



UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

FEBRUARY 2014

Josh, age 15 is waiting...

Photo by: Lothar Gulla

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



Gabriel and Julian ages 13 + 10, are waiting...

Photo by: Cliff Winegar

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FEBRUARY 2014 EDITION

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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.

Grant our children life and happiness
Send forth the good south winds.
Send forth your breath over the waters
That our world may be beautiful and
our people may thrive. . .
May all complete life's long road,
May all grow old.
May our little ones know
The sweet smell of the
Sacred breath of life.

Sia Medicine Song





Healing from Food Insecurity: *Beyond the Stash*

from Winter 2013 Adoptalk

Whether a child is 15 days or 15 years old, feeding and nurturing through shared meals is a critical way to deepen attachment. Dr. Bruce Perry, of the Child Trauma Academy, refers to ideal bonding opportunities as repetitive, relationship-building, patternbased, and involving the senses—which describes the family meal experience perfectly. But the family table is not always an easy place for adopted and foster children. Indeed, one mom said that her fantasies of pleasant family meals were met “with a slap in the face” when her two children, adopted from Russia, struggled with food anxieties and sensory issues. Unfortunately, conflict around food and eating habits are more common for foster and adopted children due to their past experiences. When conflict defines interactions around food, those bonding opportunities are lost, and trust and attachment can suffer as well. “We had a 15-year-old boy in foster care with a history of run-away episodes,” Amy recalls. “He was gone for about 30 hours. When he came back, I decided there was no point being upset, so just told him we’d been scared, made sure he was safe and healthy, and quickly threw a box of mac-n-cheese on the stove to get him some comfort food. That floored him, because it turns out that he’d been denied food in his home after his running. I think it

ended up bonding him to us much more than anything else could have.”

Parents want to raise children who are healthy and happy. Many try to instill healthy eating habits by enforcing nutrition rules or portion control. But when raising children who have experienced food insecurity, healing the anxiety around food is key to helping children grow up to be competent eaters who can self-regulate and learn to eat a variety of foods.

Food Insecurity Leads to Survival Behaviors

When children are not fed reliably, do not get enough food, or have to compete for enough, they become anxious. When food-insecure children do have access to food, they often don’t understand or trust that it is coming again in adequate amounts. Food insecurity and unsupportive feeding deeply color the initial relationship a child has with food. It can take weeks, months, and even years of reliable feeding for that trust to build and for children to believe they will be fed. Some children who have been food insecure demonstrate hoarding behaviors. These survival strategies may manifest themselves in the following:

- Eating quickly
- Gobbling or stuffing food
- Stealing or hiding food
- Eating large quantities, even to the point of vomiting
- Becoming upset if someone eats off their plate
- Getting upset if food is limited or taken away
- Getting upset or eating faster if asked to slow down
- Eating only familiar and “safe” foods
- Keeping food in the mouth for hours, known as “pocketing,” which may be behavioral or a sign of an oral-motor problem (or both)

Healing Food Anxieties

Deciding whether to stash or not to stash. Many resources on hoarding advise allowing the child to have snacks in his backpack or carry food in a pocket, or even have containers of food in the bedroom. Aneliese, mother of two boys, one adopted, one biological, recalls that the main feeding advice she got from her social worker was to let her son carry around baggies of carrots all day: “I just didn’t think that was going to help.” Other experts advise parents to avoid the stash and serve regular meals and snacks. The reality is, it is not an either-or or one-size-fits-all answer. Parents may decide to offer a stash, or not, and see how things go. The stash may help at first, and the child simply loses interest with time. Consider 18-month-old Marcus, who did not want to let go of his biscuit. He certainly can be allowed to hang on to the biscuit for a while, and maybe even have one in his pocket. Follow his lead. If he throws a tantrum when it’s taken away, allow him to carry it. But the parent also has to be absolutely reliable about regularly providing food. Parents may need to offer food more frequently at first, perhaps every hour or so. Three-year-old Arielle, adopted at 11 months, was on calorie restriction and was experiencing intense food anxiety and preoccupation. Mom let her carry food in an attempt to address her anxiety, but Arielle gobbled it up and begged for more. In this scenario, Arielle’s actions were not the hoarding behaviors seen when a child first arrives from a place of food insecurity, but were actually symptoms of a feeding relationship disruption due to her food restriction (more below). Letting her have her own stash of food to carry around didn’t work in this situation.

To facilitate bonding and food security, food should come from the parents whenever possible. When a child is allowed to get food whenever he wants, he may still feel responsible for getting his own food. It is a missed opportunity to nurture and deepen the attachment with the child. Feeding a child directly shows him

that he will be taken care of and builds trust. Meeting his needs, over and over again, is the basis for attachment.

Reassuring the child with words and actions. One foster mom had a little boy she couldn’t keep out of the fridge. He would occasionally eat to the point of making himself sick. Mom didn’t want to lock the fridge to restrict his food access. Instead, she assigned him a refrigerator drawer. She stocked it with familiar food and told him that the drawer would always be full, and while he could not take food at random, this drawer was his. He checked the drawer often, with Mom’s reassurance that it was his food, and he could help choose from it for meals and snack times. Mom made certain it was never empty, and gradually he forgot about it, mostly because Mom reassured him with regularly scheduled meals and snacks.

Another preschool boy, adopted from Eastern Europe, loved cereal. He would frantically gobble as much as he could and cry when limited. His parents finally realized that when he saw an empty box, he thought there would be no more cereal, ever. They were able to reassure him, and for a while overstocked the pantry with his favorite cereals. At breakfast, he was allowed to eat as much as he wanted, but simple reassurances and a trip to look at the pantry helped him realize he would get enough. Soon he was eating about the same as his brother and was no longer anxious at meals.

Being reliable about feeding. While parents can allow a stash if it works for their child, the best way to lessen hoarding behaviors is to lessen anxiety around food.

“Sam had some hoarding issues, but it didn’t last long. We let it run its course. We chose not to have food available to the boys all day and night. I didn’t think it would reassure them. I fed them regularly and sat and ate with them. They pretty quickly learned to trust they would get fed.” — Mia, mother of two boys adopted at age five and seven
Deborah Gray, in *Attaching and Adoption*, wrote about “high nurture, high structure” parenting. This dovetails nicely with feeding in the Trust Model, pioneered by therapist and nutritionist Ellyn Satter. Parents provide regular meals and snacks with balanced and tasty foods, and the child decides how much to eat from what is provided.

Keeping initial hoarding from becoming entrenched food obsession. Even if a child is labeled as obese or overweight, she can still feel food insecure, and attempts to limit her intake will make her more anxious and prone to overeat. Many children who experienced food insecurity have initial behaviors that scare parents, especially if the child is big-

ger than average. A foster child may be obese and not regulating food intake due to food insecurity or other factors.

Research tells us that restrictive feeding tends to lead to higher weight and increased eating in the absence of hunger. I believe food restriction and efforts to control weight lead to more entrenched food obsession, with food-seeking behaviors worsening, not improving.

It is critical to address a child's initial food anxiety with nurturing, reliable feeding, and allow the child to "overeat" while she learns to trust her cues of hunger and fullness. I believe these children's food regulation skills are simply buried, and they can learn to tune in to hunger and fullness cues. What it boils down to is this: with reliable, pleasant, and satisfying meals and snacks, even the food insecure child will learn over time that he doesn't have to worry about when or how much he will get to eat. Parents get to worry or think about the food, so the child doesn't have to.

Tips to Reduce Food Anxiety

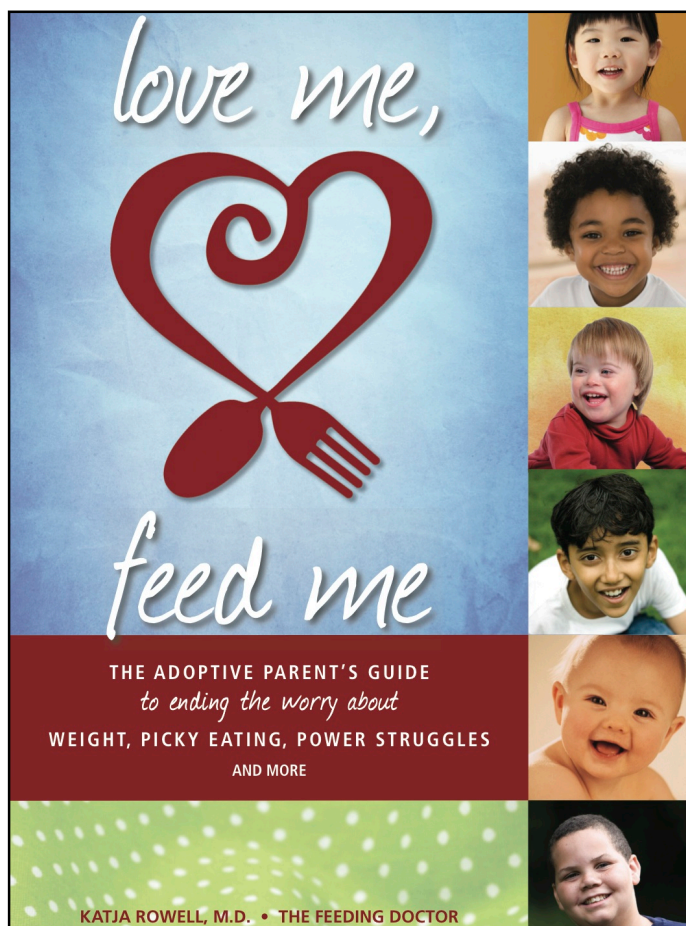
- Feed young children every two to three hours and older children every three to four hours.
- Offer food more frequently at first or if a child is healing from food obsession.
- Offer frequent reassurance: "There will always be enough food."
- Show him the pantry, perhaps even as you end a meal, "See, there is always enough food here."
- Plan on pleasant family meals—if you're battling over broccoli or a therapy task, that's not helping him feel more secure.
- Structure is critical. If you go to the park, bring a balanced and filling snack.
- Include fat, protein, and carbs. A snack might be whole-wheat crackers with cream cheese and apple slices, or cereal, milk and a banana.
- Institute Division of Responsibility. At meals and snacks, he gets to eat as much or as little as he wants from what you provide. Even if he eats a lot initially, this sense of control will reassure him.
- Always provide at least one thing from her accepted list. She needs to feel that she can come to the table and her hunger will be fed.
- Invite the child to help you cook and meal-plan if he is old enough. You can say, "We're having lentils for dinner. Would you like cornbread or rice with that?" Resist the urge to argue or pressure, even if he refuses food he chose.
- Let her know that she may politely spit out any food she doesn't want to swallow into a paper napkin. Children are more likely to try a new food if they can spit it out, particular if they have a history of gagging or vomiting episodes.
- Don't worry about enforcing manners right away. Lead by example.
- Serve foods family-style so a child can serve herself and feel more in control. This also diffuses battles that begin when a pre-plated meal is served to the child who might erupt over something on his plate. (Clients tell me this is the number one tip to lessen power struggles.)

Dr. Katja Rowell is a family doctor turned childhood feeding specialist. Her mission is to bring peace and joy to the family table. She consults with parents, is a blogger, mom, family cook, and sought-after speaker. Her book *Love Me, Feed Me: The Adoptive Parent's Guide to Ending the Worry About Weight, Picky Eating, Power Struggles and More* distills the support she provides clients. (Published in 2012 and available on Amazon.com.)

The information in this article is educational. It is not meant to replace careful evaluation and treatment by medical, nutritional, or mental health professionals.

“I have rarely learned so much valuable information in one book. This will be on my recommended list for all families.”

— Deborah Gray, author of *Attaching in Adoption*



Nourish, nurture, and attach: a relationship-building, practical guide.

Explore the unique challenges many foster and adopted children bring to the table. Through the words of parents who have “been there,” learn to address food obsession, oral motor and developmental delays, sensory issues, feeding clinic “failures” and more. **Stop the power struggles over food and help your child grow up to be a competent eater.** Whether your child has been with you for ten days or ten years, learn practical ways to address feeding challenges in children of all ages.

You can feed with confidence and joy!

“You touched on so many of the questions that I had, and have changed our lives already.” — Anneliese, mom of Adan

“Rowell tackles the tough issues that would have helped my parents when I was adopted and are already helping me with my foster children now.”

— Ashley Rhodes-Courter, bestselling author of *Three Little Words*.

“...a deeply complex, loving and effective plan of action for resolving feeding problems.” — Carol Danaher RD, MPH

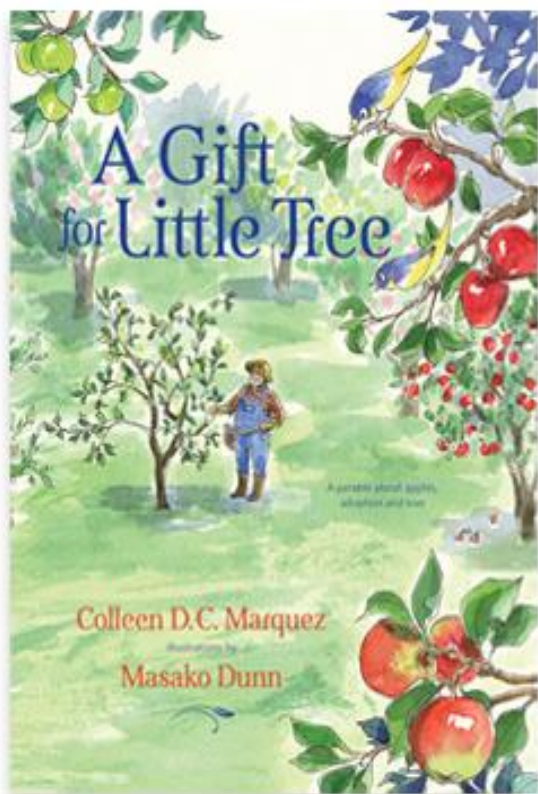
“I wish we had read LMFM before our son was home with us. It would have saved us so much worry and heartache.” — Ruth C., adoptive mother and family nurse practitioner

CHECK OUT ONE OF THE LATEST TITLES IN THE LENDING LIBRARY

A Gift for Little Tree: A parable about apples, adoption and love

By Colleen D.C. Marquez

Illustrated by Masako Dunn



“A lovely story about a little apple tree who has a secret dream—to bear apples of her very own unique color and flavor. A Gift for Little Tree perfectly captures the yearning of a mother and the joy of adoption. Sweet, lyrical, unforgettable.”

Susy Flory, New York Times Bestselling author of “Thunder Dog”

“A poignant, sweet look at the power and beauty of adoption, A Gift for Little Tree will bless both parents and children alike.”

Mary Demuth, Author of “You Can Raise Courageous and Confident Kids”

“What a delightful parable that will surely touch the hearts of anyone touched by adoption! Colleen Marquez helps us see the big picture of adoption, which is much-needed.”

SHERRIE ELDRIDGE, author of “20 Things Adopted Kids

Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew”

“Colleen D.C. Marquez warmly tells the story of an apple tree that is unable to bear fruit. Through a series of grafts by a caring farmer, Little Tree becomes one of the most colorful and fruit-bearing trees in the orchard. With great sensitivity, Marquez is able to convey the emotions and struggles of those who deal with infertility as they long for children of their own, including the delight that comes when a family is formed through adoption. Beautifully written, A Gift for Little Tree is a book that will appeal to readers of all ages.”

LAUREL BURNS, Library media teacher, Strandwood Elementary

UAC ADOPTION CONFERENCE

Perspectives on Adoption: Facing Your Fears

MARCH 26TH & 27TH

Contact your post adoption worker for scholarship availability and registration details.

Comments from attendees:

"The best conference I attended all year" " Very powerful information as a professional and a parent; helped me to see through a child's eyes."



FAMILY LINKS 2014 Conference

For families with children with disabilities. Sponsored by The Parents Center
Friday, February 28 and Saturday, March 1, 2014!

The conference will feature keynote presentations by Matt Townsend and Judith Snow and more than 20 additional breakout sessions. The conference will also be holding an exhibitor/resource fair on Saturday. Watch for more information to come or visit <https://www.facebook.com/FamilyLinksEvents> to get up-to-date information about the conference.

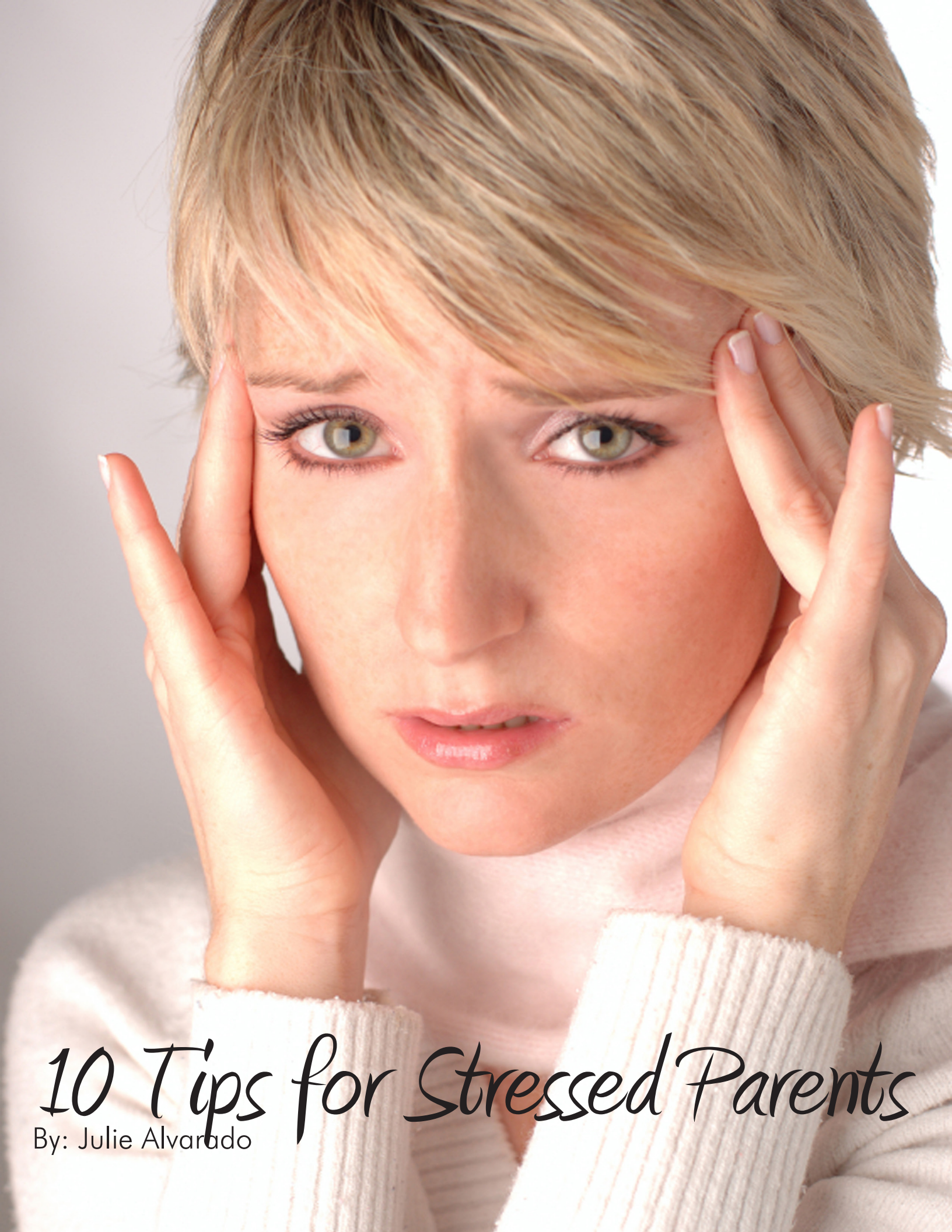
UFCF SYMPOSIUM

Please join us for the 5th Annual Utah Foster Care Symposium
Zermatt Inn and Resort in Midway
April 2nd and 3rd, 2014

Dr. Daniel Siegel will be presenting on his newest book, "Brainstorm." It promises to be a fun and informative look at the teenage brain!

Registration begins February 1, 2014 at www.utahfostercare.org. CEU's available!





10 Tips for Stressed Parents

By: Julie Alvarado

We have learned about trauma.
We have learned about attachment.
We have learned about emotional regulation.
We have made all the appointments, met all the therapists, researched all the diagnoses, completed the mounds of paperwork, put our lives into a big fishbowl for others to review, run all the errands, made all the beds, started the laundry, dinner is on the stove, and the day is gone.

How did that happen? I thought I had planned well enough that I would have a couple of hours before the kids get home....and oh my, summer break is just around the corner.

I love my family, my children and my role in life.

And, I AM TIRED, stressed out and depleted at times.

Many parents have written to me over the years asking for ways to calm themselves, work on their own stress and for suggestions for free or low cost means to feel better. I offer my response~But, there is a catch.

I can share 10 tips for easy stress reduction; ways to help you get and stay more emotionally regulated and they will do you absolutely no good unless you practice them daily.

We have to intentionally take care of ourselves. Talking about it will not help. Doing it will.

What's Breath got to do with it??

The emotional experience of stress triggers a chemical reaction in the brain. The chemical reaction impacts our physiological system. Now we have a brain/body reaction to stress.

The brain loses its ability for clear thinking, decision making and rational thought. We become impulsive, irrational and we do and say things that we soon regret.

The body becomes rigid, down to the cellular level we constrict under stress. Muscles tighten up, the jaw clenches, we often sweat as our heart rate increases and blood pumps more quickly under fire from the stress response system.

All of this happens for good reason! It primes us to respond to the stress~prepares us to take action through fight, flight or freeze against that which is threatening to us.

However, when we are pumped up, ready to fight, we

simply add to that which has stressed us to begin with. A fight is not what we typically need in our day to day lives to bring the situation back to calm. Fighting against a person fighting just gets us more fighting! We make bad decisions, we add to the anger and tension and we suffer in our emotional and physical being.

Breathing, deep breathing is the connection between our body, mind and spirit. It is through deep breaths that we bring both our emotional, physical and spiritual being back into regulation. Stop right now, take 3 very deep breaths, exhaling slowly and intentionally. Allow your body to relax a bit as you do. You will understand clearly how powerful a simple breath is to our Peace and healing.

The brain learns through repetition, the more you do something the more natural it becomes. I started practicing deep breathing years ago, now I unconsciously stop and breathe to bring myself to regulation all through the day. My stress is extremely low; my impulsive, frustrated, intolerant reactions are almost non-existent. I can function from a state of love and calm even in the midst of the storm, which I, like you, have daily.

Integrated into the 10 tips for stress reduction for parents is breathing, lots of breathing. I encourage you to pick 2 or 3 of my suggestions and begin to practice them daily. You will change. Your life will change. When you change for the better, so too, will your family change. Try it for 30 days, you will be glad you did!

10 Tips for Stressed Parents:

AWARENESS: unless you are aware of that which dysregulates (stresses) you, you cannot create an environment opposite to that for your healing. We must first take a look inside and figure out what stresses us. Make a note of any stressful, current situations in your life. What is it about this situation that stresses you? Write it down. If there is something that you can do to change it, engage that change today. If there is not, you can always change you.

It is often our reaction to a situation that stresses us out as much as the situation itself. If your reaction is out of fear, anger or anxiety, choosing instead to stop before you react and taking 3 deep breaths, calms your mind and body. Your reaction is causing your stress response system to activate. We can calm the system instead of activate the system simply through our breath.

EVERY HOUR: set your timer or alarm on your computer or phone to provide a soft, soothing reminder every

hour of the day. When the alarm goes off, stop everything that you are doing, stand up, stretch your entire body for a full 60 seconds, take 3 very deep breaths and go back to work. You will feel better in one day. Guaranteed.

MEDITATION/PRAYER: every morning before your feet hit the floor, offer gratitude for another day, another chance, another breath. Thank God and the Universe for all that is provided you another day. Take three deep breaths to bring your mind/body/spirit into alignment before you hit the ground running. Stretch your body as much as you can when you first awaken. Your day will be better the very first day you begin this routine!

YOGA: if you cannot join a class, or purchase an inexpensive DVD yoga class to do in your own home, you can always find a yoga class on one of the health TV stations. Yoga helps you learn to control your breathing and increase heart rate variability. This helps the body to respond more flexibly to stress. Once a week is good, twice is better. Your body, your mind and your spirit will feel better in one week!

WALKING: a 15 minute brisk walk, two times a day increases the release of feel good chemicals into your brain and body. If it is cold out, walk inside. I sometimes will set my timer for 5 minutes and walk up and down the steps in my office 2-3 times a day to increase the cardio exercise. I follow that with three deep breaths and go back to work. Gets me feeling better every single time.

Any exercise rebalances melatonin which enhances sleep cycles and releases endorphins which enhances mood. Get up and move every day in some way.

SLEEP WELL AND REST DAILY: sleep deprivation keeps your nervous system on high-alert and your cortisol levels too high. This keeps you feeling anxious throughout the day. If you do not sleep well at night, rest during the day if you can, even for 30 minutes. This will bring your relaxation chemicals back to target.

SENSORY STIMULATION: your stress system is affected by sensory input; what you hear, taste, touch, smell and see. Are your surroundings calm, soothing, tranquil and content? If not, what can you do to change that, now? I listen to very soothing music with no words while I work. I light candles with light scent, and I use lamps with soft lighting. I create a sensory

experience that draws me in with comfort.

TIME OUT: not for your kids, but for you if needed! If you are at the point of blowing, you have permission to give yourself a time out. Let your children or loved ones know that you will be back, that you just need to walk away for a few minutes. That is much less damaging than what may slip out if you stay!

TRIPLE A's: affection, attention and attunement. Your kids need this everyday, but so do you. Create relationships that are full of affection, that provide you with the attention you need, and that are attuned to your needs and wants. The more of these you get, the more you can share! Cultivate the friendships you long for; coffee with a good friend is more helpful than most therapy sessions!

STOP DROP and ROLL: when all else fails and the stress returns,

Stop: completely stop, stop talking, moving and reacting

Drop: drop into deep breaths, slowly inhale and exhale focusing only on breath

Roll: roll back into relationship only after you have calmed your mind and body

This provides a calm platform for both you and the other person to come back into safety. If the other person is still upset, work to remain slow in your movements and low in your tone of voice. This will help you remain calm and bring the other person down with you.

If you are in need of a personal coach, someone to help you, listen to you and direct you as a coach would do, please visit us at www.coaching-forlife.com

We have wonderful parent coaches, many free resources and links for articles, research and further information supporting you toward a more peaceful life!

Please reach out, if you need support, ask someone. You are not alone.

And remember, breathe~

Juli Alvarado
Founder/Sr. Clinical Consultant
coaching for LIFE!
www.coaching-forlife.com
866-570-0604



Utah Parent Center
Special needs, extraordinary potential

Information Sheet

Utah Parent Center e-Journal

What is an e-Journal?

The Utah Parent Center's e-Journals are in-depth topical publications created by the Utah Parent Center to address specific areas of interest for families and professionals. They are designed to address a variety of issues and provide resources on the various topics.

What topics are covered?

As of December 2013, the Utah Parent Center has e-Journals on the following topics:

- Dual Diagnosis: Developmental Disabilities plus Mental Health Needs
- Assistive Technology
- Autism
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders
- Bullying
- Caring and Caregivers
- Response to Intervention (RTI)
- People with Disabilities and Faith Communities

We hope the information in the e-journals is helpful to you and your family members. An electronic copy of the e-journals along with supporting information are available on or through the UPC's website at www.utahparentcenter.org/publications/e-journals/. If you need resources specific to a certain area of the state or other types of resources or if you would like to speak to one of our parent consultants about questions regarding school services or other topics, please contact us at 801-272-1051 or toll free at 1-800-468-1160.

Our Family to Family Health Information Center can provide information about how your primary care physician can help and about the importance of a medical home for your child. Often if you can clear up some of the medical health issues you can manage the disability better.

The Utah Parent Center has been serving Utah families of children, youth, and young adults with all disabilities since before 1983. We provide free resources such as publications, workshops, and individualized assistance to help families make decisions about education, support services, vocational training, employment, and other services for the child and family.

Utah Parent Center

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www.utahparentcenter.org



Teenagers *are like* BEES...

By Vicki Nelson

They are busy... they can be unpredictable... they get your attention... they have stingers ... and use them sometimes.

Some people love bees. In fact, I love bees and have wanted to own a hive and raise my own honey bees for years. One day I hope to get to that hobby. Some people realize the bee's great value and enjoy having them around. Some people know the bees are there but don't pay them much attention, just let them go about their business. Some people know someone who has been stung by a bee and don't want to give a bee the chance to do that to them. Some people are very afraid of bees and run when they encounter one, bees have stingers and those people have been hurt. For the most part, bees have a bad reputation.

While I wait for the day to come that I have my own honey bees I read all sorts of books about them. In one of my very favorite books titled, *The Secret Life of Bees*, it talks about the glorious bees

– How they gather pollen all day, every day and in gathering that pollen, particles will fall off into other flowers and blossoms and make it possible to grow fruit on trees and vegetables in the gardens. Their honey is used in various ways and is nutritious and delicious. At one point in the book August, the beekeeper, was teaching Lily, a 12 or 13 year old runaway girl about her bees. Lily wondered why August never got stung. She wasn't wearing all the coverings that beekeepers usually wear. August explained to her that if you send them your love they won't feel threatened and in turn won't want to sting you. Later on in the book Lily tests this idea and stands in the midst of all the bees while they whirled around her like a tornado. She sent them her love and enjoyed the high volume buzz that only a full hive of bees can put off, and of course they didn't sting her. This book is full of metaphors about bee life and human life, and while it is a novel, the similarities that it talks about are

right on, in my opinion. I've tested this "sending of love" to bees. I've done it several times. One time I stood right inside (my shoulders and head) in my flowering pear tree in the spring. It was covered in white blossoms and equally covered in honey bees. I stood there and sent them my love and watched them buzz around my face and enjoyed how noisy they get and never got stung once. My 10 year old daughter wondered what in the world I was doing standing amongst the bees and I told her about it. She thought I was nuts and you may too by the time I'm done. But this idea stayed with me and when I needed to let someone know I loved them without hugging them or saying it. I experimented with it on our foster kids, as they usually don't want a lot of affection in the beginning while they are trying to figure out where they fit in this new family.

In August of this year we adopted Valerie, a 15 year old girl. Later on in that month Val was asked to sit on a foster care panel of 5 or 6 people with experience in the foster care system. She had experience because she had been in foster care for two years before coming to our home and she was excited for the opportunity to tell what she believes works in a foster family and what does not work. While I sat in the audience and listened to her tell her story I cried when she said that from the very first step into our home on that first day, she felt love. I cried because I remember performing one of my experiments again and was consciously sending her my love that first time we met. But I didn't know she had got it until she told about it on the panel.

Teens don't all lack love when they come into care. A lot of them have been told and shown in various ways but sometimes not very healthy ways. They need unconditional love and boundaries that mean when you make bad choices we will still love you. The consequences that automatically follow those bad choices will be paid by you, but we still love you. Once they know the limits a family holds they can realize and not have to wonder anymore. They have a more secure idea of where they stand.

Valerie talked about something else while on the foster care panel that night. She explained how trust played a huge part in her progress over these last couple of years. She explained that in one new home she was told that she had none of her foster parents trust and that she had to earn all of it. She said she tried in different ways to gain their trust and when it was certain that she was never going to get it she stopped trying. The friction in the home got worse and worse; along with her performance at school and the choices she was making hindering her progress since the time she had been removed from her home. When given the chance to speak on this subject during that night on the panel she held out her hands and said, "When I got to the Nelson's home they gave me all their trust like this. They said I could do with it what I wanted. I could keep it all, every bit, or I could pick away at it until there was nothing left." That meant so much to her, you could tell but it meant so much to me too because I knew we hadn't ever had that conversation. That is just how she understood it.

Since that first day that she was brought to our home, just four days before Christmas last year, she has made some amazing progress! I have to say that one of many of her best qualities is her ability to adapt to her surroundings. It's done her well in making friends in a new school and creating bonds with her siblings in our home. That's not to say that we haven't had any problems. Anytime a new person is added to the mix it shakes things up for a while. Our family has learned tolerance on a whole new level since starting

foster care, and not so much because we were pushed to it but because of the example of these teenagers and their hardships. But isn't tolerance what we all need a little more of? What better way to learn it than in our own families.

We have four biological children; three boys and then a girl. Our oldest boy is out of the house and attending University. Our next boy is turning 17 and is a junior in high school. Val fits right in next and is turning 16 soon. She is a sophomore. Then we have another boy that is a 14 year old freshman. Our last is a girl who is ten and in the 5th grade. Before Valerie, we fostered two teens, 16 and 14 year old siblings. Mixing teenagers so close in age and meeting everyone's needs is pretty tricky but not impossible. In our family we have family night every Sunday. It's not done the way most do it. Ours is more of a family counsel. This is a great time to plan out the week, talk about grades, and give opinions about what is working, what they hate and what we need to change. My husband and I have been very open about what we expect concerning drugs, pornography, bad language and bad choices, and then the consequences that follow those choices. Having a connection to drug abuse through our foster kids' parents gives a prime opportunity to see the effects drugs will have on their lives and we talk about them. They know kids who experimented with drugs and they recognize the signs. All we can do as parents is to hope and pray that our kids don't get caught up in that life style. But if they do, they can't say they didn't know the effect it would have.

We still see Val's biological mom twice a month for an hour each time. It isn't court ordered just a verbal agreement. Val wanted to and we wanted her to also, because we know that it can be good for Val to know she still has that bit of connection. As long as the visits are positive we will continue. It seems, though, that the longer Val is in our family the less she has in common with her mom. The visits are getting more and more strained and unnatural. On their last visit, Val's mom got up and left early because of some hurt feelings. Val was saddened by this the whole rest of the day. She sees her mom for who she has been and is now and knows now she can't change her no matter how badly she would like to. When Val needs more time away from her mom, I call her mom and let her know that we will be waiting another week. I feel it is so important to respect these kids' biological mothers because they will always love them. Val knows why it's better to live away from her mom. She gets angry about her mom sometimes but she knows she can always speak openly about her in our home.

Allowing tough situations to happen between all the kids is a hard thing to do but very necessary, I feel. Things like disagreements, jealousy, scheduling the shower; things that they all feel sometimes maybe aren't fair. I could have buffered a lot of them but decided in many cases to let things go and see how they turned out. We worked them out. We reached our six month mark for adopting Val in June and had to wait on the courts until August but during that time we were able to work through some very important issues and ended up grateful for the extra time.

I know why many people are afraid to foster teenagers. My husband and I have the same fears that everyone else does. Teenagers will come to you a little crusty. Their circumstances have made them that way. But with stability, unconditional love, boundaries, and trust, you can break through their crusty layer and what you find in the gooey center is as sweet as fresh honey. We are so blessed to have Valerie in our life. She brings so much joy to the family as do all of our children.

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