative to relative was a way of life. It was how we survived. It wouldn't take long for me to find out that isn't the case. I was angry. My blood boiled and I eventually just shut down. I didn't talk to anyone for three months – not even my sisters. Was this it? Was this how my life was going to be? Am I an orphan? That's

what you call a child with no parents, isn't it? These questions and many like them floated through my head. Most importantly, I felt guilt. What could I have done to prevent this from happening?

Months went by in our temporary shelter home. I felt like an animal that was locked up and waiting for someone to decide if I was the one they would take home. Since it was temporary, my sisters and I finally moved to a foster home. A foster home is more permanent than a shelter home but more temporary than a permanent home. This is where they put you when no one has picked you to go home with them yet. My sisters and I were teens at this point, and even I knew that the older the animal the less likely it'll be picked to go to a good home. This family that we would be living with, probably until we were 18, was an older couple old enough to be my grandparents. It was comforting though since the only grandparent I really knew had died when I was ten years old. Everything about them was strange. The first thing I remember about them was the smell. It wasn't one I recognized. It was like flowers blooming in the spring, lemons being squeezed for lemonade, and a ladies' perfume being misted on a beautiful woman's neck all mixed into one. Boy did I feel silly later when I learned that the smell was a clean house, and I sure would come to love cleaning, whether I liked it or not. We had a bedtime, school work time, dinner time, reading time, and even a play time. The whole day was planned out. I wasn't used to this strict way of living. With my birth-parents I was

able to run around wherever I wanted, went to bed when I wanted, and even went to school when I wanted. I quickly let my “fake parents” know that I was not happy about this arrangement at all. Their patience and understanding would eventually turn into something as an adult I learned to appreciate. Six months had gone by and a miracle happened. Someone from the church we went to decided they wanted to adopt – not just one of us, but all three of us! I couldn’t believe it. Would this be the family that would take us home and love us? Make us feel secure and at peace? Well, no. Things were wonderful in the beginning stages of the trial run. I’m pretty sure if every parent had a kid that they could have a trial run with, we would have a bunch of parentless kids. In the beginning, all three of us were well behaved. During the week we would stay with our potential new mother and father, and on the weekends we would go back to our “fake parents.” I was so excited. Being picked to be someone’s child is an overwhelming feeling. There isn’t a better way to describe it other than an explosion of joy. The dad was my favorite. He had a motorcycle that he took me to my first day of middle school on. He was so cool. His life as a former police officer brought him to his present job of training the new police officers. I mean come on, for me, a tom boy through and through, this was like a dream come true. The mother stayed at home, but that was fine because she was always there to greet us with a smile when we came home from school. Near the end of our trial run as a family, things went downhill quickly. It was like they cracked. The mother would yell at me and tell me it was my fault she couldn’t have kids, and they even talked about getting a divorce. Approximately three days before it could have been home sweet home for my sisters and me, the almost-family decided we weren’t the right animals for them.

A stroke of luck came our way and we were sent back to the foster home from before. I was ashamed. Not only did my birth-parents not love me, but now neither could new parents. I became lost. I started skipping school, ignoring my responsibilities around the house, and even would tell people that my sisters weren’t related to me. I wanted to be alone and away from the hurt. I wanted to be away from my sisters because I had let them down. Another year had passed and my older sister turned 18. The time had come for her to leave. By this time our birth-parents had gotten divorced and my birth-father was in prison for other things they found out about him. Worse things than what he had done to us. My older sister decided to go back to my birth-mother. She would tell my little sister and me before she left that we would be a family again soon. I hated her. How could she leave? Why did she get to go home and we had to stay? Then I thought about it more. I didn’t want to go home. I hated my birth-mother for giving us up. My little sister took what my older sister said to heart. She did everything she could to get back to our “bad family” as quickly as possible. The state soon decided she

needed to go somewhere else. Then it was just me, the lone animal in the shelter. Every cage was empty but my cold one. I felt abandoned. After I lost my little sister, I felt like a huge failure. I wanted the pain and the guilt to end. I tried to kill myself a couple times. What stopped me every time was how upset my “fake parents” would be. I couldn’t believe they were affecting me like this. One night, my “fake mom” was sitting in her recliner reading a book. I came in, kneeled on the floor and just looked at her. She was so beautiful, the light from the lamp made a certain glow around her head. She looked like an angel. She saw me, smiled and opened her arms to me. This was very new. Never in my life had I sat in someone’s lap and been held. My body or my spirit recognized this action and almost instinctively I rose from the floor and sat in her lap. She held me while rocking back and forth humming a song. Was this it? The peace and security I was looking for? Even without my sisters? That moment I was truly happy. Two months after my 15th birthday, my “new parents” and I signed a document that made me theirs and they were mine. I finally belonged. After years of waiting for someone to walk down the hall of that shelter and see me. My family had finally been made. With this new family I had 11 new siblings. All of them are older but one, the youngest sister, who was also adopted three years prior to me getting there.

We were unique as a family. An older couple with two young children, but we were happy. My emptiness, hatred, loss, and guilt changed into love, joy, and fulfillment. I still kept in touch with my sisters; however I am happy with my new family. At times I am so comfortable I forget I was even adopted. I know if it wasn’t for them seeing me and loving me I would not be who I am today. My parents are the two most important people in my life, because that’s what they gave me, a new life. A life of fear, sadness, and loss is all in the past. I now have a life of security, love, and great memories that will last me forever which I plan to share with the family I will have one day. Although it may seem odd to some, being adopted was the most positive thing in my life.

There is always tomorrow

About Jessica:

Graduated from Bingham High School

Enlisted in the Air Force Reserves, been in 6 years and just reenlisted

Deployed to Afghanistan for 6 months

Attending College for a degree in Paralegal

Will be going to Law school when graduated and

Been in a healthy relationship for 2 and one-half years

Works full time at the Fairbanks Alaska Airport as a Trans Security Officer



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