

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES


FEBRUARY 2016



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QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



Austin, age 14
Photo by: Shane Egan

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FEBRUARY 2016 EDITION

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Dear Birthmom,

At 6 I dreamed of you. I whole heartedly believed you were a queen who had a palace waiting for me. I believed you were the definition of perfection, and yet I had no idea who you were.

At 10 I felt abandoned by you. I was hoping with everything inside of me that you were somewhere nearby, waiting for the right time to introduce yourself. I looked for you in crowds, and prayed you had CSI agents watching me and giving you pictures. I convinced myself that you would come see me when I was a little older.

At 13 I hated you. I had no idea why you would leave me. My heart was being contorted by the love and hatred I felt for you. I never really knew what it felt like to love someone so much I hated them until 13. I began blaming myself...I must have done something wrong for you to not want me.

At 15 I longed for you. I just wanted to know who you were, why you weren't there to hold my hand, dry my tears, hold me close, and comfort me about boys. I felt like I didn't belong, like you had forgotten me, like I was a waste of space. I didn't look like anyone around me! I was the black sheep and that's how my insecurities grew. All my friends looked like their parents...but not me. Every wish when I blew out the candles, saw a shooting star, or got the bigger half of the wish bone, was for you to come find me.

At 17 I hit rock bottom. My entire life changed, at first for the worst, and then for the best. I picked myself up, and realized you weren't coming, no one was coming. I had to save myself. I dug deep within myself and used every last bit of strength on recovery. During recovery is when I realized that I'm not a waste of space. I was wanted. While I may not know what you look like, your greatest aspirations, or your darkest fears...I do know that you had a love so great for me you were willing to change your entire body for me, then make the biggest sacrifice of all: give me up so I could have a chance at a life.

Here I am 18 and strong. With tear stained cheeks and a heart full of renewed and enlightened love, I can finally say from the bottom of my heart, "thank you." Because of your decision I have a mother and a father. I have a sister and a real family who has given me everything. All I want for you is for you to find a family and create that same happiness that I have. I don't have to know what you look like, act like, or anything of that nature because I know the good that was inside of you. I hope you don't feel sorrow, despair, or depression. I hope you feel pride and love. I pray that the memory of me doesn't bring tears of regret or pain, but rather tears of courage and hope. All I want for you is happiness and prosperity. Letting go is never easy, and I'll always hold a piece of you in my heart, but now I understand the situation from a more mature perspective. You're never coming back, and after 18 years I have finally found peace with that conclusion. I hope you find every happiness the world has to offer, just know I'll always love you, you gave me the opportunity to have everything.

~Your Birth Daughter

Written by Meagan Tracey, reprinted with permission

Information Alert!!

Parents who have an adopted child on Medicaid coverage

This year you will be required to report to the IRS and Medicaid through the Department of Health that your adopted child is a recipient of Medicaid coverage and thus meets the Minimal Essential Coverage (MEC) for the Affordable Care Act. You will receive a notice in the mail around January 31, 2016 with instruction as to how to file the report.

On the Cover Audrey, 18



Audrey is a hard working and dedicated teen looking forward to her future! Known for being likeable, fun and personable, it's easy to see why Audrey is a breeze to talk with. She has a myriad of interests that include art, animals, music, and keeping active. Audrey has a love for horses and stuffed animals, enjoys skateboarding and playing sports, and loves to dance and play the piano, guitar or drums.

Audrey is doing well in school as an eleventh grader. She is looking forward to attending a public school and has a desire to attend college after graduation. She has expressed an interest in becoming a forensic pathologist or a coroner. Audrey has great social skills and enjoys spending time with her friends. She really believes in others and possesses a strong desire to succeed. Audrey currently benefits from counseling, which may need to continue after placement.

If your family can provide Audrey with a loving, committed and structured environment, we urge you to inquire. She has significant relationships she would like to maintain in the future. Audrey prefers to be placed with a family that has no religious affiliation. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

This is a LEGAL RISK ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT. Placement of a child with an approved pre-adoptive foster family who intends to adopt the child if reunification is not possible and adoption becomes necessary for the child. In legal risk placements, the rights of all of the child's birth parents have not yet been voluntarily or involuntarily terminated.

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

Photo by: Kris Doman

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.

Losing Ms. Theresa

By: Sharlene Tolbert

My mother was told by her doctor that she would never have kids, but then she had me, her only child. I thought my mother would give me love and attention, since she was blessed to have me. But from the time I was 6 years old I had the sense that she didn't care about me.

School was important to me as a child, but my mother never praised my good grades or attended the family conferences. Every time she missed a family conference, I would take a long shower and cry until I got sleepy. Sometimes when she got her SSI check, I would come home from school and the house would be empty. She would be out spending her money with her sister, who lived nearby, and her nieces and nephews. When she got home she would have no money for me.

In elementary school, I had five outfits to wear to school and a cheap pair of sneakers. Meanwhile my cousins had lots of name-brand clothes that my mother bought them. I don't think my mom realized how badly it hurt me that she didn't provide for me. I thought she loved them more than me.

When I was 9 years old, I grew depressed. I cried more. I didn't care how I presented myself to the world and started to walk around with my head down. I stayed in the house a lot.

When I was 10, my mother drove me up to meet my father, for the first time since I was 3. I didn't remember him or know much about him. I just knew that he was Jamaican and that he lived out in the country.

When I got out of the car, I was scared that he wouldn't love me. I worried that he would think that I was ugly and

wouldn't accept me as his own. But he hugged me like I'd come back from the dead. My heart started to hurt. I felt love in my father's arms, and I wanted to stay with him.

He was about 5'4" with a kind of big belly. His skin was soft caramel toned. He only had hair on the sides, not the top. I knew where I got my eyes from because his eyes never looked like they were open, especially when he was laughing. After that my mother and I went up there almost every week, and every week I got closer to him. But I still was acting shy.

Five days after my 11th birthday, my father died of a heart attack. That day my life changed. I started to physically fight my mother, and fight in school nearly every day.

Then my mother melted down and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I would hear her talk to herself and wave her hand like somebody was actually in the room. Nobody wanted to be bothered with her when she was like that. My aunts kept saying that she was my mother and it was my turn to take care of her. It was too much for an 11-year-old.

I thought to myself, Why do I have to take care of a grown woman who never took me to my doctor appointments, got my hair done, or made sure I bathed? She would give me a hard time when I tried to give her her medications, and then I would put my hands on her. Then my aunts would yell at me for that. Nobody asked me how I felt about the whole situation. I felt trapped in a hospital. I felt like I was the nurse, and my payment was hospital food and free television.

Angry at the World

When I was 13, I talked to a counselor in my school and she told me about foster care. I thought that would be the best choice, to live with a different family. I wanted to finish school, and I knew if I stayed with my mother, I wouldn't graduate from high school and move on to college.

A Children's Protective Services (CPS) worker picked me up from school and took me to my mother's house so she could sign some papers and I could pack. My mother didn't want to sign, but I begged her. She did it, but she was hurt. That was exactly how I wanted her to feel. She'd been hitting me since I was 9 and putting my needs last my whole life. I felt like she took away my childhood, and I wanted her to feel everything that she put me through.

Within 24 hours, I was placed in a group home on Long Island. My body and emotions felt abused. I was angry at the world and felt like I had to fight to get what I wanted.

Later that week I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital because I told the psychologist that I would hurt myself when I got sad and or mad, and I had tried to kill myself multiple times. I fought and cut myself in the hospital, so I ended up staying there three months.

After I was discharged, I was placed in a group home on Staten Island. A few months later I was arrested for throwing a desk at a teacher. I was in and out of juvenile detention facilities for two months.

My boyfriend and I AWOLed together.

We slept in an abandoned building in the Bronx on a hard, cold concrete floor with one sheet. Instead of enjoying becoming a teenager, I spent the first few months of being 13 sneaking onto trains, stealing food, asking people for money, and trying not to freeze to death on that cold floor. After I turned 14, CPS caught up with me and placed me with Ms. Theresa.

When I first met Ms. Theresa I was scared. I had wanted to live with a foster parent after the group home, but I had heard stories about children getting abused by their foster parents. She had one son and four daughters, one of whom was my age. I was excited because I always wanted brothers and sisters.

A Motherly Smile

That first day in the house, I was nervous. Her youngest daughters were watching television, and I said hi. They said hi back, and I was relieved they weren't nasty to me. Later on that night, I was in my room watching television and the two oldest daughters walked in. I felt nervous again. I thought getting the older girls to like me would be harder than the younger daughters. But they asked me how I liked their house so far, and I felt welcomed.

The next day, Ms. Theresa took me shopping. I was shocked because I didn't know that foster parents were supposed to do that. That's when I realized she cared about me. I liked how Ms. Theresa looked. Even on her lazy days she would put a nice outfit on. Her hair styles and eyebrows were always on point, and her smile was like thousands of motherly hugs. She made me feel accepted.

I was only at Ms. Theresa's house for a couple of weeks before I had to go to court for a previous assault charge. The judge said no more than two words and I was sent back to a juvenile jail for a week, because I'd AWOLed so much before.

I was afraid that Ms. Theresa wouldn't want somebody who got arrested in her home, so I was happy when she took me back. She simply said, "I hope you learned your lesson and wouldn't want to go back in there." I looked at her and smiled and said, "Yes I did."

School was starting and I was happy that my grades were high enough that I

could move on to the 9th grade. The first semester, I made friends and also got good grades. Getting good grades made me feel good, because I proved to myself that I am smart. But it wasn't a feeling I was used to, and I didn't know how to enjoy it. I was used to attention for being bad.

I told my birth mom about my good grades and the awards I got in math and English. She seemed proud and told my aunts and cousins and they congratulated me too. I knew that the court had told her if she took her medication and went to therapy and groups, she could get me back. She would praise me, but it didn't seem like she was trying to get me back. I wondered why she was finally acknowledging my good grades.

Not Used to Rules

I wasn't used to rules or curfews, and Ms. Theresa's rules felt like lockdown at the group homes. Ms. Theresa encouraged me to make friends, but I acted different with my friends. I was quiet around Ms. Theresa, but I was wild and loud with my friends.

I started to feel alone again. I wanted to hang out with my friends and check out boys. I started to cut classes with my friends. At first it was once a week, then twice a week, and then the teacher didn't even remember my name.

When my report card came, Ms. Theresa saw that I was cutting and she punished me by making me come straight home from school, then by taking things away. I was disappointed in my bad grades, too, and I gave up even trying. I was used to not having much, so Ms. Theresa taking things away didn't bother me.

But even on punishment, Ms. Theresa still bought me school clothes, sneakers, and other stuff. She didn't give me a lot just because I was on punishment but she didn't want to leave me out of certain things. I started to feel bad because I knew that she didn't have to put up with my actions. She could easily have taken me back to the agency, but she didn't.

"Sharlene, why do you continue to cut class? Is there something that you want to tell me?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I don't know." I didn't.

Even though she made me feel accepted I still didn't know how to open up. I could see Ms. Theresa getting fed up. I wanted to change but I couldn't. It was like I had my mother's bad priorities. My mother picked having a good time over paying the bills, and she picked my cousins over me. I was picking my friends over Ms. Theresa, who cared about me and was sticking by me.

I Changed Too Late

When I was 16, I got caught by the cops in a car with a much older man. Ms. Theresa couldn't even look at me. She took me up to the agency and told them that she couldn't take me back home. Before we said our good-byes, she bought me Chinese food. That broke my heart and I felt like I broke her heart as well.

Though I didn't act on it until it was too late, Ms. Theresa helped me mature and understand myself in the two years I lived with her. I learned that I had a problem with receiving help. My mistake was living in the past where everybody let me down. I couldn't believe Ms. Theresa really could love me like a mother, but she did.

I still keep in contact with her. She invites me to family events, and she told me that I am always welcome for the holidays. When I achieve something, she tells me that she is proud of me. That motivates me to do more positive things in my life. I stopped cutting class. I have been on the honor roll for four semesters.

I visited her a couple of months after I moved to a new foster home. She had a new foster child. Ms. Theresa told me that she was doing even worse things than I had been doing there. Ms. Theresa asked me to talk to her, and this is what I said to the girl:

"You don't know what you have right now. Ms. Theresa can be your friend and your mother. She will help you and give you things, but you have to respect her and her house. There are not a lot of foster parents out there like her. Trust me, I know. I messed up big time, and I regret it every day."

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By: Kathy Lynn Harris

Dear Mom of an Adopted Child,

I met you in adoption education class. I met you at the agency. I met you at my son's school. I met you online. I met you on purpose. I met you by accident.

It doesn't matter. The thing is, I knew you right away. I recognize the fierce determination. The grit. The fight. Because everything about what you have was a decision, and nothing about what you have was easy. You are the kind of woman who Makes Things Happen. After all, you made this happen, this family you have.

Maybe you prayed for it. Maybe you had to convince a partner it was the right thing. Maybe you did it alone. Maybe people told you to just be happy with what you had before. Maybe someone told you it simply wasn't in God's plans for you to have a child, this child whose hair you now brush lightly from his face. Maybe someone warned you about what happened to their cousin's neighbor's friend. Maybe you ignored them.

Maybe you planned for it for years. Maybe an opportunity dropped into your lap. Maybe you depleted your life savings for it. Maybe it was not your first choice. But maybe it was.

Regardless, I know you. And I see how you hold on so tight. Sometimes too tight. Because that's what we do, isn't it?

I know about all those books you read back then. The ones everyone reads about sleep patterns and cloth versus disposable, yes -- but the extra ones, too. About dealing with attachment disorders, breast milk banks, babies born addicted to alcohol, cocaine, meth. About cognitive delays, language deficiencies. About counseling support services, tax and insurance issues, open adoption pros and cons, legal rights.

I know about the fingerprinting, the background checks, the credit reports, the interviews, the references. I know about the classes -- so many classes. I

know the frustration of the never-ending paperwork. The hours of going over finances, of having garage sales and bake sales and whatever-it-takes sales to raise money to afford it all.

I know how you never lost sight of what you wanted.

I know about the match call, the soaring of everything inside you to cloud-height, even higher. And then the tucking of that away because, well, these things fall through, you know.

Maybe you told your mother, a few close friends. Maybe you shouted it to the world. Maybe you allowed yourself to decorate a baby's room, buy a car seat. Maybe you bought a soft blanket, just that one blanket, and held it to your cheek every night.

I know about your home visits. I know about your knuckles, cracked and bleeding from cleaning every square inch of

your home the night before. I know about you burning the coffee cake and trying to fix your mascara before the social worker rang the doorbell.

And I know about the follow-up visits, when you hadn't slept in three weeks because the baby had colic. I know how you wanted so badly to show that you had it all together, even though you were back to working more-than-full-time, maybe without maternity leave, without the family and casseroles and welcome-home balloons and plants.

And I've seen you in foreign countries, strange lands, staying in dirty hotels, taking weeks away from work, struggling to understand what's being promised and what's not. Struggling to offer your love to a little one who is unsettled and afraid. Waiting, wishing, greeting, loving, flying, nesting, coming home.

I've seen you down the street at the hospital when a baby was born, trying to figure out where you belong in the scene that's emerging. I've seen your face as you hear a nurse whisper to the birthmother that she doesn't have to go through with this. I've seen you trying so hard to give this birthmother all of your respect and patience and compassion in those moments -- while you bite your lip and close your eyes, not knowing if she will change her mind, if this has all been a dream coming to an abrupt end in a sterile environment. Not knowing if this is your time. Not knowing so much.

I've seen you look down into a newborn infant's eyes, wondering if he's really yours, wondering if you can quiet your mind and good sense long enough to give yourself over completely.

And then, to have the child in your arms, at home, that first night. His little fingers curled around yours. His warm heart beating against yours.

I know that bliss. The perfect, guarded, hopeful bliss.

I also know about you on adoption day. The nerves that morning, the judge, the formality, the relief, the joy. The letting out of a breath maybe you didn't even know you were holding for months. Months.

I've seen you meet your child's birthparents and grandparents weeks or years down the road. I've seen you share your child with strangers who have his nose, his smile ... people who love him because he's one of them. I've seen you hold him in the evenings after those visits, when he's shaken and confused and really just wants a stuffed animal and to rest his head on your shoulder.

I've seen you worry when your child brings home a family tree project from school. Or a request to bring in photos of him and his dad, so that the class can compare traits that are passed down, like blue eyes or square chins. I know you worry, because you can protect your child from a lot of things -- but you can't protect him from being different in a world so intent on celebrating sameness.

I've seen you at the doctor's office, filling out medical histories, leaving blanks, question marks, hoping the little spaces don't turn into big problems later on.

I've seen you answer all of the tough questions, the questions that have to do with why, and love, and how much, and where, and who, and how come, mama?

How come?

I've seen you wonder how you'll react the first time you hear the dreaded, "You're not my real mom." And I've seen you smile softly in the face of that question, remaining calm and loving, until you lock yourself in the bathroom and muffle your soft cries with the sound of the shower.

I've seen you cringe just a little when someone says your child is lucky to have you. Because you know with all your being that it is the other way around.

But most of all, I want you to know that I've seen you look into your child's eyes. And while you will never see a reflection of your own eyes there, you see something that's just as powerful: A reflection of your complete and unstoppable love for this person who grew in the midst of your tears and laughter -- and whose loss would be like the loss of yourself.

Kathy Lynn Harris grew up in South Texas and now lives in a log cabin at the top of a Colorado mountain. She is the author of two Amazon best-selling novels, one of which won a national literary award in 2013. She's also written children's books, magazine articles, a nationally recognized online column on mountain living, short stories, essays and award-winning poetry. Her work has appeared in numerous published anthologies, as well. Ice-cold Dr Pepper, good manners, and Texas A&M football are still part of her religion, and according to BuzzFeed and Zimbio, her celebrity lookalikes are Sandra Bullock and Catherine Zeta-Jones (in the curvy years). She blogs at kathylynnharris.com.



The Science of Parent-Child Relationships: Parental Openness Can Help Children Learn to Trust

from Winter 2013 Adoptalk

by Jonathan Baylin, Ph.D. and Daniel Hughes, Ph.D. Dr. Baylin and Dr. Hughes are coauthors of *Brain-Based Parenting: The Neuroscience of Caregiving for Healthy Attachment*, published in 2012 by Norton Press. They will present both a keynote session and a full-day preconference training at the NACAC conference in Toronto in August 2016

Children who experience early trauma learn to survive by not trusting their caregivers or the world around them. They become naturally defensive and face the daunting task of learning to trust once they are in the care of trustworthy parents. Caregivers face the huge challenge of keeping their minds and hearts open despite repeated experiences of what feels like rejection from a mistrustful child.

The neuroscience of parenting and attachment is deepening our understanding of challenges faced by both these children and their parents. New knowledge from brain science provides a better understanding of how and why the most loving parents can lose touch with their good intentions and develop what we call “blocked care” when they don’t

receive caring responses from a child. With blocked care, brain systems that support empathy start to shut down to protect parents from rejection, and parents may feel angry or upset, or take children’s behavior personally. Painful parenting can cause actual wear and tear on parents’ brains, making it harder to be loving and nurturing.

If parents understand why their child has become mistrustful and how it affects the child’s behavior, they are less likely to react defensively when a child does not reciprocate love. They can then begin to embrace parental actions that promote trust—playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy (PACE). When parents can regulate negative feelings, accept the whole child—mistrust and all—and employ actions like

PACE, the child can gradually feel safer and the parent-child bond improves.

Whole Brain Parenting

A brain-based caregiving approach helps parents stay open to untrusting children, embracing the whole child rather than shifting into defense. Parenting calls upon at least five different brain systems that enable us to:

1. stay close to our kids without getting too defensive;
2. derive pleasure or joy from caring for and interacting with our kids;
3. attune to kids’ inner lives using powers of empathy and understanding;
4. construct rich stories about being parents; and

5. regulate negative, uncaring reactions most of the time.

When a parent can keep all five systems up and running, a child gets to interact with an open-minded, empathic adult in ways that enhance a child's brain development.

Learning to Mistrust

Children who start life with people who can be volatile learn to avoid getting too close to these adults. A complicated dance of approach and avoidance becomes the child's template for relating to others and surviving. Even very young infants learn from their experiences with caregivers whether it is safe or dangerous to interact with adults. These early experiences are stored in the child's brain as their first social memories, and these memories are easily triggered again by facial expression, tone of voice, or movement. When frightening memories are triggered later in life, they may act like flashbacks, the kind of memory in which the child's brain cannot tell the difference between now and then. In the midst of this kind of reaction, a child does not distinguish between former adults who were hurtful and current ones who aren't.

Learning to trust after first learning to mistrust is hard work for developing brains. Unlearning a strategy of basic mistrust involves two types of learning—called “reversal learning” and “fear extinction”—that depend heavily on the prefrontal cortex. Since early exposure to high levels of stress can suppress prefrontal cortex development, many children may have a hard time letting go of defensiveness. They are likely to do the same old defensive things over and over with new caregivers. As a result, learning to trust is often a slow and repetitive process requiring understanding and patience from all adults involved.

Learning to Trust in Stages

As children gradually transition to trust,

one of the crucial stages is beginning to question their own feelings of mistrust. Being conflicted about trusting a parent is progress, big progress, over automatically mistrusting. Caregivers and therapists should take heart when a deeply defensive child begins to question her mistrust, asking: Are you being mean or nice? Can I trust you or should I stick with mistrust and know I won't get hurt again?

Parents who are able to see the child's lack of trust as a natural outgrowth of early experiences are more prepared to welcome opportunities to help a child verbalize mistrustful feelings. For example, if a child looks upset when a parent says something positive, the parent could ask the child what she is feeling and encourage her to talk about her reaction. The goal is to make it safe for a child to bring her hidden strategy of mistrust into the light of day, where it's safe to speak about it, be curious about it, and begin to change it.

The parent can also play detective, exploring why the child learned to mistrust. Curiosity can help construct a new narrative, a coherent, engaging story that contradicts untold stories of being a bad kid who didn't deserve parental love. By taking responsibility for being a trust builder, a parent can hold on to her own good intentions. Realizing that a parent is and will be in the trust building business can go a long way toward preventing blocked care.

Safe to Be Sad

An important step in helping a child learn to trust is enabling the child to risk feeling sad around their parent. Building opportunities for comforting a sad child who usually resists any offer of comfort is vital to promote the development of more secure attachment. Parents must look for opportunities to help children experience the sadness of their early experiences and losses, not just the anger, alienation, or numbness.

Sadness calls out for help, for comfort.

Sadness comes from the cingulate, the part of the brain that generates cries for help in young mammals separated from their caregivers. When caregivers hear these distress sounds, their cingulates light up in response, urging them to find, retrieve, and comfort the lost baby. Effective attachment-focused treatment awakens the cingulate and activates this call-and-response system between parent and child. Therefore, feeling emotional pain can be good, allowing the child to experience a parent as caring and the parent to feel effective and empowered.

Parents can build chances to activate this vital distress system by watching for subtle signs of a child trying to suppress tears or hold back the need for a hug. Using a soft, caring voice at these times may help the child accept and feel the emerging sadness, and create a safe space to express this scary emotion. Children who are finally able to cry and be comforted often seem to find great relief in this reciprocal interaction with their parents.

The Element of Surprise

Another essential component of change involves surprising the defensive child with unexpected playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy (PACE). Indeed, there can be no change without surprise as part of the parent-child relationship. Parents have to violate the child's negative expectations to help the child's brain start to see and feel the current signs of love and safety. In therapy lingo, creating a “therapeutic conflict” in the child's mind is an essential ingredient of change. When we detect a conflict between what we expect and what is actually happening, the brain's anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) becomes more active. ACC activity signals us that something important is going on and we need to pay attention so we can understand what's happening. This internal conflict helps put the brakes on old automatic ways of feeling, thinking, and acting, and thus serves as a gateway to change.

Using PACE, parents can promote the reversal learning and fear extinction that help defensive kids shift from mistrust to trust. PACE helps children see, hear, and feel the difference between the new sensations of being truly cared for and the negative sights, sounds, and touch associated with previous experiences and caregivers. Parents can highlight the element of surprise by using a surprised voice: "Wow, I get it! You thought I was being mean when I said you've really been showing your feelings lately. I guess it's still hard for you to know how much I love you!"

Playfulness promotes engagement by keeping the defense system off. Just as receiving comfort soothes the stress response system, playful interactions can shift brains from defensiveness to pleasurable engagement. Playfulness can make a child forget to be mistrustful for a while. For example, when a child gets a bit silly, a parent might join in the silliness, taking care to monitor the child's response and match the child's energy without going overboard.

Acceptance—especially when a parent accepts the full range of a child's feelings while also setting limits to ensure safety—helps a child learn to feel safe with her own feelings and thoughts without having to suppress parts of herself and her experience. Deep acceptance is crucial in helping a child question her deeply engrained experience of feeling bad or unlovable. Parents of mistrusting kids have many opportunities to show acceptance of their child's negative feelings. One of the best times for showing parental acceptance is when a child is angry and expecting the parent to get mad in response. When the parent acknowledges the child's anger without being defensive, the child gets to feel safe expressing anger. This can help the child feel heard and seen in a way that can reduce the likelihood of escalation into prolonged rage. Feeling safe with negative emotions is crucial for learning to regulate these emotions.

Curiosity promotes a search for meaning, for incorporating new aspects of our experience into our knowledge base. When parents are curious about what's going on inside a defensive child's mind, they might jiggle the child's brain out of defense and get the child interested in why she feels what she does. A parent can use curiosity with a child about a negative interaction after the heat of the moment has passed, wondering out loud with the child what happened and what the child experienced. This is a great way to help a child reflect on her and her parents' actions instead of just moving on.

Empathy, in which parents mirror a child's emotions while still being a parent, helps parents attune to the child's experience and connect more deeply with the child. Fortunately, we have mirror cells in our brains to help us do this. When the brain's empathy system is on, the defense system is off. Parents of mistrusting kids do well, at times, to picture their child as an infant learning to be defensive without even knowing she was learning. This imagery can help the parent empathize with a child who is behaving defensively now.

PACE for Parents

In brain terms, parenting is a pretty complex process. Keeping the parenting brain healthy and working well takes self-care and supportive connections with other adults. Tending to the well-being and brain health of parents is one of the best investments we can make as a society. We need to understand as deeply as we can what it takes to parent well and how we can support parents, especially those who are experiencing extreme stress and are at risk of developing chronic blocked care.

Helping parents embrace this model of brain-based parenting, a model of parenting the "whole brain child" as Siegel and Bryson put it, may be the most powerful intervention mental health

professionals can use with families raising mistrusting children. Depending upon the parent's background and adult attachment status, this process can be straightforward or complex. Parents who have not resolved their own unfinished business from childhood will need to experience PACE from therapists in the early stages of treatment. Just as children need to be surprised by PACE, parents who expect to be misunderstood need to experience the opposite. They have to feel safe to share their darkest feelings about themselves and their children if they are going to trust the professional as a guide toward a better parent-child bond. Professionals can also help parents examine their own familial relationships and look for triggers in their own parenting.

To build attachment and enhance the parent-child relationship, we need to employ a whole brain approach for both parents and children—a model that addresses how a child's early experiences affect not only the child but also the parent's ability to provide loving care. By helping parents learn to respond positively and proactively to their children's learned mistrust, we can create a roadmap for helping them teach their children to trust.

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Developing the Capacity to Mean Business *Without Being Mean*

By Deborah Hage

Scott Peck opens his book *The Road Less Traveled* with, “Life is difficult.” No truer words have been spoken when it comes to parenting. Parenting is difficult. Adoptive parenting, foster parenting, parenting in general, is difficult. It is difficult for the wealthy and difficult for the poor. It is difficult for those with healthy children and those whose children are behaviorally, physically and/or emotionally outside the norm. The acceptance of that fact is foundational to approaching the task in a way that is healthy for both parents and children. It is the precursor to accepting that no one gets to choose what happens to them, we only get to choose how we will respond. When we accept that parenting is difficult then we can set aside the unrealistic expectation that the path will be easy. We can set aside the expectation that our children will be the way we envision or behave the way we desire. It is when our children don’t meet our expectations or the parenting experience is not what we had hoped for that we become angry or upset. We are unhappy because our expectations have not been met. The most direct approach to becoming happy is, therefore, to set aside our expectations and accept what IS, not what we hoped for. In other words, happiness or unhappiness is all in our heads. We can’t choose how our children behave, but we can choose how we will respond to that behavior. We can’t choose happiness for them, but we can choose happiness for ourselves. If we lose site of this basic principle we then project onto our children that they are the source of our happiness or unhappiness. We communicate to them that control of our well-being is vested in them. The problem with this is obvious. If we blame others for our unhappiness then they can blame us for their unhappiness. If we believe our personal happiness is up to those around us, those who, for the most part, are out of

our ability to control, then happiness will always elude us. Anyone who has been a parent for any length of time knows we cannot make our children do anything, least of all make us happy. All we can do is set up situations where appropriate choices are rewarded and inappropriate choices have consequences. In this way everyone in the family has access to the same well of happiness. Some will choose it, some may not but those who don’t choose it need it made clear that their choices are about them, not about the parents. If parents become unhappy because of their child’s behavior then the child is in control of the tone of the home and the parents have abdicated their responsibility. If everyone goes down when one child goes down then the child does not have a model of what happiness looks like. They believe that if happiness is not accessible to the adults, who are supposedly powerful, it is therefore not accessible to anyone. The family environment needs to remain overall positive so the child has a goal to reach for. It is the parents’ responsibility to maintain a high emotional tone in the home by maintaining their own equanimity.

It becomes of primary importance for parents to take good care of themselves. Sleep long. Eat well. Exercise. Get filled up by association with others. Don’t be “therapeutic” at your own expense. Don’t let a child sabotage the good times of the entire family in order to teach that child a lesson. Consequence and discipline in such a way that no matter what the child chooses you are ok.

When parents take good care of themselves and keep an emotional distance between their happiness and their child’s behavior they have the ability to mean business without being mean. They can remain dispassionate about their child’s

behaviors and see them as separate from themselves. Because their child’s behaviors are not about them they can give directions to the child in an appropriate tone of voice. Choosing a tone of voice is critical to “meaning business without being mean.” Police officers don’t start yelling at the person getting a speeding ticket. Whether or not the speeder violates the law does not affect the officer personally. There is no emotional involvement. He just tells the violator what the law is, how they violated it and what the consequence is. Gate agents at the airport don’t start screaming at the person who runs up after the door has closed, “What, did you think the whole plane was going to wait for you? Why didn’t you leave in enough time? You should have been here 10 minutes ago.” Whether or not the traveler catches the plane has no affect on their day whatsoever. They simply tell the traveler they missed the plane and what they need to do to catch another flight.

The same is true for parents. If the parent exhibits a huge level of emotionality then the child thinks, “Wow, this sure is important to my parents. It is not nearly so important to me as all that. No point in both of us worrying about this.” The child then backs off taking responsibility for his actions as he is not as bothered by them and his parents obviously are. The general rule is that the person who has behaved the most irresponsibly should be the one bearing the brunt of the emotionality. In other words, if someone is going to get upset over unpleasant behavior it should be the one who exhibited the unpleasant behavior. If the parent does not demonstrate that he or she is in control, even when angry, then how will the child learn that such a goal is attainable? Understand and appreciate that no one can make you angry. No one can make you feel any

emotion. Parents are not puppets pulled by the strings of their children. You choose your response, positive or negative, to all events. If that were not the case then we would be a race of robots, entirely predictable. Everyone would be programmed to respond in the same way. Anything said in anger diminishes you, diminishes the child, and demonstrates you are not in control of yourself, much less anybody else. You are the adult. Anything said in anger loses all potential to affect change in the child. The child will focus on the anger, not on the source of the anger.

If feeling overwhelmed by anger, then the parent needs to model what is expected of children when they are angry. Go for a walk. Eat chocolate. Separate oneself until you are calmed down. Don't do those things, as a parent, that will cause you to lose respect for yourself. Demonstrate that people can be angry and no one gets hurt, demeaning words are not said, nothing gets broken. If the parents can't control their own anger what hope is there for the child to learn how intense emotion is handled? Every time a child hears, "You make me so angry!" the message becomes more deeply engrained that as individuals we are not responsible for our emotions or the behaviors that are generated as a result. Parents must not be surprised then, when the child hurls the same ill-conceived words back.

In order to reach some sort of nirvana of parenting, do we avoid imposing tasks in order to avoid the anger it generates in the child? Absolutely not!! What it does mean is that our attitude about chores changes. We understand that in order to have a happy life and engage in happy relationships we must learn to be reciprocal. The adage should not be "Give and take". The adage is more appropriately worded "Give and get." When we give of ourselves then we get back in reciprocal measures. The more we give the more we receive. The more we behave responsibly the more privileges and rewards we have. Teaching children to be reciprocal is therefore an absolutely critical goal of parenting.

Children who do not learn to do chores grow up believing that the world owes them a living that they are powerless

to affect their own happiness, as they are dependent on others to take care of them. Children who do not learn to do chores end up having a lower self-esteem, not a higher one, as they do not see where they fit in the world or what they can do that has value. Having children help out around the house is not about raising a generation of personal servants who must fulfill the ego needs of the adult by having someone to order around. Teaching a child to do chores is a gift that parents give their children. Tasks are opportunities for the child to learn the skills of living in relationship with others. Not doing the task is not disrespectful; it is a lost opportunity. When a child says "no" to his parents, it is not about the parents. It is about the child! When parents have this attitude it becomes clear that children who refuse to do a chore are robbing themselves of learning a skill that will enable them to have a happier life. The child who refuses to cooperate is not making life for the parent harder, as for the most part; it is easier for the parent to do the job himself. Teaching task completion is a sacrifice the parent makes for the child. It is not about being the master in your home or dictator for life. It is about teaching children that they can do for others, cooperate, and their life gets better, happier, as they earn more freedoms and privileges.

A foundational concept of teaching children reciprocity is for the parents to not impose a task unless they know what the reward will be if the child does it and what they will do if the child chooses to not do it. Anger at lack of cooperation and reciprocity is more apt to occur when the parent is caught off guard. Planning for it enables the parent to stay on an even keel and keep a positive tone of voice. When dealing with a child who is not expected to cooperate, one of the most positive tools a parent can use is a double bind. That is, give the child permission to do what he is going to do anyway, that you couldn't stop even if you wanted to.

Double binds are parenting techniques that short-circuit a child's resistance. They work because they circumvent a child's anger and fear systems and help prevent them from becoming aroused. They also work because they eliminate

the control battles that often escalate into confrontations between the parent and child. The basic use of a paradoxical directive is to tell the child to do what he is going to do anyway. If the child chooses the usual negative behavior it is a win/win; the child did what the parents told him to do. If he does not engage in the negative behavior in order to demonstrate that his parents can't tell him what to do then the parents win because he is making a good choice. Either way both the parent and the child win! Foster Cline in his book *Understanding and Treating The Difficult Child* wrote, "A therapeutic double bind means putting a child into a position where the only way out is health!" When done appropriately they move the control battles from outside the child to inside the child, from the parents to the child.

A classic example would be to tell the child who always tantrums when asked to do a chore that he is going to be asked to do something which always causes him to scream and yell so go ahead and scream and yell and get it out of the way first. If the child screams and yells the parent is in control as the parent gave the child permission to do exactly that. The parent can hardly get upset when the child is doing what he has been told to do. If the child does not scream and yell and instead states that he can do the chore without screaming and yelling the parent is still in control; the child has made a good decision and the end result is the desired one. Predicting for a child what he normally does under certain circumstances enables the child to make a different choice. Giving children the opportunity to make good choices is the foundation of healthy parenting.

It is not the parents' job to guarantee their child's happiness. No one can guarantee the happiness of another. No one can make someone else happy. The parental responsibility is to model personal contentment and give their child opportunities for happiness, then sit back. By giving children opportunities to learn reciprocity, emotional control, and task completion parents give them the keys to opening up the door of their own lives. Ultimately, it is up to the children to open the door for themselves.

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Intimate Strangers

From the January/February 2009 issue. *Adoptive Families Today*
by Amy Ford

As a foster parent, I am accustomed to children coming to and leaving our home, but McKenzie was different. Maybe I connected with her so quickly because she was my favorite age – 18 months. Maybe she won me over with her devilish smile. Whatever the reason, I fell in love with McKenzie instantly. When we finalized her foster adoption that winter, I thought our family was complete.

Five months later, we got a call from our agency. The social worker wanted to place McKenzie's biological sister, Morgan, with us. We didn't even know that McKenzie's birth mother, Mary, had been pregnant, but we said yes immediately and jumped into preparation mode. That same day, two-day-old Morgan came home to us.

A Treasured Note

While scrambling to set up a crib, wash baby clothes, and race to the store for diapers, I began to worry. How should I ask for this unexpected maternity leave? How would our two girls handle a new sibling? Could our car accommodate three car seats?

I also began to think about Mary. I remembered the first time I saw her name. We had accepted the placement of McKenzie, and I waded through the 894 pages of her case history. Mary's life was a hard one, scarred by poverty, drug addiction, and homelessness. There had been other children, all of whom now called someone else Mommy.

One page stood apart from the rest. It was a handwritten note from Mary to a

different caseworker of a different child. In the note, she said she was going to make it through treatment this time, and be the best mom ever. I treasured that piece of paper. I knew how much it would one day mean to McKenzie, to know that her birth mother had tried so hard to change the circumstances of her life. In that note, I glimpsed the vulnerability of a woman in crisis. I never dreamed I'd see that vulnerability up close.

Surprise Meeting

Despite the stress and lack of sleep that come with parenting a newborn, we were blissfully happy for the first four weeks with Morgan. We were excited to have a new addition to our family and a birth sibling for McKenzie. After all, this was every adoptive parent's dream, wasn't it?

And then, one day, the phone rang. The birth parents were out of jail and asked to see Morgan. They wanted to try to win her back. This news came out of left field. I was terrified of losing the baby I already loved so deeply. To my surprise, we were invited to take part in the permanency conference – a meeting that would also include the birth parents. On the appointed day, I drove to Child Protective Services. I greeted the social workers and attorneys sitting around an oval conference table, and we anxiously awaited Mary's arrival. The room's worn carpet, fluorescent lights, and sputtering air conditioner screamed "misery." Then Mary and her husband walked in the door. She looked nothing like I had thought she would. She wore a long, summery skirt with a matching blouse. Her hair was nicely combed, and it set off a nervous smile that had clearly spawned McKenzie's devilish grin. The moderator introduced me as the adoptive mother of one child and the foster mother of another.

At first, it was hard to pay attention to the discussion. Mary and I were each trying to inspect the other without staring. Did McKenzie have her eyes? I wondered, as I snuck glances. Would Morgan also share her smile?

When I began to focus on the long service plan being outlined for Mary, I knew the odds were in my favor. How horrible was it to want someone else to lose, so that I could win?

Uncharted Waters

The meeting was coming to a close, but I could tell that Mary had a lot to say. I decided to break the ice by asking Mary if there was anything she wanted to talk about. This gave me the perfect excuse to look her in the face. She didn't look like a junkie. She didn't look homeless. She looked like anyone else I knew. "How is McKenzie?" she asked. "McKenzie is great. She loves to read books and play dress-up. I am thinking about enrolling her in gymnastics, because she is always tumbling around the

living room." A smile began to spread across Mary's face, so I kept talking. I told her how healthy McKenzie is, how she'd had her hair braided with extensions for the first time, and about the stack of books she brings to me to read every night before bed. Talking about my children always puts me at ease, and this day was no exception.

"Do you have other children?" Mary wanted to know.

"Yes, I have a daughter, Madison, who was also adopted. She is six."

"Why do white people always want black kids?" she sneered.

Not knowing whether this was a rhetorical question, I decided to answer it, in case silence might seem rude.

"I don't have a preference of color," I explained. "I take whatever God gives me."

"Does McKenzie love her baby sister?" Mary asked. "Absolutely. McKenzie helps me feed her and is always giving the baby kisses."

Then Mary asked me what I tell McKenzie about her birth parents.

As I began to answer her question, I heard my voice change, becoming soft and gentle. "I tell McKenzie that her mom and dad love her very much, but they weren't able to take care of her. I tell her you were very sick, so she came to live with us while you went away to get better. When you didn't get better, we decided to make her a part of our family forever, so she would never miss out on hugs and kisses and books to read."

You could have heard a pin drop when I stopped speaking. The social worker and her supervisor sat with their mouths open. Mary's attorney smiled, nodding her head in approval. The moderator laid down her pen. We were off the map, in uncharted waters. Birth parents and foster/adoptive parents aren't supposed to speak. In fact, I've always felt that we're set up to be enemies, told that they are bad and we are good. But Mary and I had made a connection. In seven years of fostering, nothing like this had ever happened to me.

After a long silence, Mary asked, "Do they need anything?"

"No, they don't need anything. Do you need something?" I asked.

A tear rolled down Mary's cheek. She quietly said, "Yes," and asked for a picture of them. I said I could arrange that. Then she asked, "Could I see McKenzie?" I had dreaded this question, but, without hesitation, I responded: "I don't think that would be a good idea. McKenzie has been through a lot in her short life. She is doing really well right now, and I think seeing you would be upsetting." I held my breath, but Mary said she understood.

Then I had to ask for something. "Can I ask a favor of you?" I blurted out.

"Sure," she said in obvious surprise.

"Would you let me take your picture, for my girls?"

"Right now?" she asked.

"Yes, I have a camera in my purse. Would you mind?"

Mary and her husband stood side by side with their arms around each other, smiling for the camera. There's not a trace of sadness or loss in the photos I took, only love for each other. I know my children will treasure the photos one day.

The meeting came to a close after Mary confirmed a weekly visitation schedule with baby Morgan. She passed close to me to leave the room and I was overwhelmed with feeling for this intimate stranger. Taking a leap of faith, I reached out. She wrapped her arms around me. I felt her hair on my cheek and smelled the faint scent of perfume. We clung to each other for what seemed like hours, whispering messages of thanks over and over. She thanked me for taking care of her children, and I thanked her for bringing mine into the world.

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