

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

MAY 2021 EDITION



ALLY, AGE 13

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DAMYEN, AGE 13

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Part two of a personal account of an adoptee's journey of identity during their teen years. (For part one see Feb. 2021 edition)



Racial Equity Children's Books

**MANY OF THESE TITLES CAN BE FOUND AT:
UTAHADOPT.ORG/LENDINGLIBRARY**

Many parents are wondering how to speak with their children about diversity and racial equity. It might seem daunting, but it is more important than ever. Studies from Harvard University suggest that children as young as three years old, when exposed to racism and prejudice, tended to embrace and accept it, even though they might not entirely understand what they were feeling.

If you're struggling with how to open up about these challenging subjects or clarify confusing times for the young people in your life, books are a great way to begin to tackle tough topics and expose children to different narratives. With that in mind, we've put together a list of stories for all ages that not only discuss race, but also celebrate diversity and the differences that make us special, to help begin these crucial conversations.

ANTIRACIST BABY BY IBRAM X. KENDI

It is important for even babies to learn about race and justice. *Antiracist Baby* teaches young readers (and their parents) nine steps to help create a more equitable world.

A IS FOR ACTIVIST BY INNOSANTO NAGA

Not your typical ABC board book. Teach your toddler the alphabet while also promoting messages of racial justice and the power of activism. The book uses rhyming and colorful illustration to delight young readers and introduces important concepts like community and equality.

COUNTING ON COMMUNITY BY INNOSANTO NAGA

Counting on Community is a great way to teach about the impact of community, diversity, and togetherness, while also teaching toddlers about numbers.

WE'RE DIFFERENT, WE'RE THE SAME, BY BOBBI KATES

In this sweet picture book, the cast of Sesame Street teaches that our differences are what make us special, but that, deep down, we are very similar. Elmo and his Muppet friends teach toddlers and adults alike that differences are to be celebrated.

LAST STOP ON MARKET STREET, BY MATT DE LA PENA'S

Award winning children's book celebrates the relationship between a grandparent and grandchild, a bustling city, and economic and racial diversity. This heartwarming story is sure to become a family favorite.

ALL ARE WELCOME, BY ALEXANDRA PENFOLD AND SUZANNE KAUFMAN

This lively picture book celebrates diversity in a classroom by walking readers through a day at school. Students of all races and religions arrive, many wearing hijabs, yarmulkes, and patkas. These kids learn to celebrate each other's differences and play alongside one another.

I AM ENOUGH, BY GRACE BYERS AND KETURAH A. BOBO

This beautifully illustrated book implores us to be kind to ourselves and to one another. The book, written in the style of a poem, asks us to respect one another and shares motivating positive messages: "We are more than enough. We just need to believe it."

WE'VE GOT A JOB: THE 1963 BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S MARCH, BY CYNTHIA LEVINSON

We've Got a Job tells the lesser-known story of the 1963 Birmingham Children's March, where 4,000 Black elementary, middle, and high school students voluntarily went to jail in order to help desegregate one of the most divided cities in the nation.

THE HATE U GIVE, BY ANGIE THOMAS AND NIKKI GIOVANNI

A stunning fictional adaptation of current events, this best-selling novel follows sixteen-year-old Starr Carter, who witnesses her unarmed best friend get killed at the hands of a police officer. When the story becomes national news, Starr grapples with her own choices and the effect they will have on her community.

THE ROCK AND THE RIVER, BY KEKLA MAGOON

Taking place in 1968 Chicago, thirteen-year-old Sam struggles with being the son of a well-known civil rights activist. Throughout the book, Sam grapples with his own identity, and how to best use his voice in a tale that will resonate for young readers.

ON THE COVER ALLY, AGE 13

Ally is a social girl! Getting along with others is a breeze for this youth and she makes friends easily wherever she goes. Loyalty is one of Ally's greatest strengths and she also isn't afraid to speak up when needed. Cooking is an activity she enjoys and she loves making yummy cuisines to share with others. Playing games and drawing are fun ways for her to spend her free time. Ally also adores styling her hair and mastering make-up. She thrives on one-on-one attention from adults.

She is in the seventh grade.

Sibling and family relationships are important to Ally and she will need to remain in contact with her siblings following placement. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

For families outside of Utah, only those families who have a completed homestudy are encouraged to inquire.

Heritage: Hispanic/Latino

ID #182253

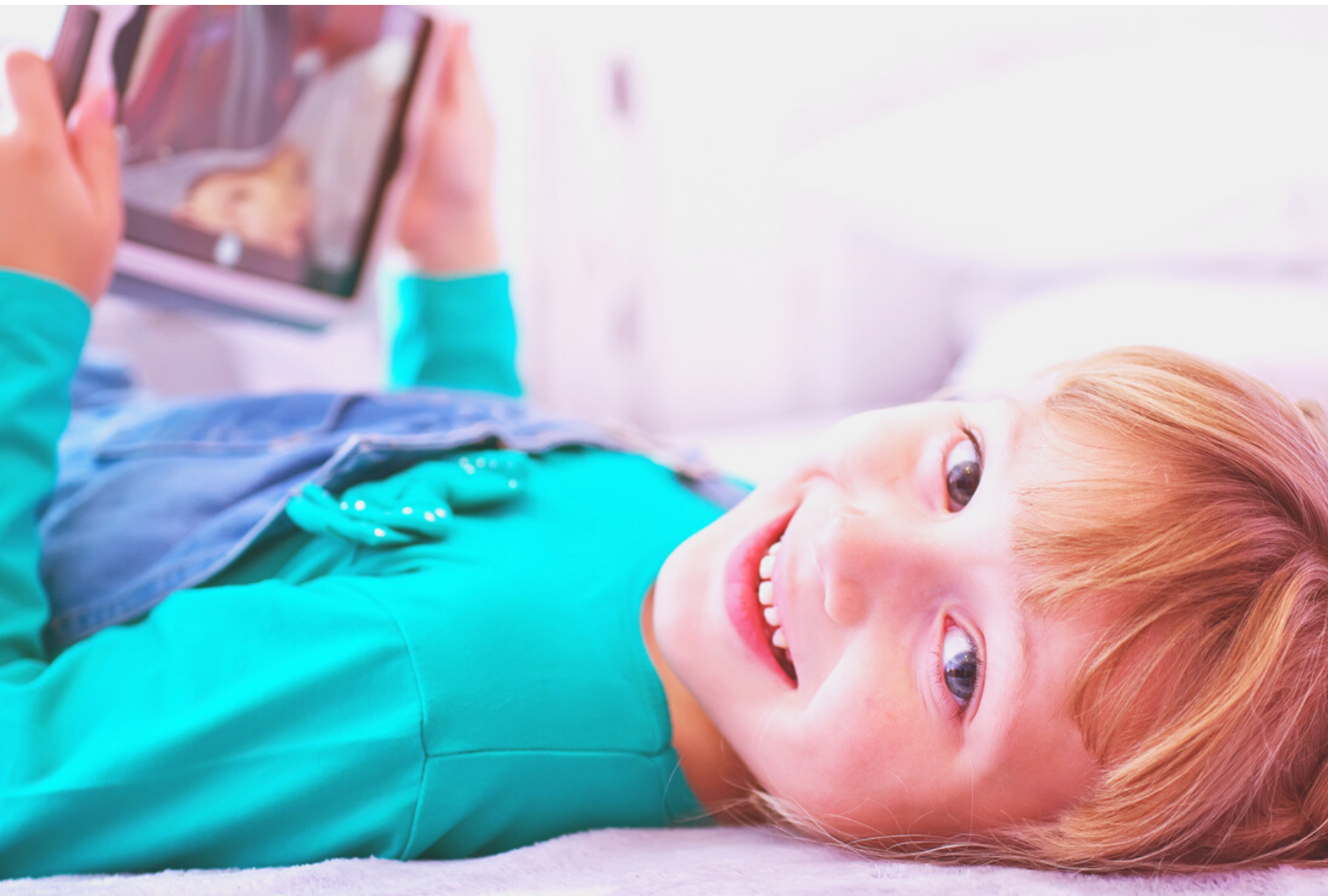
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Am I Raising a Pathological Liar?

BY ASHLEY PATEK,
GENERATION MINDFUL

Does your child insist that she cleaned her room but the wind made it messy again? Does your budding artist disown the crayon mural in the hallway? Or does your son deny whopping his brother although you watched it go down? When things like this happen, you may be wondering why are they lying and how do we get them to tell the truth ... and maybe even more profoundly, a bigger fear, are we raising a pathological liar?

Research actually says that some levels of lying are healthy and acceptable. In fact, one study shows that between the ages of 4 and 17, lying is normal, and, after the age of 17, lying decreases significantly. Whatever the lie, big or small, it's a frustrating challenge for parents. But when we understand why children lie, we can help them become more honest.

MAGICAL THINKING: AGES 2 - 4

Lying isn't always done with ulterior motives. When your preschooler starts lying, it's simply a new developmental milestone. At this age, so much of a child's world is based on play and developmentally their brains cannot keep track of what's fantasy and what's reality. Elizabeth Berger, child psychiatrist and author of *Raising Kids with Character* says, "Toddlers have a fairly shaky grasp on the difference between reality, daydreams, wishes, fantasies, and fears. So if your toddler tells you he is a purple dragon and the dog has wings, roll with it."

Other times, we may feel like our toddlers are lying to get their way, yet experts say that preschool-aged children are too young to understand lying as a moral choice. According to research by Kang Lee, University of Toronto professor and director of the Institute of Child Study, lying actually signifies changes in the way our children organize information.

Children don't always think before they act and, therefore, don't always anticipate consequences. So if your child denies eating that cookie while traces of the chocolate crumbs remain on her face, keep in mind that, to her, her denial of the act will somehow magically erase her behavior, and everything will be okay.

WISHFUL THINKING: AGES 4-7

Play is still a common state of mind for children of this age and so they may lie to express what they wish would have happened. It's not a conscious or malicious plan, rather it often stems from regret or embarrassment. If your child were to say, "I don't know how the toy broke. Someone else did it," it can be helpful to translate their statement to, "I wish I didn't break the toy." Or if your child tells you that, "dad said I could eat 10 pieces of candy for breakfast" when you know the family agreement is no candy in the morning, you can translate their message to, "I wish I could have candy for breakfast."

SKILL SEEKING: SCHOOL-AGED

Children at this age understand that lying is wrong, but also know that lying can help them avoid consequences. According to pediatric psychologist Kristen Eastman, PsyD, "at this age, skill-building is the goal. Kids usually want to do the right thing but when they lack the skills to handle a situation, they just choose the path of least resistance. So if your child lies about not having homework, find out why. Maybe they don't understand or can't keep track of their assignments. Pinpoint what is behind the lie and focus on teaching your child skills to problem-solve and get through uncomfortable situations."

TEENS AND BEYOND

During middle school years, children are more likely to lie to fit in with peers, get out of trouble, or to feel powerful. Dr. Eastman explains the importance of helping children understand the impact of their choices. "Helping children see why limits are put into place can help them make better choices. Parents can talk with their children and explain their concerns (whether moral or safety issues) and perhaps find a compromise."

OUR REACTION MATTERS

Would you be honest if you knew it would cause you humiliation, a lecture, a punishment, or being yelled at? Unlikely. And it's hard for our children, too. They don't want to get in trouble and they don't want to disappoint us.

From the most innocent of lies to the most serious, it is possible to teach children the value of honesty without relying on punishments or bribes. Research has shown that children that are punished for lying are more likely to lie again in the future. However, children that are given an opportunity to make amends and tell the truth without fear are more likely to learn problem-solving skills. "As parents, we are playing the long game. When we are face to face with our children in the midst of their lie, the urge is to punish, bribe, or shame. Yet, the better goal is to keep the lines of communication open," Dr. Eastman says. Keeping in mind the reasons why kids lie, we can create an environment where they feel safe to tell the truth.

TOOLS FOR WHEN YOUR CHILD TELLS A LIE

1. Find your center. In the face of a lie, how do you feel? Angry, frustrated, confused, worried? Getting underneath our own emotions helps us better be with what's happening at the moment. With a clear head, we can become curious about the lie rather than react to it.

2. Avoid setting up a lie. When we ask questions to which we already know the answer, we're giving our children the opportunity to tell a lie. Instead, emphasize ways to address the situation.

Instead of asking "did you put away your clothes?" try stating, "I noticed the laundry is waiting in the basket, do you have a plan for putting it away?" Or, instead of asking, "did you hit your brother?" as you watched it play out, try "I hear you say you didn't hit your brother, yet it seems like he was hit. What could we do next time we feel angry?" Reframing questions in this way can help prevent a power struggle and allows your child to focus on a plan of action instead of fabricating an excuse.

3. Find what's underneath the lie. While we may want to put our child on the spot when we catch them in a lie, accusing or blaming them often only amplifies the behavior we want to avoid. Instead, get to the root of the problem and understand why she felt she could not be honest with you. This will help encourage your child to tell the truth in the future. Is she fearful of getting in trouble? Does she feel embarrassed or is she trying to save the relationship? Is there a lacking skill or does she need help to cope with a new stressor in her life? Open up a gentle conversation, "You seem worried to tell me the truth. Let's talk about that. What would help you be honest?" You can use the information you gather to help her be more truthful in the future.

4. Make mistakes safe. Compassionately notice how you respond to misbehavior and mistakes, whether it's spilled milk on the floor or the mistruth about missing cookies. When our kids worry about being yelled at or punished when they make mistakes, they shy away from coming to us with the truth. Instead of reacting to your child's lie, become curious, and discuss solutions with your child.

5. Celebrate honesty. When your son has used the wall for his next art piece and owns up to the masterpiece, commend him for telling you the truth. "It can be hard to tell the truth. Thank you for telling me what happened and taking responsibility. Let's come up with a plan to clean the crayon off the wall." While we may not always like the behavior, we can create a home environment where it is safe to tell the truth. Rather than punishing, use truth-telling as a learning opportunity and help your child find solutions to their problems so they don't feel the need to hide them.

While lying can be a trigger for many parents, it is a developmental rite of passage that all children experience. It is in the way we address these milestones that influence whether our children will feel comfortable making mistakes and telling the truth or continue the cycle of lying. Creating a safe environment for children to feel, express, and own up to mistakes without fear of punishment makes space for skill-building and connection. When we show our kids that our unwavering love is no lie, we help them find their truth.

Generation Mindful nurtures emotional intelligence playfully. Visit [GenMindful.com](https://genmindful.com) to learn more. For information specific to foster care adoption visit <https://genmindful.com/pages/foster-adoptive-families>





Going Beyond Trauma-Informed

BY ROBYN GOBBEL, ROBYNGOBBEL.COM

“How do I know if this is a trauma related behavior or a normal kid behavior?”

“Help me know how to respond to this behavior in my child with a trauma history because if my bio kid had ever pulled anything like this, I would react WAY different.”

“I completely agree with trauma-informed care...but what about when it doesn't work? Doesn't the child need a consequence then?”

Without a doubt, I'm so grateful that children's history of relationship trauma is creating a pause in how we react to behavior difficulties. But I've long wondered why we need the excuse of a trauma history to be curious about what's driving the behavior, assume that there is an unmet need, consider the child's regulation, or examine their connection to important adults in their world.

These same underlying causes for difficult behavior in children with trauma histories underlie the difficult behavior in ALL of us.

Not just our kids with trauma histories. Not just our kids without trauma histories. All of us. Me. You. Everyone. Without going into a ton of neuroscience research in this moment, the emerging science of regulation theory, polyvagal theory, and attachment theory seem to make it pretty clear that we humans are pack animals. We are absolutely born to be in connection. Connection is actually our baseline (really...it's called social baseline theory). And part of being in connection means behaving in a way that encourages people to want to be with us.

Sure. Humans are egocentric, self-driven. Because in addition to being born to be in connection, we are also born to be kept ALIVE. But when we are SAFE (which is subjective, by the way...), our brain is freed up to focus on connection. Little ones need time to grow and develop a brain that is connected and integrated enough for emotion regulation and impulse control. To maintain a sense of self and their own needs and desires while ALSO caring about the needs and the desires of the people they are with or connected to. And this ability to develop emotional regulation and impulse control? They are basically developmental milestones that are achieved INSIDE the co-regulated caregiving relationship.

What that means is...

...if we parent through a lens of regulation, the neural structures that contribute to impulse control, empathy, delayed gratification, etc. WILL DEVELOP. So when children are struggling, ALL children not just children with trauma histories, we need to pause and ask ourselves “Is this child feeling safe?” “Is this child regulated?” “Is this child feeling connected to me, believes I want to be connected to them, and is also connected to themselves?”

Children with a history of relationship trauma have a lower threshold for when they start to feel unsafe, dysregulated, and disconnected. But this litmus test- safe, regulated, connect- it's true of kids with trauma histories AND everyone else on earth.

It's simply how. humans. work.

So all that to say....I think it's time to officially move on from being trauma-informed to truly understanding the neurobiology of being human.

Trauma-informed has been an important step in helping us begin to understand how behaviors are simply an externalization of inner experience. For some reason, we all needed the excuse of 'trauma' to start getting compassionate about behaviors and get curious about what's happening inside. I wish we hadn't needed that excuse, but we did (myself included).

And now it's time to move on and just get human informed. *Behavior is simply an externalization of inner experience. In all humans. All the time.*

Regulated, connected kids (people) who feel safe (and know what to do) behave well.

The three-year-old tantruming at the grocery store. Not regulated. Why aren't they regulated? No idea. But regulated humans....even small ones... don't have knock down drag out fits at the grocery store. Tired? Hungry? Overwhelmed?

And how do dysregulated humans come back into regulation?

Another regulated human helps them.

Maybe they offer a drink or a snack.

Maybe they sit quietly and wait.

Maybe they pick up the kicking three-year-old, whisper things like "I've got you...you're feelings are so big but I've got you..." while ignoring the eye rolls and glares from the other adults at the grocery store, take the tantruming three-year-old out the car, and wait for the storm to pass.

Then they offer a drink or a snack.

And finish grocery shopping, if possible.

No human learns from humiliation or punishment.

I mean they do learn, but they aren't learning what you are hoping. So if we aren't using humiliation and punishment, then why else do we need to treat people with trauma histories differently than people without?

Look for the need. Structure? Boundaries? Nurture? Connection? Food? Nap?

Look for the level of dysregulation in the system.

Decide how to respond.

Maybe...just wait it out. Sometimes big feelings just need to get out.

This isn't behaving bad. This is behaving human.

This is true for EVERYONE.

And it's true that people with trauma histories are more quickly dysregulated than people without significant trauma histories.

They need more connection and nurture before using structure and boundaries because they were likely LACKING in receiving connection and nurture previously in their lives.

But other than that?

Not much difference in responding to behaviors in people with trauma histories than in people without.

Compassion. Curiosity. Respond to the level of dysregulation.

And!!! Learn how to set compassionate boundaries. It is possible!! We humans don't have a lot of practice at this. I really believe that once we learn about compassionate boundaries, we will finally be ready to go beyond trauma-informed to just recognizing our shared humanity- the neurobiology of being human.

Assume people are always looking for connection.

Assume people are always doing the best they can.

Understanding the neurobiology of being human will take us past the limits of trauma-informed care. Understanding the neurobiology of being human is essential in TRULY being trauma-informed. This is the next hurdle.

Otherwise, being trauma-informed is just the next technique or intervention to get people to act the way we want.





What is Sensory Processing Sensitivity? Traits, Insights, and ADHD Links

BY BIANCA ACEVEDO, PH.D.

What is Sensory Processing Sensitivity?

Sensory processing sensitivity (SPS), or environmental sensitivity (ES), is a biologically-based trait characterized by increased awareness and sensitivity to the environment. A [highly sensitive person](#) — whether child or adult — processes sensory stimuli and information more strongly and deeply than do others. Individuals with SPS express these characteristics:

- Deeper cognitive processing
- More attention to subtleties
- Greater emotional reactivity
- Pausing before acting
- Greater awareness of environmental and social stimuli, including the moods and emotions of others

What Does It Mean to Be a Highly Sensitive Person?

Researchers of various disciplines – from psychology, sociology, human development, biology, and more – have long recognized differing sensitivity levels among individuals. Dr. Elaine Aron, a clinical research psychologist who coined the term “the highly sensitive person” in her [1996 book \(#CommissionsEarned\)](#), also developed a now widely used scale that measures responses to different stimuli. According to the scale, some markers of highly sensitive people (HSPs) include:

- Needing to withdraw (privacy from stimulation)
- Being easily overwhelmed by bright lights, strong smells, loud noises, clothing materials, and other stimuli
Being affected by other people’s moods
- Feeling annoyed or overwhelmed when asked to do too many things at once
- Becoming nervous when observed performing a task
- Sensitivity to [caffeine](#)

A Highly Sensitive Child Scale is also available and used. This scale divides behaviors into three distinct components of SPS. Discomfort with loud noises, for example, is associated with a low sensory threshold. Nervousness when having to do multiple tasks in a short amount of time is linked to ease of excitation. Responding to pleasant stimuli, like music, scent, and scenery, is associated with aesthetic sensitivity.

[Hypersensitivity Is Real: Why Highly Sensitive People Have ADHD]

Is Sensory Processing Sensitivity a Disorder?

SPS is not a disorder, but rather an innate trait. It should not be confused with [sensory processing disorder](#) (SPD), wherein the brain has difficulty organizing and processing sensory stimuli. SPS, in comparison, is not associated with dysregulation, but with awareness, depth of processing, and needing time to process information and stimuli.

Sensory Processing Sensitivity: Prevalence and Origins

Early studies estimate that 20 percent of the population may be “highly sensitive.”¹ Researchers sometimes refer to highly sensitive people as orchids, given the flower’s responsiveness to changes in its environment. Less sensitive people, on the other hand, are referred to as dandelions.

More recent research, however, suggests that there may be three groups of sensitive people². About 40 percent of people in this framework fall into a moderately sensitive group (tulips). Low- and high-sensitive individuals each make up about 30 percent of individuals. Research appears to be pointing to sensitivity as a continuum rather than having definitive categories. This theory encourages considering environmental factors in tandem with biology when studying how sensitivity manifests (genetic research suggests, for example, that about 50 percent of sensitivity is heritable³).

[Read: “My Socks Feel Weird!” Morning Help for the Highly Sensitive Child]

Sensory Processing Sensitivity and the Brain

Recent research points to unique neural activity among highly sensitive people.

Our 2014 fMRI study found that the anterior insula, a part of the brain associated with emotional processing and visceral sensations (like the gut feelings that often accompany empathy), shows higher activation in highly sensitive people⁴. The study, in part, had participants look and react to images of partners and strangers experiencing a range of positive and negative emotions.

The highly sensitive participants who looked at happy images of their partners, furthermore, had more brain activation in areas related to bodily sensations. Seeing a partner smile, or reflecting on a partner’s happiness, led to greater activation in the ventral tegmental area (VTA), a key [dopamine](#) area of the brain also associated with motivation, energy, feelings of euphoria, and reward. Seeing sad images of their partners activated areas of the brain linked to cognitive processing, reflective thinking, and perspective.

In another study⁵, we found that highly sensitive individuals who also reported a positive childhood experience showed even greater VTA activity after seeing positive images. In response to negative images, these individuals, interestingly, showed activation in areas associated with self-regulation and cognitive processing. VTA activity, meanwhile, showed decreased activity in response to negative images for those with negative childhood experiences.

Sensory Processing Sensitivity and ADHD

Sensory processing sensitivity and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD or ADD) do overlap in some ways. Both are characterized, in part, by **emotional reactivity** and overstimulation. The risk for **anxiety** and mood disorders is greater, especially if a sensitive person experienced a negative childhood. ADHD and SPS can also impact interpersonal and academic performance. They are, however, inherently different.

ADHD is a neuropsychiatric disorder characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and/or impulsivity. Sensory processing sensitivity, meanwhile, is proposed to be a biological temperament trait observed in people who are more sensitive to environmental and social stimuli. A child with ADHD, for example, may display impulsivity in response to an overwhelming environment, but a sensitive child would more likely pause and reflect before taking action.

Brain activity also delineates the difference between the two. ADHD is associated with less activation in cognitive processing areas that impact self-regulation, attention, and inhibition. With SPS, there is actually more activation in these areas, along with depth of processing and empathy.

Sensory Processing Sensitivity Interventions

Despite overlapping characteristics, it is possible to have SPS and ADHD. For individuals with ADHD who suspect SPS, it is important to consider the extent and length of responses to stimuli, as well as the aforementioned core characteristics of SPS (like being reflective, more empathetic, and careful to act), especially as they may have manifested in childhood. Interventions can include:

- Taking the **Highly Sensitive Person Scale**, also available on the **LoveSmart app**
- Keeping calm and comfortable environments
- Decreasing sugar and caffeine intake
- Engaging in activities that build resilience, self-esteem, and self-regulation (e.g. meditation, yoga, and talk-therapy)

The content for this article was derived from the ADDitude Expert Webinar “Why Are You So Sensitive? Understand How Sensory Processing Sensitivity Affects the ADHD Brain” with Bianca Acevedo, Ph.D., which was broadcast live on November 18, 2020.

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Welcome to GRANDfamilies

GRANDfamilies Kinship Care at Children's Service Society of Utah (referred to as GRANDfamilies) was created in 2002 to meet the growing needs of kinship caregivers in the community who found themselves caring for a relative's child(ren) when the biological parent(s) were not able to parent the child(ren) themselves.

GRANDfamilies is the only service program that provides support and assistance to kinship families in the State of Utah, regardless of kinship licensure and/or involvement with other state agencies. The program was created to restore safety to the child(ren)'s living situation, enhance protective factors, prevent substance abuse, and improve family functioning. This program allows children to be placed with relatives rather than strangers, prevents substance abuse in a second generation, and assists caregivers with the dynamics of kinship issues. GRANDfamilies provides counseling, crisis intervention, advocacy, access to legal resources, case management, as well as free educational and support groups for all members of the kinship family. The program also provides social support and pro-social involvement for kinship families that find themselves isolated in their communities.

WHAT DRIVES US?

The Kinship Families

GRANDfamilies aims to serve kinship families. Research has shown that children experience less trauma when placed with grandparents or other relatives when they cannot remain with their parent(s)¹. However, the majority of kinship families are forced to manage difficult circumstances and navigate social service agencies without any outside assistance. We believe that a dedicated kinship navigation program can help reduce the countless barriers these families face, strengthen family bonds, and increase positive outcomes for both the children and caregivers.

Purpose

The purpose of GRANDfamilies Kinship Care at Children's Service Society of Utah is to provide support for the entire kinship family to ensure the physical, social, and emotional needs of the child(ren) are met. The program provides the resources necessary for caregivers to provide a safe, stable home for the child(ren) in their care, which maintains permanency and prevents entrance into the formal foster care system.

Mission

GRANDfamilies Kinship Care at Children's Service Society of Utah supports kinship caregivers and children by providing inclusive support services in collaboration with trusted community partners to build safe, stable, and resilient kinship families.

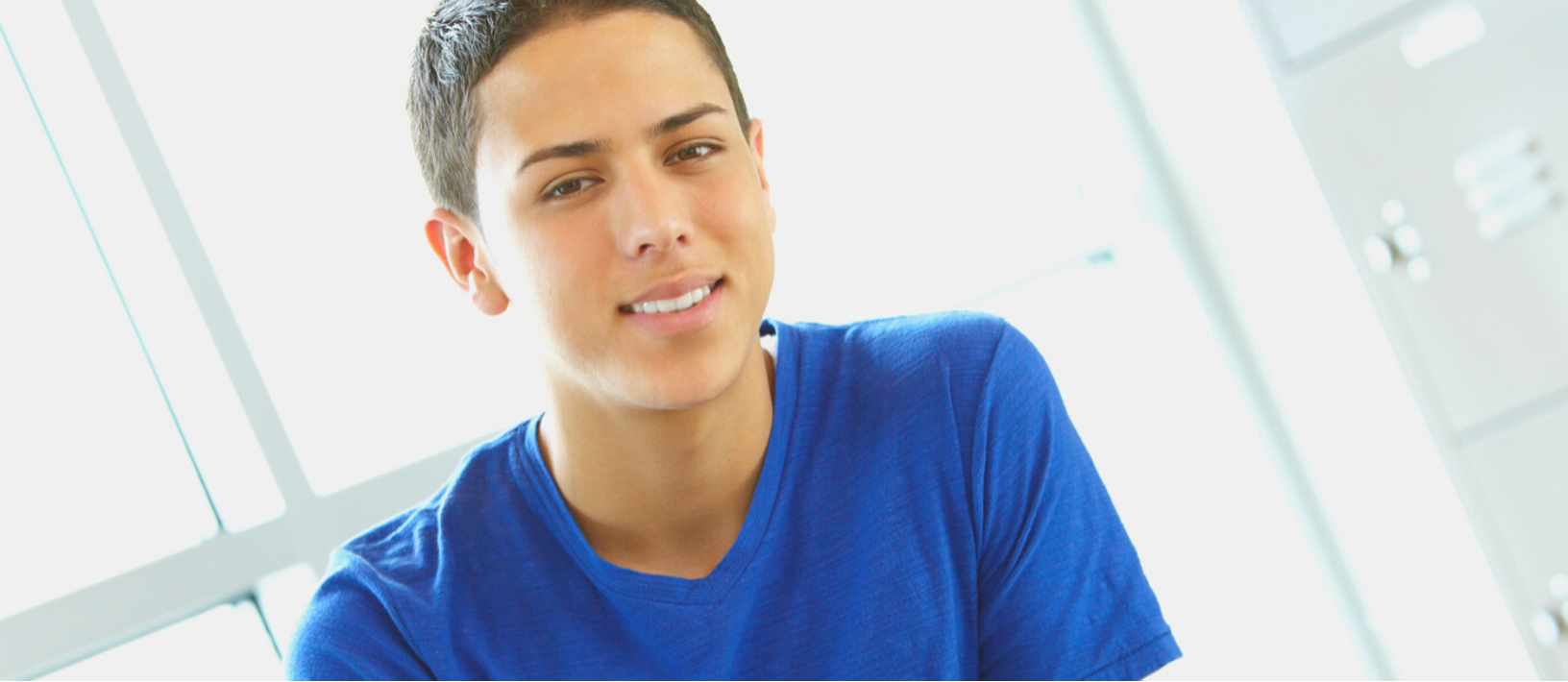
CORE COMPONENTS

The GRANDfamilies program provides a variety of services and resources across six core areas of service, where the amount and type of services provided is unique to the kinship family and their identified needs:

| Core Components | Services |
|---------------------------|--|
| Intake and Assessment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Needs, risks, and service plans. ❖ Crisis intervention. |
| Case Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Assistance with guardianship paperwork. ❖ Applying for the Specified Relative Grant. |
| Psychoeducational Courses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Helping navigate complex social services. ❖ Linking families with other needed services. |
| Friend2Friend | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Adult educational support groups. ❖ Children's educational support groups. |
| Support Groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Adolescent educational support groups. ❖ Family mediation. |
| Clinical Counseling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Friend2Friend monthly support. • (Optional) Informal support groups. • (Optional) Clinical counseling. |

In focusing on the above services, GRANDfamilies engages in community outreach, builds partnerships, and collaborates with outside partners such as 211, the Division of Child and Family Services, Child Protective Services workers, as well as other partners that benefit kinship families in the community. GRANDfamilies family advocates have knowledge specific to kinship needs such as trauma, guardianship laws, case management and referrals, supportive services, as well as additional knowledge and training related to kinship family dynamics.

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The Impact of Adoption on Teen Identity Formation-PART TWO

BY CAMERON LEE SMALL, MS LPCC

I think about my own journey through those stages as a Korean adoptee growing up in central Wisconsin in the 1980s. My parents did everything they could to support my identity through adolescence, but now as a clinician I look back and realize there were steps that I wish we could have taken together. Here are a few:

1. Reflect on ambiguous loss.

Identity can be a fluid term. For many adoptees, myself included, we need to figure out, “Who am I?” “What do people like me do?” “Who do I relate to?” “How do I exist, internally and externally?” “What’s my purpose?” “Who’s important to me?” “Who cares about me?” “Where do I belong?”

We must recognize that identity has as much to do with “Who isn’t here?” as it does with “Who is?” Allow birth family into conversations about “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to become?” “Ambiguous loss” is the notion that someone can be physically absent, yet psychologically present. Give space for that as adoptees hold common and appropriate curiosities over what could have been, who could have been, where are they, and why are they not here, etc.

Jae Ran Kim’s article “Ambiguous Loss” explains this well. “For most, the ritual of finalizing an adoption is a ‘joyous’ time; however, not all adopted youth understand or feel happy about the finalization—especially if the child is older at the time of the adoption.

For children who remember their first parents, finalization day may actually be a reminder of their loss. The ‘gotcha’ day, or anniversary of the adoption, may be a sad reminder of what the adoptee has lost rather than a celebration of what they have gained.”

For me, ambiguous loss is about acknowledging and honoring those in our lives who enjoy and were designed to hold precious real estate in our hearts, minds, and stories; whether here and now or there and then. Please do not ask or teach us to let that go.

We have not been called to forget one another, but to love one another. Understanding ambiguous loss can support that process as we navigate our adoption stories. Withholding these opportunities can (intentionally or unintentionally) cause harm to both the child/youth and their relationship with their adoptive parents.

It can feel intimidating at times, but it doesn’t need to be a scary thing to allow space for an adoptee to recognize the loss. To sit with children/youth in their loss can actually strengthen the parent/child relationship. Trust is actually weakened when those losses are either ignored or invalidated. Even if and even when information about biological parents is uncomfortable, adoptees still face and must process that loss.

Darla Henry's 3-5-7 model for helping children through grief has been helpful for me as I continue to process my own story and support others in theirs. Henry clarifies this journey with five questions:

- “What happened to me?”**
- “Who am I?”**
- “Where am I going?”**
- “How will I get there?”**
- “When will I know when I belong?”**

Katie Naftzger, in “Parenting in the Eye of the Storm: the Adoptive Parent’s Guide to Navigating the Teen Years,”⁸ shares four skill sets that will help parents meet these unique needs of their adopted teens:

- 1. Un-rescue your teen (skill building)**
- 2. Set adoption-sensitive limits**
- 3. Have connected conversations**
- 4. Help your teen envision their future**

The next two sections will lean toward those connected conversations and envisioning the future.

2. Speak truth with dignity and respect, use strengths-based language.

Identity is also formed by the way we talk about it. And especially in the teen years, adoptees in the contemplation stage are tasked with figuring out who they are in the context of who their birth parents might have been.

- “Why did they give me up?”
- “What if I had been able to stay?”
- “What were their interests?”
- “Who were their friends?”
- “Where did they work?”
- “What did they do for fun?”
- “How well did they do in school?”
- “What was important to them?”
- “Why did they choose to keep my siblings?”
- “How would they feel if I searched for them?”
- “Would they want to meet me?”

Strengths-based language assumes folks are doing the best they can with the tools they have at any given moment. It seeks to draw upon a person’s strengths and assets rather than their shortcomings and failures. It also gives space to hold others within their local and environmental context accountable. In other words, instead of blaming birth mothers for their decisions, how can we as a culture challenge the systems in which we live?

In “The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before *Roe v. Wade*,”⁹ author Ann Fessler shares the account of Margaret as she prepared to deliver her baby at St. Anne’s infant and maternity home: “They said, ‘Write down on this side of the paper what you can give your baby. Write down on the other side what the adoptive parents have to offer.’” Margaret recalls how they told her, “You know, he’ll not have the nice clothes that the other children are going to have and on the playground, they’ll call

him a bastard.” She continues to remember, “And I believed that. I remember writing down they had money, they had a father, they had a house, and they had clothes and food. And on my side I only put down love. That’s all I did have... I signed the papers and they never told me I had thirty days to change my mind.”

The way we speak can heavily influence an adoptee’s ability to make or embrace meanings about their identity. It can be a struggle for adoptees to make sense of their situation when their adoptive family constellation (including extended family and friends) are comfortable with demonizing, dehumanizing, or objectifying their birth family. “Your birth mom was a [fill in the blank] and that’s why she couldn’t take care of you.” For adoptive parents, it helps to ask, “How does the way I talk about birth family influence the way my child feels?” A mother shared with me how a stranger once commented, “Oh thank goodness, he would have grown up godless,” upon learning the child had been adopted. The child was right there, and could hear the stranger talk about his birth mother.

Feeling “saved” solely because they were adopted is a dangerous place for both child and parent. Living as a god (or hero?) among adoptees is too much for any adoptive parent to fulfill and it crushes the adoptee. It also doesn’t leave room for the birth parents’ inherent value, worth, and potential as precious people. For the adoptee, the pressure to feel grateful can sometimes block the grieving process.

Especially in transracial adoption, there are longstanding inequities that plague communities of color, in the U.S. and around the globe, which often marginalize and disrupt families without re-evaluating the unchecked institutional values and patterns that create such hardship. Because societal institutions typically outlast the individuals within those institutions, we should ensure that adoption professionals and government policy makers understand the way social discrimination, prejudices, privileges, racism, poverty, and other injustices exert power and control over the lives of children and families. Of course, the dialogue surrounding all those layers is complex with endless nuances that exist beyond the scope of this article. However, there are still actions we can take together.

One way to do that is to ask more of our adoption professionals and policymakers, so that we can ensure we have transparency on the ethics beneath their operations, appropriate and equitable fee structures, accurate information on medical and social history, aggressive efforts to avoid deceit and fraud, pre- and post-support for birth families, better training resources for adoptive parents, and more guidance and support for adoptees post-adoption. Legislatively, we can advocate for policies that benefit adoptees. For example, the Adoptee Citizenship Act has been introduced multiple times to the House of Representatives and Senate. The bill would grant automatic United States citizenship to international adoptees who did not obtain citizenship from the Child Citizenship Act of 2000—a much needed reform in the aftermath of too many adoptees being deported due to lack of citizenship.

Beliefs and related attitudes about who belongs here in the United States typically come from mediating narratives. In the book “Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery,”¹⁰ theology professor Dr. Soong-Chan Rah and 2020 independent U.S. presidential candidate Mark Charles assert, “Because mediating narratives provide fuel for dysfunctional systems, they can hold a power that we can oftentimes overlook. For instance, there is an overriding narrative of white supremacy that fuels a dysfunctional system, the demise of that system does not necessarily mean the end of that narrative. In the United States, the narrative of white supremacy is a central theme that fuels our dysfunctional systems. The horrid institution of slavery fulfilled the narrative of white supremacy. Yet even after the institution of slavery was abolished, the dysfunctional narrative of white supremacy continued; therefore a new dysfunctional system of Jim Crow laws took the place of slavery.”

Charles and Soong-Chan in their book go on to consider how those mediating narratives have led to the New Jim Crow, the current system of mass incarceration and disenfranchisement, which allows white supremacy to continue. We can vote. We can initiate conversations with family, friends, colleagues, and community members. We can call out racism when we see it. Those are just a few tangible steps we can take to advocate for our children as they make sense of their identity and interact with a world that seeks to minimize their identity. Strengths-based language is a practical step toward deconstructing that world, and building something better for its citizens.

3. Identity formation includes separating from birth and adoptive family.

One of the main tasks of a teen is to differentiate from their immediate family constellation.¹² This means there is a life stage in which it is appropriate to individuate, separate, and become independent from family, while simultaneously remaining connected to some degree. Problems often arise if parents’ expectations about this period are different from the child’s expectations. With adoption, children face the additional complicated task of individuating from their birth family.

In “The Primal Wound,” Nancy Verrier writes, “During adolescence, when everyone is searching for his own identity, it becomes more difficult for the adoptee to deny the fact that he has no long-term history with the people by whom he is being reared. Not only does he find it difficult to identify his own personal history with that of his family, but he experiences a great deal of conflict around the idea of searching for that personal history.”

Even more tension could arise if transracial adoptive parents insist race does not matter. In “Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging,” Eleana J. Kim writes, “This crucial stage in the adoptee journey is one marked by disidentification in which they recognize that they fit neither the dominant mono-racial constructions of America as white nor ethnocentric constructions of Koreanness, whether among South Koreans or Korean Americans.”

Teens might need to wrestle with race, relinquishment, thinking more about their birth family, holding multiple feelings at once (e.g., anger at birth family, yearning for them, sad at their loss, confusion about information), and fearing intimacy in current and future relationships. The process of differentiation can feel overwhelming when questions come up such as “Were my birth parents in love?” “Should I have sex before marriage?” “How am I different from my birth parents?” “How am I the same?” “How does this all fit together with my adoptive family?”



I had a client who went through a season, before we started working together, in which she preferred to be called by her birth name, because it connected her to her birth family. After a while, though, she developed for herself a third name, one she created on her own, because she no longer wanted to be associated with her adoptive family or her birth family. Her thought was, “It’s time for me to just be me, and I want to decide that for myself.” She disclosed that everyone she ever met during that time of her life only knows her by that third name. For our sessions, she decided she wanted me to call her by her birth name, saying, “I feel like it’s time to reconnect with my birth mom... and our culture.”

The ebb and flow of identity formation can look and feel as diverse as the number of adoptees in the world. Once parents recognize that process, they can think of creative ways to honor and support that exploration and formation.

I would never ask a couple struggling with infertility to “just be thankful.” I would never ridicule or pathologize a widow crying at the funeral. Adoptees do not get a funeral for the ones they have missed. Likewise, we should not ask adoptees to “just be thankful” or stop missing family members who are important to them. Too often adoptees get an adoption announcement or a gotcha day without any real meaningful recognition of the life and lives they have lost.

Adoption has a significant impact on the important stages of development not only during the teen years but throughout the lifespan.

In her book “All You Can Ever Know,” transracial adoptee Nicole Chung recalls her experience through pregnancy: “As we left the birth center, I couldn’t shake the overwhelming feeling that our baby was destined to inherit a half-empty family tree. I wasn’t even a mother yet, and already the best I could offer was far from good enough.”

Adoptees need to carve meaning into their stories so that they can feel confident, satisfied, and hopeful about who they are and where they belong in this world, from womb to tomb. That need is expressed in a thousand different ways, behaviors, tones, and intensities.

We need not feel worried or intimidated about supporting youth and adult adoptees through loss, birth family/culture, and identity formation. It is part of the story. And in that story, when we can offer unceasing, thoughtful, adoptee-centric, warm, and compassionate care, just doing the best we can day by day, they are more likely to embrace their adoption experience, practice independent living skills, and feel empowered to truly live within it, not just in their teen years but throughout their lifespan.

4. Practice patience.

There were so many ways my parents could have responded to my getting fired from Boy Scout camp—countless angles to take and any one of them could have been justified. I was struck by this one particularly because they didn’t yell. I wasn’t grounded.

There were no “consequences” (apart from the real world one of getting fired). They sat with me so graciously in the afterward-seasons as I wrestled with what I learned (or hadn’t). Especially during my teen years they knew I was holding so much, as an adoptee and simply as a person trying to figure himself out.

Were there times for limits and warnings? Certainly. But without their patience it would have just been noise. Of course there will be situational layers that prevent us from fully relating to our children with empathy and understanding. So, we ask what can we do? In the midst of all the loss, grief, complexity, and confusion we can demonstrate the human qualities of patience, kindness, respect, truth, gentleness, coaching, and self-control. We can do what we can to enter these conversations with our heart rate as low as possible. Developmental psychologist and early childhood expert Dr. Becky Bailey has some fun examples on YouTube¹³. Our hope is to raise adults who know how to make good decisions in the midst of stressful seasons and circumstances. Your calming presence will help them feel calm and present, so that they can work these ideas out with you, and ultimately in their own meaningful and satisfying relationships as adults.

As a teen just fired for underage drinking, I think that is what I needed. And I am thankful my parents were able to provide it.

What does that look like for you in this specific season of your parenting and practice? You get to decide. Keep trying to figure it out even when the fruit of your patience feels years or decades away. Regardless of whether or not we thank you or feel lucky for it, I’m convinced it will matter more than you can imagine.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cam, author of *This is Why I Was Adopted*, has been working to raise consciousness about faith, child welfare, and mental health since 2012, after meeting his biological mother in Korea. Trans-racially adopted and founder of Therapy Redeemed, he holds a Master’s in Counseling Psychology from University of Wisconsin-Madison and is a licensed professional clinical counselor. Cam is PACC certified, and registered as an accredited service provider through TAC via Center for Adoption Support and Education. He is also a vetted clinician with MN ADOPT. Join Cam’s 12-week Online Support & Training for Adoptive Parents, offered once per season.

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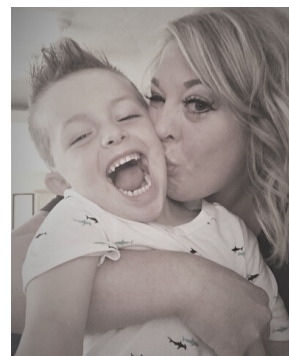
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Krystal Jones is a Clinical Mental Health Counselor, a TBRI Practitioner, and an Adoption Specialist for DCFS in Southwest Region. Krystal received her Bachelor's from Southern Utah University in Psychology and Criminal Justice and her Master's degree from the University of Phoenix. Krystal has worked with youth from hard places working as a foster care worker, Transition to Adult Living Coordinator and as a staff at both the Dixie Area Detention and Washington County Youth Crisis Center. Her passion is helping youth and families find hope, purpose and direction! Krystal and her son Kayden enjoy RVing, RZR riding, bike riding, and anything to do with water! Krystal also welcomes the daily challenge of utilizing her TBRI skills within her home.

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