



UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

NOVEMBER 2015

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QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



Shilo, age 15, waiting
Photo by: Brekke Felt

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Kathy Searle, Editor

Lindsay Kaeding, Design Director

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When You Check The Box

By Angela Tucker

Even though I'm hearing impaired
I am a healthy adult.
Even though this wasn't learned until my late childhood
I was a healthy child.
She didn't always eat healthy while I grew in her belly
There were no prenatal visits or vitamins
Still I am fine and I'm healthy.
You should know that still I have worth.
I know you checked the box
on that homestudy preferences list
that you were not open to prenatal drug use,
a family history of depression or bipolar
you checked the box that you would not adopt a child
whose birthparents wanted to choose their name.
Does this have anything to do with the needs of the child?
or is this just you playing a matchmaking game?
Does my health depend upon your understanding of medicine?
Is healthiness a societally constructed concept?
Is an autistic child unhealthy? Down syndrome? High IQ?
Does a lack of birthparent history dictate the child's future health?
Are you seeking perfection in a child; A valedictorian graduating magna cum laude?
Is a "special needs" adoptee incapable of success? PTSD? Anxiety?
Not knowing family medical history can feel scary
and in utero drug exposure may concern you
but know that adoptees will seek righteousness with Malala.
We Will Rise with Maya Angelou.
We strive for peace like Benazir Bhutto
and have hoop dreams like Sheryl Swoopes
although I may strain to hear you at times,
or I may lose my balance,
I may need a sick day or two to recoup
Still I am healthy and I am strong.
Dyslexia doesn't define a soul
any more than a perfectionistic mother in defeat.
ADHD shouldn't equate to "I can't parent this"
just as "normal" is not synonymous with healthy.
Prenatal alcohol exposure doesn't make my brother less human
Prenatal drug use doesn't make my sister's body wrong
I am healthy. We are healthy.
We aren't a series of labels, or orphaned bodies to experiment on.
We were healthy children that have grown to be healthy adults.
We were adopted as we were, and have grown in to who we are.
We have struggles, and faults, we succeed, we laugh
at times we gain ground, and at times we fight bad thoughts.
When you go to check the boxes
Please don't predetermine what healthy might mean for me.
Please examine your own beliefs first.
I wonder, what does "healthy" mean to you?

About Angela Tucker:

Angela's adoption story is documented in the film "Closure," closedocumentary.com.
Angela is a blogger, speaker and educator on adoption. www.theadoptedlife.com.



On the Cover

Isaac, 10

Isaac is a natural athlete! This guy runs fast, has good hands and loves to play sports. He has started a football card collection as this is his all time favorite sport. Isaac has just begun keeping a journal and he enjoys scrapbooking.

This fourth grader is a good reader that likes to spell. Isaac benefits from counseling, which will need to continue after placement.

Isaac's caseworker will consider all family types for placement. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

For Utah children, only homestudied families from all states are encouraged to inquire.

Photo by: Brekke Felt

If you are interested in any of the children featured in this publication, please contact The Adoption Exchange at 801-265-0444 or visit www.utahadopt.org.



The Loss of Life Beneath Your Skin: *How to Revive It*

By: Rachel Macy Stafford, handsfreemama.com

A few months ago my newly turned 12-year-old daughter got into making iced tea.

We seek out new flavors at quaint little farmers' markets and at fancy tea shops in the mall. My child holds the canister and asks questions of the vendor that I do not understand. She pays with her babysitting money.

I stand back and marvel at her maturity and her newfound passion.

She comes home with her wares and goes right to work. It's quite a process, and she takes it very seriously. She makes a large pitcher and offers me a glass. My daughter knows I am trying to stop drinking diet soda once and for all. So whenever she makes a new flavor, she says, "I think you'll like this one, Mama."

She holds out that glass of deep orange liquid as if handing me a sunset made with her very own two hands.

I didn't know why I felt like crying happy tears at such an offering until my friend shared something about her own life experience.

She said, "Just when I feel like I am failing as a parent, a moment will come along that makes me feel like I'm doing okay."

Her moment came when her four-year-old son had earned several dollars to spend at a toy store. But instead of buy-

ing only for himself, he bought a toy for his little brother and baby sister.

As she shared her story, I had an epiphany. It dawned on me that in the same place my daughter makes tea is where I smashed a casserole dish in a moment of complete and utter overwhelm. And when I did, I scared that precious child who happened to be rinsing off her dinner plate at the time. This woman who is supposed to have it all together fell apart right there in that very spot where this child makes tea in hues of yellow, purple, and orange.

When my child hands me a glass and says, "Taste this one, Mama," I feel like I am being handed forgiveness. The healing lyrics of one of my favorite songs plays in my head: Even the best fall down sometimes. I blink back tears as I remember pieces of ceramic flying in every direction and how my daughter loves me in spite of it.

Don't get me wrong—I didn't let myself off the hook easily. In fact, I beat myself up over that reckless choice for weeks. I thought you had stopped overreacting, Criticism sneered. And you tell people how to have a peaceful response? What a joke, Shame scoffed.

But even the best fall down sometimes, Grace whispered in Howie Day's soothing voice. I play it on repeat over and over in my mind.

I look back on that day in May and realize I was in a bad place. I was sleep-

deprived. I was trying to meet work deadlines and fulfill end-of-the-school year duties. I'd been in physical pain for months. Worry over my persistent infection's mysterious cause had finally set in. In this fragile state, I made a grave mistake that could have hurt someone I love or myself.

That night I went to my child's room to ask for forgiveness. I told her I deeply regretted handling that feeling of overwhelm and hopelessness by breaking a glass dish.

My daughter's response surprised me. She said, "Sometimes when I am tired and someone gets in my face, I am like, 'Grrrrrr!' It's like I forget the other person has feelings."

Yes. Yes. To forget the other person has feelings—yes, that is when the hurt happens. That is when poor choices are made.

But there was more, and my daughter's words helped me realize what it was:

Sometimes I forget I have feelings.
Sometimes I forget I have needs.
Sometimes I forget I have limits.

And such a volatile outburst indicates I am not caring for myself properly and need to take an honest look at how I am living.

"I am so sorry. I did not handle the situation well. I think it's because I'm not taking good care of myself lately," I realized and admitted all at once.

My little budding orthopedic surgeon quickly came up with suggestions as if she'd been waiting to be asked. More sleep, Mama. More fresh air. More water, Mama. Too many Coke Zeros. More chilling out. Get your heart rate up. And tea. Drink herbal tea instead of soda. I can make you some, Mama.

It was abundantly clear that she'd been concerned and had been waiting for an invitation to tell me.

I publically declared then and there what I intended to do to look after myself. I would give up the soda addiction and drink more water. I would start running again, even a mile or two of heart-pumping sweat could do wonders. I would be more selective when it came to writing opportunities. I would get at least seven hours of sleep. I would go to a specialist and get to the bottom of a six-month long bladder infection instead continuing to take different antibiotics.

And that is what I did. I immediately began sleeping through the night. I could think more clearly. I could handle frustration better. I went to several doctors un-

*"We push and pull and I fall down sometimes and I'm not letting go, you hold the other line,
'Cause there is a light in your eyes, in your eyes."*

—Mat Kearney

til I got to the bottom of my health issue. A skilled urologist discovered a gargantuan sized kidney stone that was taking up over half my kidney. Left unattended or improperly removed, the results could have been fatal.

When I told my doctor what the first urologist recommended for removal of the mass, she said, "You could have lost a year of your life due to complications from the wrong procedure."

But all I heard was: You could have lost your life.

And not just from a monstrous kidney stone, but from not looking after myself—from looking after everyone but me.

Even losing yourself in good works is still losing yourself ...

Even the one who handles everything must rest and restore ...

Even the strongest have moments of weakness ...

Even the most vibrant on the outside can be dying on the inside ...

Even the most vibrant lovers of life need to frequently re-evaluate their priorities ...

Even the best fall down sometimes.

And in these moments of human vulnerability, it gives others a chance to lift, love, and carry the one who often lifts, loves, and carries them.

My twelve year old daughter makes tea several times a week now. It is in the exact spot where things were broken but have managed to come back stronger than before.

When she hands me that tall glass of forgiveness, I am given a reminder that brings relief to my parched soul. Today I feel compelled to pass that reminder on:

To you, the one who yelled again today and hangs her head in shame

To you, the one who doesn't even recognize himself anymore

To you, the one who can't remember the last time she laughed

To you, the one who can only see the damage done

To you, the one who feels like he's just going through the motions

To you, the one who can't seem to get herself together

To you, the one who thinks thoughts she could never say out loud

To you, the one who's slowly dying inside

My friend, you have feelings. They are real. They are worth listening to and acknowledging.

You have limits. They are real. They are necessary to keep in place as a means of valuing your time and honoring your health.

You have dreams. They are real. You are worthy of time to pursue what makes your heart come alive.

You have needs. They are real. You deserve affection, rest, sustenance, and grace.

Perhaps you forgot you have feelings. Perhaps you forgot you have limits. Perhaps you forgot that you deserve love and care just like anyone else. Perhaps you forgot that it is necessary to look after you.

It's okay. It's okay. I forgot too.

But today, let us look after ourselves just as we do our loved ones. After all, what good are we if we are not here?

And then maybe we can look after ourselves again tomorrow.

Even the one who holds up the world needs a reprieve.

Even the one who doles out the love needs replenished.

Even the best fall down sometimes.

And we'll never find out who's been waiting to help us up if we never allow ourselves to fall into the arms of grace.

Rachel is a New York Times best selling author of two books, "Hands Free for Life" and "Hands Free Mama". Both books are available in Utah's Adoption Connection Lending Library, utahadopt.org.



by: Tracy Dee Whitt, www.lovinadoptin.com

Last week I shared what fun has been going on here. After sharing this with a friend, she said, "It's not what you signed up for is it?" (A little background if you haven't been around for long: Justin and I adopted two children from foster care, Payton is seven, and Jeremiah is five, he has non-verbal autism.

My friend's words broke my heart, and shocked me. The strange thing is I share both the positive and negative with her, and before the last few weeks, Jeremiah and Payton had been doing really well, and most of my complaints center around how much pain I'm in, or how our family isn't getting support.

What she said was also a reflection of

how she feels about her life. Life has disappointed her, and she feels it's not what she signed up for, but it's not how I feel. I think she feels that if she isn't happy with her life, which doesn't have near the complications mine does (and that's okay), I couldn't possibly be happy or satisfied with mine.

However, I do love my life. Yeah there are hard times, but that's a given with what our family is made of.

So, this IS what I signed up for. I signed up to be a parent.

I didn't sign up for the expected, I signed up for the unexpected. Especially when I adopted two children from foster care. But frankly, most

of the time life doesn't go exactly as expected, and if it does, it's probably fairly boring. Ha, when I hear people complain that their life is boring, I want to yell, "Come visit me! I'll help you out with your boredom!"

I signed up for love, and I got it a million-fold. Jeremiah was crying last night when Justin put him to bed. He would cry a little and stop, cry a little more. This is odd, he usually stays in his room and plays until he falls asleep, so Justin offered him some crackers and water (that's normally the only reason Jeremiah cries at bedtime – he needs something else), but he wanted neither. He wanted to watch a movie. Odd.

I asked Jeremiah what he wanted, he went to the movie again and picked it up, I sat it down and told him, "No movie, it's bedtime." He cried again. I laid down with him on his bed and held him, but he kept circling in and out of crying. I asked, "Did you have a bad dream last night?" It was the only reason I could think of for him to not want to go to bed. He stopped crying and looked me in the eyes. This is sometimes his way of saying, "Yes." I responded, "I'm so sorry you had a bad dream or nightmare. I'm here and Daddy's here, you're safe." He wiped his darling eyes and began to drift off into sleep.

I'm so glad I was there for him, even though it might not be what I planned on doing for those twenty-five minutes (I had laundry and watering to do). Love, I do it because of love, and I loved those moments we had together, when he knew I would keep him safe, I would push away those horrible, scary

feelings, the connection when I understood what could not be spoken. I signed up for a child who could have a mega-ton more problems than he does. Frankly, we're lucky he only has autism, it's nothing compared to what

and hopefully have made me a better person. I signed up for really seeing humanity, viewing those people who are different in a whole new way.

No, not every day is sunshine and snowflakes, but without bad days we wouldn't appreciate the good. Without hard days we wouldn't appreciate the easy ones (or the laughs). Without struggle, we wouldn't know the gift of love when it arrives. I wouldn't know what I do about humanity if it weren't for what I chose. I chose two kids. I chose what I couldn't see, but now my eyes have been opened.

on adoption & autism
lovinadoptin.com

So, yeah this IS what I signed up for. No, not every day is full of sunshine and snowflakes, but without bad days, we wouldn't appreciate the good. Without hard ones, we wouldn't appreciate the easy ones (or the laughs). Without struggle, we wouldn't know the gift of love when it arrives. I wouldn't know what I do about humanity if it weren't for what I chose. I chose two kids, I chose what I couldn't see, but now my eyes have been opened. I choose autism.

it could've been. I signed up for learning a whole new rulebook on life. I signed up for the unexpected challenges that have changed me forever,

Tracey Dee Witt,
lovinadoptin.com,



The purpose of her blog is to support adoptive and foster families as well as those living with autism.



8 Practical Tips for Adoptive Parents

by Angelica Shields, scarymommy.com

As a therapist who has worked with many families who have chosen adoption, I'd like to shed some light on one of the greatest challenges that adoptive families face, and also provide some support for these amazing people.

Studies have found that adopted children and children in foster care display behavioral, developmental, and emotional issues more commonly than children who have been raised in one environment. Prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, abuse, neglect, lack of structure and consistency, poor nutrition, and reduced stimulation, can all contribute to the child's risk for ADHD, conduct disorder, attachment disorders, developmental delay, oppositional-

defiance, and poor social skills.

Some of the most evident problems that adopted/foster children endure are related to early disturbances in attachment. Often times these children were not given the opportunity to form a healthy bond with a stable and responsive caregiver, or an experience with a caregiver included abuse, trauma, or neglect. As a result, these children often crave love, but lack the skills and are terrified to form vulnerable bonds with others. They feel confused, afraid, and powerless when it comes to relationships, and often lack the emotional awareness and skills to handle these feelings without acting out. Often times it appears as if—and it is true in some sense—the child is doing everything in his power to push his new caregivers away in an effort to protect himself from pain and gain a sense of predictability.

Common attachment-related behaviors/characteristics are:

- Control issues
- Anger and aggressive behavior
- Disobedience, defiance
- Tantrum behavior
- Manipulative or passive-aggressive behavior
- Lack of remorse, guilt, or conscience
- Difficulty showing genuine caring and affection
- Being withdrawn
- Emotional detachment
- Overly dependent or independent
- Pushing others away or ignoring others
- Seeking comfort and attention from anyone

Dealing with attachment problems in a child can be especially trying for parents.

The child is often behaviorally difficult, and many of the typical reactions to misbehavior (parental frustration, anger, privileges revoked, stricter limits) can actually exacerbate the child's feelings of mistrust, anxiety, and isolation. The trick is providing discipline along with behaviors that model healthy attachment and show that the relationship is emotionally safe. This is not easy to do. It requires the parent to practice patience, wisdom, restraint, and thoughtful choices in words and reactions, even when he or she feels powerless and fed-up. It requires truly choosing to love through the emotional pain— not just the child's, but their own as well. Here are some simple, practical tips for adoptive parents (and foster parents) to “choose love” despite attachment challenges:

1. Manage your expectations. Attachment wounds take a long time to heal. Make sure you aren't attempting to get your needs for admiration, affection, and appreciation from your child. This shouldn't be the obligation of any child, but it is unrealistic in addition to unfair to expect of an adoptive/foster child. Your anger/frustration/“need to fix” will dissipate as soon as your expectations are aligned with reality. Remember to make time for self care, relaxation, personal pursuits, and healthy adult interaction. A support group or supportive therapy may also help with surrendering to the reality that your child struggles in a way that adds great demands to your life.

2. Establish very specific expectations/ rules as well as a specific consequence/ reward system before-hand, not just in response to misbehavior. In other words, on day one tell the child the “house rules.” Make sure these expectations are incredibly specific and realistic. Telling a 12-year-

old to “clean your room” or “empty the dishwasher” may seem age-appropriate. However, children whose frontal lobes have not adequately formed (due to neglect, lack of stimulation, stress, and prenatal substance exposure), may view these as daunting tasks. Meet your child where he is. If he needs a step-by-step drawing of each aspect of cleaning his room or emptying the dishwasher, provide him with one no matter how old he is.

3. Expect that he will disobey and test these rules, and when that happens, issue empathy with a 24-hour consequence (two week groundings just take away the child's incentive to try to improve behavior since they have a consequence anyway.) “Awe; it's too bad you can't have your friend come over tonight since you broke a rule. I really hope you show good listening tomorrow so you get a chance to have your playdate!” At the end of the consequence, go back to “warm, responsive, inviting parent” mode. Empathy and not holding grudges teaches the child “relationship resilience,” that just because I had to correct you does not mean I am unsafe.

4. Take opportunities to revisit developmental stages he may have missed out on. Although it may seem odd that an older child wants to be rocked, sang-to, or use a sippy-cup, indulge him as these behaviors may be his way of re-living developmental stage in safety in able to heal old wounds. Don't worry that this will cause him to regress, and don't worry about what others think. Your child is getting something out of engaging in that behavior, and your satisfying that need is showing him that you are a responsive caregiver.

5. Anticipate your child's needs (not wants) as much as possible without him having to ask you to meet that need. Make sure you buy healthy foods he

enjoys, establish the bed-time and meal schedule he needs, make sure he is picked up from school the day it snows instead of having to walk home, make sure he has new shoes before he grows out of the old ones, etc. The idea is to show him that you are consistently responsive to his needs completely independent of his behavior.

6. Have a weekly activity (game night, going out for pizza, movie night) that you do together, just as parent and child, that is absolutely prioritized and never cancelled due to punishment, disobedience, or something better coming up. Even if he is misbehaving, angry, etc., act neutral to pleasant during this weekly special time. This is teaching him the constant that is a parent's love.

7. Think of your child as having never learned, seen, or practiced pro social thinking or behavior. Instead of getting frustrated and bewildered and his lack of caring and apparent selfishness, take that opportunity to model and teach appropriate communication and empathy for others. Keep your voice calm; maintain eye contact; calmly reflect back what you hear him saying (even if he is yelling), tell him how you can see how he would see it that way; dig deep to extend some words of empathy (I would imagine that if I were in your shoes I'd feel angry too). Even when consequences are called-for, always model the pro-social behaviors of making him feel heard and understood before calmly delivering the consequence.

8. When in doubt, use humor and silliness. Even if your child doesn't crack a smile, singing badly, making a purposeful mess, dancing in the kitchen, and being an exaggerated goofball is sometimes the best medicine for yourself.



National Adoption Center[®]

There are no unwanted children...just unfound families

Discount Internet Services for Adoptive Parents

The National Adoption Center is pleased to let you know about a service, Internet Essentials, that Comcast is offering to some families.

If you, or a family you know, have a child who participates in the National School Lunch Program, your family may qualify for Comcast Internet Service at the low cost of \$9.95 a month plus tax. There are no price increases, no activation fees or equipment rental charges. In addition, the family may purchase a low-cost computer for just \$149 plus tax and receive free Internet training-online, in print and in person.

The National Adoption Center believes that every child deserves the right to an excellent education, and supports Comcast's conviction that Internet service can be an important part of that education. Internet at home allows children to do homework, search for jobs, download music, communicate with others and much more.

If you think this program might be right for a family, it's easy to get started.

www.InternetEssentials.com

to learn more, or call

1-855-8-INTERNET (1-855-846-8376)

to enroll and begin.

Comcast is committed to students' access to online learning, and is excited to tell you about programs like Internet Essentials that may be helpful to families.

Sincerely,
National Adoption Center

Wanting to Be Like Everyone Else

The preteen years can bring some changes in your child's feelings about adoption.

by Jayne Schooler

John has started at a new summer camp, where he knows none of the kids or counselors. He usually adjusts to new situations quickly, but the 10-year-old still feels alone after a week there. He feels “different,” even though the other kids don’t know he was adopted.

Because he’d been quieter than usual at dinner, his mom quizzed him. But he changed the subject. Just when you think your child is secure about the way your family was formed, after years of openness, discomfort about adoption returns. Why?

Searching for Sameness

“This is the ‘age of embarrassment,’” says Cheryl Proctor, an Ohio-based expert in post-adoption issues. “Preteens don’t want parents seeing them dressing or undressing, nor to be teased about the opposite sex. They don’t want to talk about their day, or about adoption, because it evokes feelings they may not know how to express.”

Preteens and young teens don’t want to be different. They’re involved in establishing “pecking order,” determining who’s cool and who’s not. What’s important is to be like everyone else. So a child’s adoption status, whether or not it’s known to the group, can be a source of embarrassment.

Then there’s the spectre of another set of parents. “A child knows there must be someone else out there that they have a connection to,” Proctor says. “This realization, coupled with feelings of divided loyalties, leaves some kids feeling different from their peers and embarrassed about it.”

How You Can Help

Such feelings about adoption are normal at this age. Your child may hate to discuss them, but there are other ways to help. First, Proctor recommends taking part in an adoption event. Being around other adoptive families helps a child see that his status is not unique to him. Activities like this offer a non-threatening arena where a child can see and talk with kids who are coping with similar issues.

Another strategy: “Point out, when it is appropriate, a hero who is an adoptee or adoptive parent,” Proctor suggests. Heroes and role models are important to a child at this age. Aside from a famous person, a hero might be a local coach, teacher, or athlete, even a teen at school or someone at church.

Finally, deal directly with embarrassment and any other feelings about adoption. Open the door for discussion by saying that you’ve noticed he seems uneasy about his adop-

tion. Use adoption-themed stories or films as springboards for conversations. Your own comfort with the discussion will go a long way in helping him overcome his discomfort with feeling different.

Ready to Talk

Parents need to proactively address preteens’ feelings about adoption. To help get ready for discussion, consider these points:

- When was the last time you discussed your child’s birth family with her? How did the talk make you feel? How do you think she felt?
- Try to imagine how your child feels about being adopted. Discuss this with her.
- When you imagine your child’s curiosity about her background, how do you feel?
- How much of your child’s past have you discussed with her? Have you answered questions honestly and completely? If not, why not?

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Helping Children Connect with their Birth Parents

by Lori Ross
Fall 2013 Adoptalk

I have been parenting adopted kids for 28 years now. I've had the chance to raise 12 children (8 adopted) to adulthood. In addition, I'm connected with dozens of my former foster kids who were reunified with their birth parents. My experiences, especially those of my adult children and their birth families, have led me to consider the concept of openness in adoption in a totally different way than I imagined years ago.

Learning about the Importance of Birth Family

Adoptive families are very different than traditional, biological families. The decision to add members to your family through a court process is similar to the decision to make a permanent commitment to your spouse through marriage. It's making a choice to be family.

For a long time, I believed termination of parental rights was just a court process. Maybe I needed to feel more secure about my role as an adoptive parent. Maybe I had a limited understanding of the depth of the genetic connection between biological parents and their children. Somehow I felt that a termination meant that "those" people were no longer "my" kids' parents.

About six years into foster/adoptive parenting, however, I met a young woman who had been adopted by another family. She confided in me about her conflicted loyalty between the love for her adoptive parents and her need to reconnect to members of her birth family. She wasn't rejecting her adoptive family; she was expressing sadness about having to pick a family. She felt it wasn't okay to belong in both. What hurt her most was her adoptive mother's inability to help her navigate those feelings without taking it as a rejection. She was a sensitive, caring young woman, in large part because of the love and compassion she had learned in her adoptive family. But she had to hide part of who

she was from the people she loved and needed the most.

From that experience, I learned it was my job to help my kids navigate their feelings about their birth families, without making the journey about me. I needed to be secure enough as their mother that I could listen, understand, and support whatever degree of reconnection they decided to have.

Evolution of Thinking

Still I had further to go in my journey toward openness. I was pretty sure there should be some disconnect between birth families and children at termination of parental rights. The act of terminating rights resulted from some failure on the birth parents' part to rectify the circumstances that caused them to abuse or neglect my children. Surely my kids needed time to heal from that trauma in the trauma-free environment of my home.

In our early days, I thought we were parenting experts. We'd mastered the skills to meet the needs of children with significant medical and mental health issues. We could parent teenagers with whom we had not shared the early formative years. But with the addition of each new child with significant issues, our trauma-free environment quickly became less peaceful. It eventually became clear we were not exactly offering a trauma-free environment.

Instead, we were hanging on for dear life and hoping that if we hung on long enough, the roller coaster would slow down. The working theory that I'd hung my hat on for so many years was out the door—there was no way to keep the trauma out. It was part and parcel of these kids no matter where they laid their heads at night.

The thing that tipped me right over the openness in adoption edge was the

dawn of social networking. With My Space, Facebook, and constant internet access, it finally clicked that there was no such thing as closed adoption anymore. Twenty years ago it might have been hard for my kids' birth parents to track us down. But even then it wasn't hard for many of our foster and adoptive kids to find their birth parents when they made the choice to do so, particularly if they were older than toddlers when they came into care. Now, it's not even a contest. We can find anyone we want to find by clicking a few buttons on the computer—and our kids can find them faster than we parents can.

Helping Your Children Learn Their Identity

So it's no longer a matter of if, it's when. It's no longer a matter of will they have contact, it's how will that contact look? As I've taken time to let that realization gel in my brain, it's finally occurred to me that it's really okay.

The biggest issue facing all adopted people is achieving a sense of identity that requires some connection to their biological parents. Understanding where you came from—all of who you are—helps you to be whole.

We've all recognized the need for medical information for adopted youth. They have a right to know what to expect as health issues arise. What we may not have recognized is that they also have a right to know and understand the people from whom they come, whose genes have helped shape their appearance, their sense of humor, their way of processing the challenges they face, and more. While we may think we are protecting our children from hard-to-hear information, we may be robbing them of what makes them who they are.

I still believe that there are valid reasons why some parents should not have custody of their children. I still believe that,

for the safety and protection of children, adoptive parents must join with the children and form a new kind of family. But I no longer feel it is my job to protect my children from their birth parents. Now, I feel it's my job to help my children navigate their relationship with their birth parents in a way that makes sense for each of them at their pace and their ability level. It's my job to partner with birth parents to make the best decisions to support our mutual children. Rather than cutting off the biological family from their lives, it's my job to bring the biological family into my family and to walk willingly with my child into their family as well.

My adopted children have two mothers, two fathers, and sometimes more. The best thing I can do for them is to help them be who they are, not who I want them to be. And isn't that truly what we want for all of our children?

Helping Other Parents Connect with Birth Family

This approach to openness takes hard work and practice. It's full of messy emotions for everyone. At Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association (MFCAA), we have been approached by adoptive parents who are pretty upset. Their child has found and reconnected with biological parents, adult siblings, or other family members—usually via social media. They don't know what to do about this intrusion and are desperately afraid the birth family influence will lead their child to harm. This stance has often led to an increasingly strained relationship between the adoptive parents and their child.

In a handful of cases where teens had already connected with their birth parents, our staff have encouraged adoptive parents to engage the birth family in a partnership, with a mutual goal of helping the child make good choices, communicate honestly, etc. In every situation we've seen, the birth parents love the child. There has been no doubt that the adoptive parents love the child. And when the two sets of parents come together with that mutual concern, they are able to mediate an agreement for contact that allows them to work together to support the child in a healthy way.

Helping adoptive parents is usually just a matter of a couple of meetings. First, an MFCAA staff member, who is a licensed

clinician and an adoptive parent, facilitates separate conversations with the adoptive parents and birth parents. In these separate meetings, each set of parents identifies old hurts, concerns, and hopes for the child, and goals for a reconnected relationship. We also help them see each other as real, but flawed human beings who care for the same child. Then, the staff member brings the two sets of parents together for one or more meetings.

While together, the two sets of parents discuss old hurts, talk about their common interest in what is best for the child, discuss what kinds of ground rules for contact will allow them to partner together for the benefit of the child, rather than being triangulated by the child for what he or she perceives to be a benefit. The meetings predict future conflict and establish a plan for how to manage that conflict. Mostly, what the meetings do is create a mutually respectful relationship between adults, with boundaries in place, that can help them begin to share the role of parenting through the rest of that child's life.

After the adults have established their agreements, the child is involved by first meeting with the adoptive parents, then with both sets of parents. During these facilitated sessions, the adoptive parents re-introduce the child to the birth parents, and together the parents explain the boundaries and rules for the new relationship. Both parents demonstrate mutual respect and support, and let the child know that they will be in contact with each other regularly.

In all the cases where MFCAA has provided this service, the goal was to help adoptive parents establish safe boundaries after a teen already reached out to birth family. In a dangerous situation, we would not move forward with the process and would likely recommend counseling and other services to keep the child safe.

One Family's Story

Several years ago, nine-year-old Allie was adopted with three younger siblings by George and Margaret*. Once Allie became a teen, she started to have behavioral problems, including running away. Margaret had remained in distant contact with the birth parents, although she had not allowed Allie direct contact. On one run, Allie reached out to her birth mother and an older sibling. Allie's

birth mom let Margaret know she'd heard from Allie, and eventually let her know where she was so that she could pick Allie up.

At that point, Margaret asked for our help in mediating the relationship with Allie's biological mom so that she could ensure the contact was healthy. Margaret struggled with the rejection she felt when Allie contacted her birth mother, but was able to focus on the reality that her daughter was going to have contact with her birth mother, and it was her job to make that contact as safe as possible.

MFCAA's Joe Beck then arranged a series of meetings (like those described earlier) during which he helped the two families establish better communication, guidelines for contact, and a plan for how to resolve future conflict. Over the course of the next year, the birth mother was able to go with Margaret to visit Allie in treatment. After treatment, Allie transitioned back to her home with Margaret and George, while keeping ongoing contact with her birth family.

While this was going on, the other siblings saw their two sets of parents interact positively for the benefit of their sister. They then felt comfortable to bring thoughts and questions about their birth parents to George and Margaret. As a result of having all of the information they needed about their birth parents, these three kids have a more secure sense of their own identity. They know and understand their birth parents, and feel solidly connected to their adoptive family where they belong.

The good news is that this process has worked for others as it did for Allie and her siblings. It's strengthening children's relationships with adoptive parents and birth parents. It's providing them with a sense of security in the knowledge that all of the adults they love can and will work together to do what is best for them. It's preventing triangulation and heartache. And it's allowing adopted youth to feel whole without fear.

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*names have been changed



The Challenges Don't End at the Adoption

By Aubriana Zelnak

It was mid-February 2005 when DCFS picked me and my four siblings up from the hotel we were living in. I was 11 years old. My five year old sister and I went to one home, our three brothers went to another home. Within an hour my sister and I were sitting in the bathroom of our first foster home getting the lice out of our hair. The tub had jets in it, it was absolutely huge, and it was the coolest tub I'd ever seen. We borrowed clothes to wear to bed (ours had to be destroyed because of the lice) and my sister and I went to sleep in a shared room, but in our very own beds! Compared to the many places I'd lived until this night, I truly believed I was living in a millionaires mansion. My sister and I lived with this family for about 15 months and with about four days notice we were told that we'd be moving when the school year ended. Later I learned that this family was open to adopting younger kids but because I was already 11 yrs old, they just didn't feel they were up to it. My caseworker didn't want to separate us so we were moved to live with a single foster mom who had eight children of her own, open to adopting all five of us! We were going to have a huge forever family!

It was so much fun to always have so many kids to play with. We didn't do a lot of things that cost money, because of all the kids in the house, but every year we spent a week in a camper at Lagoon! I loved being appreciated for all of the little things this foster mom saw in me (closing the microwave without slamming it, having a cooking interest, and being a good wall painter!). What I didn't like was that we moved three times in three years, which means changing schools (actually I attended 5 schools in those 3 years), making new friends, becoming familiar with new areas of Utah County. Months passed; years passed actually and no adoption was ever final-

ized. I still don't have answers about this. Then, after about three and a half years all five of us foster kids (my one sister and three brothers) were told to pack up for a few weeks because there was an investigation underway. Again, a few weeks turned into months and we actually never returned. I cried often, early on, not knowing what the hell happened. But as the months waned, my current foster mom (also single, but with no kids except my little sister and I), asked me if I would consider being adopted by her. I want to give you a little information about my Modge, (that's what I call my adopted mom, Nancy). She was working as a trainer for the Utah Foster Care Foundation when she became licensed to be a foster parent; she said she wanted to walk the walk. She was licensed in Sept 2009, and on Oct 19, 2009 my sister and I moved in with her, never to leave! Unbeknownst to me, Nancy knew my family from years earlier. She worked at DCFS back then and was the supervisor over the caseworker who managed my family's case. I didn't remember her when I moved in with her, but she knew us.

I was in Nancy's home for nine months to the day, prior to my adoption. She calls me her full-term baby! I was four weeks away from being 17 yrs old. I'm not going to say that it's all been warm and fuzzy since the adoption, but I will say, this is where I belong. I am a Zele-nak. Nancy has also adopted my little sister, another 'sister' who is half-Samoan (and my absolute best friend), and my half-brother who I was raised with for the first seven years of his life before we entered foster care (he was 17 when Nancy adopted him!).

My life at Nancy's was moving forward at warp speed, or so it felt. The first year I lived with her she made me get a library card, a savings account, a job, and

to start making my own dental and medical appointments. I hated talking on the phone to professionals, it really intimidated me. But since then, I've graduated high school, received my CNA and MA (Medical Assistant certification), I bought a Jeep, I moved out with my best friend, I was accepted to Nursing School at the University of Utah (to begin in January 2016) and life felt really good.

Then June 27, 2015 happened. I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I thought for sure this doctor was kidding me. But he's the one that called me in on a Saturday to tell me the news. I was so damn angry. I picked up his name plate and threw it across his office and broke it. He didn't seem really surprised, for all I know, it's happened before. But, why me? WHY? Wasn't six years in foster care enough? Wasn't being separated from my brothers and birth mom for years enough? A brain tumor?! Really?!

Today I feel like I'm moving backwards. I feel like I'm not contributing to life in any way. I had to move home, I had to sell my Jeep, I had to quit my job and postpone school until we can get this stage 2 malignant meningioma under control. They say it's inoperable, because of the risk of paralysis or life-long seizures, or becoming comatose. I'm participating in a four month clinical trial which ends around Halloween. We definitely have hope to shrink the tumor.

What's the purpose of this story? I was neglected as a child – I beat it. I spent six years in foster care – I beat that. So, I have cancer, I'll beat that, too. You'd think being in foster care for years is enough of a trial, it wasn't. You'd think being adopted is the pot-of-gold at the end of a raging storm, it wasn't. Life still happens. Challenges continue and so will I.

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