

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

NOVEMBER 2024 EDITION



BRAYDEN AGE 15

Photo by: Busath Photography



ELIAS, PHILLIPE, & LAZULI
Photographed by: Mikki Grimley

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UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

In partnership with  RAISE the FUTURE

UPCOMING EVENTS

For more information about these and other upcoming community events visit: <https://www.utahadopt.org/support-resources/calendar>

Raise the Future Celebrates National Adoption Month 2024

Date: 11/9 • 11:00am - 2:00pm

Please join Raise the Future in celebrating National Adoption Month. Partnering with Boondock's Fun Center, each participant can enjoy one attractions pass and \$10 arcade play.

Come enjoy fun activities and celebrate adoption!

Spanish TBRI Intro and Overview

Date: 11/14 • 9:30am - 3:30pm

Location: Raise The Future (virtual)

UTAH Parent Night Specialized Training: Preparing for the Holiday Season

Date: 11/15 • 7:00pm - 8:30pm

Location: Raise The Future (Zoom)

Ready! Resilient! Utah Early Childhood Mental Health Conference

Date: 11/21 • 8:30am - 3:30pm

Location: Zions Bancorp Technology Center / Midvale, UT

A statewide convening on early childhood mental health. Join experts, leaders, and advocates to learn more about the importance of infant and early childhood mental health.

UTAH Parent Night Specialized Training: Adopting through Foster Care

Date: 12/6 • 7:00pm - 8:30pm

During this webinar we will discuss the process of adopting a youth from the foster care system in Utah.



ON THE COVER: BRAYDEN

A few words to describe Brayden are sweet, fun, and interactive! Drawing is one of his favorite pastimes. Brayden likes to use bright colors in his drawings, which are his favorite. When he isn't drawing, he can be found playing games or with Magic: The Gathering cards. Alfredo with broccoli will surely win over Brayden's heart for a meal. It would be even better if it were followed by something sweet and delicious! Superheroes are cool in his book. If he could choose any superpower, he would pick mind control. Brayden finds joy in playing video games, doing origami, and exploring the depths of Anime. He is in the eighth grade. Brayden would thrive in a home where he could be the only child. He has significant connections to maintain following placement. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

This is a LEGAL RISK ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT.

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

NOVEMBER 2024 EDITION

Kathy Searle, Editor

Lindsay Kaeding, Design Director

To submit articles or for a subscription, call 801-265-0444 or email kathy.searle@raisethefuture.org. This publication is funded by the State of Utah, Division of Child and Family Services. Raise the Future prepares and prints the newsletter and the Division of Child and Family Services mails the publication. The mailing list is kept confidential. One can be removed from the mailing list by emailing amyers@utah.gov.



How to Take the Stress Out of the Holiday Season

BY: RACHEL EHMKE, REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

We know from the songs and movies that holidays are supposed to be an exciting, meaningful time for families to reunite and celebrate the things we cherish. We set aside time to practice both religious rituals and family traditions, we give thanks, and, of course, later on, we give presents. But sometimes holiday gatherings are less magical and more, well, stressful.

The vacation from school and work means a break from routine, something kids and parents alike depend on. Many families travel, facing traffic and long airplane rides, to attend one or more family get-togethers with rarely seen relatives who expect kisses and catching up. And most of these occasions will involve unfamiliar vegetable dishes.

How can anxious or easily frustrated children hope to survive all that? We've compiled a list of seasonal tips to help all kids—and parents—enjoy the party.

Minimize conflict over behavior

Your kids know the rules at your house, but in the excitement and novelty of a relative's home, good behavior can be a casualty. Always have a conversation before leaving your house about how you expect your children to behave, and don't shy away from specifics.

"Knowing what the rules are at someone else's house is always helpful for kids," says Steven Dickstein, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

"They know that you behave differently in church or synagogue than you do on the basketball court; they need to know what the rules are at grandma's house." If you have any questions about the house rules, don't be afraid to ask.

Talk to your hosts early

Besides preparing your children, sometimes it's necessary to prepare your relatives so they know what to expect. "A child who has behavior difficulties at school is going to have them at grandma's house," warns Dr. Dickstein, "so make sure their expectations are realistic. As a parent, you never want to put your children in a situation where they're set up to fail."

Dr. Dickstein also recommends putting a moratorium on criticizing. "Warn family members about sensitive topics in the same way you'd warn people in advance that your child has a nut allergy," advises Dr. Dickstein. If you have a body-conscious teen, no one should chide her for taking seconds on mashed potatoes. If your brother doesn't believe ADHD is real, now isn't the time to discuss it.

Plan ahead for some peace and quiet.

For kids who are easily overstimulated or sensitive to things like noise and crowds, Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist, recommends arranging for another room they can use when they need a break. "During family gatherings, we want to achieve a balance between being social with relatives while also knowing that, if things get too overwhelming and intense, there's a place to take a break and just be quiet."

Keep kids occupied

Kids like structured activities, and they'll probably be missing them while school is out. Fortunately, the holidays lend themselves to art projects and family-friendly movies that kids enjoy. You can even start new family traditions like cutting out and decorating sugar cookies or throwing a ball around outside.

If you are traveling with a child who will need to sit in a car for any length of time, Dr. Busman advises packing a bag with multiple activities, particularly if the child has a lot of energy. "Don't just think four or five activities will be enough because you could be through those things before you even get on the highway," she says.

When traveling Dr. Busman also recommends planning for breaks, even if it's not that long of a trip. "Kids who get restless or have difficulty managing their impulsive behavior might really benefit from getting out of the car and running around for a few minutes."

Discuss social expectations

Parents should have different social expectations for different kids, and if necessary communicate them to your extended family. "You want to avoid those mandatory hugs and kisses or cheek-pinching for kids that don't do that or like it," says Dr. Dickstein.

Kids with selective mutism should not be pressured to talk during family gatherings (and relatives shouldn't expect them to talk either). If you have an autistic child who has been working on their social skills, maybe you can agree that they will sit at the table next to you and talk to familiar people—others should be expected to understand.

Getting along with cousins and other kids they don't see often can be a challenge. Just because kids are approximately the same age doesn't mean they'll be natural friends, but they should still try to get along—with adult support if needed. If your daughter gets easily frustrated when she doesn't get her way, encourage her to share and be polite with her cousins—and let her know she should find you if a conflict arises that they can't settle amicably.

Dr. Dickstein says family gatherings can be a teachable moment. "Let kids know that family is important and sometimes you have to deal with people you don't really like, but you should work it out if you can. As parents, you are probably doing that with your relatives too, so you can model good social behavior."

Think about the menu

Family gatherings centered on a meal can put a lot of pressure on kids who are picky eaters or who have sensory issues that limit their diet. If you are going to someone else's house for dinner and you know the menu will be a problem, Dr. Busman suggests packing something your child will eat and bringing it with you.

Have a conversation with your child ahead of time to reassure them, explaining, "I know we're going over to your aunt's house and there's going to be some different foods there, but we'll make sure that we bring some things that you like. It would be great if you could try something else, too." Exploring new foods is good for kids, but it shouldn't be the most important thing.

Manage your expectations

Both Dr. Busman and Dr. Dickstein agree that managing your own expectations of what the holidays "should" be like is the most essential step to any holiday gathering. "As parents, we should check in with ourselves over what our own expectations are and not extend them to our kids," says Dr. Busman. "It would be great if the kids could sit at the table and eat a nice holiday meal with us, but they're probably not going to want to sit still for a long time. It's important to appreciate that kids might find the fun in other things, like watching a movie with their cousins or running around outside. And that's ok."

Dr. Dickstein advises identifying one or two things you would like your kids to get out of the holidays—an idea, a value, a memory of doing something special together as a family—and work on achieving that. "But above all, give yourself a break," he says. "You can't make everyone happy, and perfect holidays are nonexistent. Think of all those Hollywood comedies about disastrous family gatherings. There's a reason why they're funny."



Motivating Underachievers: 9 Steps to Take When Your Child Says “I Don’t Care”

BY JOSH LEHMAN
REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Is your child’s answer to everything, “I don’t care” or “It doesn’t matter?”

Parents often think that if they can find a new way to encourage their child, he or she will magically start achieving more.

I don’t think it’s like that at all. I think the problem is that these kids are motivated to resist, to withdraw, and to underperform. They act out by acting in.

The first thing to understand about teens and pre-teens who seem to have no motivation is this: it’s impossible to have no motivation. Everybody is motivated in some way. And these kids are motivated to resist and to do nothing.

Understand that to do nothing is an action. It’s an action to resist—to resist their parents and to resist their teachers. They’re motivated to say, “I don’t care,” with their words and their actions.

Once you realize that your adolescent is motivated to do nothing, it will become obvious to you that she puts a lot of energy into doing that “nothing.” She puts a lot of energy into resisting you and withdrawing from you.

When you talk with adolescents who are underachievers, you hear them express ideas that are what I call thinking errors. They say:

“It’s too hard.”

“I can’t.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

And most of all, they say:

“I don’t care.”

In fact, “I don’t care” is their magic wand and their shield. “I don’t care” takes the pressure off them and makes them feel in control. When they start to feel anxious, it soothes them to say, “I don’t care.”

Fear of failure? “I don’t care.”

It’s hard to do? “I don’t care.”

It’s how they try to solve the basic problems of everyday life.

The first step in addressing this problem is to understand that you can’t make your child care. Let’s be honest, the old saying, “You can bring a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” is true.

But you can make him thirsty. And that’s the key to managing the child who says “I don’t care.” Here are 9 steps to take when your underachieving child says “I don’t care.”

1. Identify What You Can Use for Rewards and Incentives

Look for things that can be used as rewards for your child. Make a point of observing what your child cares about and enjoys. And don't take his word for it because he'll tell you he doesn't care about anything. He'll say that "nothing matters."

But look at his actions. If he watches TV, plays on the computer, plays video games, or texts with his friends, you know what he likes already. Does he like going to the movies? Does he like going fishing? Take an inventory of the things he enjoys and write it all down on a piece of paper. While I usually recommend that parents sit down with their kids and draw up this list together, in the case of kids who tend to withhold, I don't think it's a good idea. Don't ask a child who uses passive-aggressive behavior because he won't tell you. Remember, withholding is his way of maintaining control.

Once you have an inventory of what he likes, you can use these things as incentives and rewards.

Note to parents: a child who won't attend to his work or do his chores is different from someone who's depressed. If your child won't come out of his room, doesn't seem to care no matter what you take away, and is often isolated and withdrawn, you have to take that seriously and seek professional help.

2. Take the Electronics Out of His Room

I think underachieving kids should not have electronics in their rooms. Look at it this way: their room is just a place for them to withdraw.

If you have a child who holes up in his bedroom, the computer should be in the living area. And if he's going to use it, he should be out there with other people.

He also shouldn't have a TV or video games in his room. And if he's not performing, don't let him have his cell phone, either.

3. Make Your Child Earn Privileges

I think that you have to hold unmotivated kids accountable. Make sure everything is earned. Life for these kids should be uncomfortable if they do not meet their daily responsibilities.

Make them earn video games every day. And how do they earn them? By doing their homework and chores. In the same way, make them earn their cell phone today and then start over tomorrow.

This is how real life works. If you don't work, you don't get paid, and you don't get the things you want.

4. Talk about What Your Child Wants

When times are good, I think you should talk to your child about what he would like to have someday. Try to sneak in different ideas to get your child to think about how he will achieve what he wants in life.

Sit down with your child and say:

"So what kind of car would you like to have? Do you like Jeeps?"

Try to get him to talk about what he'd like. Because later on you can say:

"Look, I care about you and I want you to get that Jeep—and you're not going to get it unless you do your homework."

As a parent, I'd be talking this way to your child from pre-adolescence onward. You can say things like:

"Just think, someday you're going to have your own place. What kind of place would you like?"

That's the type of thing you use to motivate adolescents because that's what is real to them. They want to have an apartment. They want to have a girlfriend or boyfriend. And they want to have a car.

So have conversations about what it takes to attain those things.

And don't forget, it's a mistake to give your teen or pre-teen lectures when you want them to do something. Instead, make them see that completing their responsibilities is in their best interests because it leads to the life they'd like to have in the future.

5. Don't Shout or Argue

If you're shouting, you're just showing your frustration—and letting your child know that he's in control.

Here's the truth: when people start shouting, it means they've run out of solutions. With underperforming kids, I think you have to be very cool. Arguing, pleading, and trying to get your teen to talk about how they feel is not very effective when they're using withholding as a relationship strategy.

In my opinion, you can try almost anything within reason for five minutes. You can negotiate, you can reason, you can ask your child about their feelings. It's fine to say, "Is something wrong?" Just be aware that a chronic withholder will be motivated to ignore you.

6. Tell Your Child That What She Does Matters to You

Tell your child that what she does matters to you. Personalize it by saying:

"It matters to me. I care about you. I want you to do well. I can't make you do it and I won't force you. But it matters to me and I love you."

By the way, when I tell parents to personalize it by saying "It matters to me," that doesn't mean you should take it personally. Taking something personally means believing that your child's inappropriate behavior is directed at you. It's not. In reality, their behavior is their overall strategy to deal with the stresses of life.

The concept of "It Matters to Me" helps because relationships can be motivating. Nevertheless, understand that your child is her own person. It's no reflection on you if she doesn't want to perform. You just have to set up an approach to enhance the probability that she's going to meet her responsibilities.

But again, don't take it personally, as if somehow you have to make her do it. The truth is, you can't make her do anything that she doesn't want to do. But you can hold her accountable.

7. Don't Do Your Child's Work

Kids learn early on that when they give up or act helpless that someone will step in and help them. Acting helpless becomes a way to get other people to do things for you. Psychologists refer to this as learned helplessness. And over time, you come to believe that you are helpless. It's a bad lesson to learn.

When kids and teens use this shortcut, they don't learn independence. In fact, in families where this occurs, many times you'll find that the kids weren't allowed to be independent. Perhaps they had to do things a certain way and all the choices were made for them. Eventually, they gave up.

They surrendered.

Regardless of why your child might have developed learned helplessness, as a parent, it's important to stop doing things that he needs to do for himself. Don't do his homework for him. Don't do his chores for him. Don't do his laundry for him. Let him do those things. You can be available for help if necessary, but don't take on his tasks.

I believe one of the most important things an adolescent has to learn is independence. And if you take on his responsibilities, you're robbing him of his opportunity to learn independence.

8. Coach Your Child

Let's face it: it's often sports coaches who get the most out of our kids. It's their job to help kids to want to improve their skills.

A good coach is constantly developing his players by challenging them and complimenting them on the specifics of their progress:

"Nice layup, Josh. You positioned your hands better that time. Keep it up!"

You should do the same with your kids when they meet a responsibility.

Also, a good coach doesn't use unearned praise as a motivator. Telling someone how great they are at something when they aren't isn't helpful. Kids see through flattery and false praise just like adults do. And it usually backfires.

I think parents need to learn more about the coaching parenting style. Always keep your child looking forward. Comment on his or her progress instead of telling them how great they are when they haven't put forth much of an effort.

9. Set Deadlines and Use Structure

Tell your child clearly when to do chores and schoolwork—and when you want them done by. I think it's important to schedule these kids, to give them structure. Say to your child:

"Do your chores from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m., and then you'll have free time until dinner. And during free time, you can do whatever you want to do."

There are many possibilities. You could say:

"If you can accomplish this in X amount of time, we'll go to your cousin's house on Saturday."

Remember, not everything that your child likes to do costs money, so be creative and use your list of what your child likes for ideas.

Conclusion

Being an underachiever gives your child a sense of control and power because then he doesn't have to worry about the anxiety of failure or meeting challenging responsibilities. He doesn't have to compete with other kids. He doesn't have to deal with other people's expectations.





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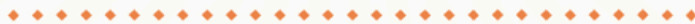
NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH

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10 Essential Classroom Accommodations for ADHD

BY: PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Thank goodness society has finally come to celebrate neurodiversity. Or rather, they've decided to finally acknowledge that there are people who think or learn differently from the majority by inventing an ultra-lengthy neologism.

Regardless, this long-overdue recognition has led to the realization and embracing that conventional methods of classroom instruction simply do not suffice for the "neurodivergent." As such, accommodations or changes that remove the barriers to learning for the neurodiverse are in order and, thankfully, welcomed. Children or young people in the education system with an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnosis have the right to receive accommodations under two federal laws, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

If your child has just been diagnosed with ADHD, or it's time for that annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) review or re-evaluation of an IEP, there may be accommodations that can set them up for success this school year. Below are 10 accommodations that can make all the difference.

Time Management Accommodations

1. Extra Time to Complete Assigned In-Class Work, Homework and Tests

Struggling with time management skills or perceiving/judging time are common ADHD issues. This accommodation can also facilitate test-taking anxiety, challenges with initiation, and deficits in processing speed.

2. Pomodoro Method

The ADHD brain loves rest. I think we can all relate to that. It's not because it's "lazier" than other brains but because the ADHD brain "battery" is much smaller than neurotypical brains. Consequently, it gets depleted faster and needs breaks to "recharge" more frequently. Allowing special education instructors to implement the Pomodoro method in school is a great way to recharge. The Pomodoro method typically recommends setting a timer for 25 minutes and taking a 5-minute break, but for young people with ADHD, the time should be altered to support their attention deficit. I recommend 15 minutes of work with a 3-minute break for young people aged 8 to 18. Remember, it's all about neurodiversity, so tweak as you see fit.

Environmental Accommodations

3. Seating Placement in the Classroom Matters

Being easily distracted and struggling to sit through long classes has always been a hallmark sign of ADHD. Limiting distractions is an easy way to reduce inattention, disruptive behavior, and urges to engage in impulsive acts. Make sure they're not seated in high-traffic areas (close to the classroom door). Seating should also be away from distractions, like windows, heating/air conditioning vents, speakers, and disruptive peers.

Tools and Equipment Accommodations

4. Fidget Chairs

People with ADHD, predominantly hyperactive-impulsive types, have difficulty sitting still, not fidgeting, squirming, and controlling their bodies in general. Special seating accommodations that allow them to expend their excess energy while remaining in their seat are a godsend for teachers and peers alike. Fidget chair bands enable them to bounce their feet without being disruptive. Motion stools, wobble cushions, and balance ball chairs are all teacher-approved.

5. Accommodations for Writing Difficulties

Children with ADHD will also often struggle with dysgraphia, which is described as a learning disability that involves an impaired ability to produce legible and automatic letter writing and often numeral writing. Pencil grips, slant boards, graphic organizers, and highlighted paper can all help make writing less anxiety-provoking.

Working Memory Deficit Accommodations

6. Reduce Memory Load

Working memory is often a significant impairment in children with ADHD. Short-term memory deficits can plague these individuals and can often affect their ability to study and memorize information for tests. Have the teacher provide class notes and study guides. It's even beneficial to have another diligent peer or "class scribe" volunteer their notes for your child's review. All of this can be done while maintaining your child's privacy.

Anxiety Accommodations

It often goes unrecognized that ADHD frequently co-exists with other anxiety disorders like generalized anxiety, social anxiety, and panic disorder. The stress of not being able to focus, forgetting tasks, assignments, and responsibilities, and being overwhelmed by seemingly never-ending external stimuli is overwhelming, to say the least.

7. Taking Breaks from the Classroom

Allowing your child to leave the classroom may seem like a slippery slope that could easily be taken advantage of, but it's necessary. Allowing them to get some water, walk down the hallway, have a quick snack, go to the bathroom, or visit the guidance counselor is often needed when struggling with ADHD and anxiety. The classroom is overwhelming and often overstimulating. A quick "calm-down" or "reset" is typically all it takes to regain focus and composure. If you're nervous about this accommodation, limit the number of times it can be utilized as well as the length of time throughout the school day.

8. ADHD and Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is like the bully that won't leave ADHD in peace. Studies have found that social anxiety disorder has a high rate of co-occurrence with ADHD. This makes classroom presentations a panic-ridden and even traumatizing experience for individuals struggling with severe cases of both. Ask teachers if they would be willing to allow your child to record their presentation at home to edit it as needed or if they would be willing to let the child only present in private. It's best to seek out cognitive behavioral therapists to help the child overcome their social anxiety so that this does not have to become a lasting accommodation. The goal should be to overcome the fear with the right mental health professional support but have the proper accommodations in place in the interim.

Socialization Supports

9. Buddy System

Children with ADHD typically struggle with switching gears or managing "transitions" — changing classes, switching subjects, starting assignments, etc. In addition to giving kids a heads up about transition time, for example, "five more minutes before recess ends," having a school-assigned peer to assist them can also make the shift go much more smoothly.

10. Have the Teacher Assign Your Child a Special Role During Class

It's well documented that ADHD kids are unfortunately targets for bullies. Whether they are often reprimanded by teachers or struggle with impulsive behaviors that garner negative attention, it doesn't change that they are and can regularly feel ostracized or generally disliked. Needless to say, this is awful for their self-esteem. Having their teacher point out that your child has a "special" role or job can help offset the negative attention due to their other misunderstood behaviors. Ask the teacher to name your child "Student Helper," "Paper Passer," (passes out all papers), "Nurse Buddy" (walk other kids to the nurse), "Line Leader," or "Teacher's Assistant."





Why Christmas Stinks Sometimes

BY MICHAEL MONROE
EMPOWERED TO CONNECT
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It was the third day in a row, or maybe the fourth. I don't exactly recall. I do, however, vividly remember coming home from work and being met by my normally patient and long-suffering wife declaring in an overly frustrated tone "Here, you deal with him. I'm done!" The kids were home for Christmas break and one son in particular was being more than a handful. This was very uncharacteristic for him. The first day we thought it was simply childhood Christmas excitement. By the second day, we were beginning to lose our patience. When I arrived home this day my wife was almost at her wits' end. Nagging, whining, crying, bugging siblings, arguing, you name it. But why? Didn't he know Christmas was almost here? Had he forgotten that Santa was "making his list and checking it twice?" Wasn't he aware of how much mom and dad had to do in order to get ready for Christmas? For so many reasons, now was not the time for him to be acting this way.

What I did next doesn't come naturally to me. Try as I might to 'practice what I preach,' I admit that my default reaction to situations like this is to 'lay down the law.' But something told me there was much, much more going on than simply bad behavior. Call it what you will, I like to think of it as my God-given "adoptive dad instinct." So I said to my son, "Let's go for a walk." And after a little cajoling, he agreed and so off we went. We walked for a while engaged in nothing but small talk. Eventually, I changed the subject.

"So what's going on?" I asked.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Of course," I thought sarcastically to myself. But I persisted.

"Mom says you've really been acting up the last few days," I continued. He nodded in agreement. "That's not really like you. Is something wrong? Are you worried about something? Maybe upset about something?"

This time he shrugged his shoulders and just kinda hung his head and shook it side to side, ever so slightly. I'd seen that look before. It told me I was on the right track. And then he gave it away.

"Do I have to tell you?" he asked. This is the tell-tale question he always asks when he has something he really needs to talk about but is a little afraid to bring it up. More often than not the subject is adoption-related. So I gave him the response I always give when he asks me this question. "Of course, you don't have to, but you know I always want to hear what you are thinking - no matter what it is."

And then he practically blurted it out. “Dad, Christmas just stinks!” he exclaimed. “I know I am supposed to love it and be having fun, but I just hate it. I really do.”

It instantly occurred to me that somehow I managed to have the only elementary school-aged child in all of America who actually hates Christmas. But I quickly asked the obvious question, “Why?” “Because it makes me really sad,” he said. “It makes me think about my birth mom and my birth family. I wonder what they are doing. Do you think they think about me?”

“I bet they do,” I replied. “No...I am sure they do. And did you know something else? You’re not the only kid that thinks Christmas stinks because of that very same reason.”

“I’m not?” he said, finally slowing down to look directly at me. I grabbed his hand and we continued. “No. You know Ms. Melanie who was adopted when she was a little girl?” I asked.

“Yeh,” he replied.

“She’s told me a million times that lots of special occasions, like Christmas, birthdays, even Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, are really hard for her. She even has a special name for those times that make her kinda sad and make her think of her birth parents and her birth family. She calls them ‘trigger moments.’ This happens a lot for people who were adopted, and not just when they are kids. She says that even though she is an adult, it still happens for her sometimes,” I explained.

I’ve always heard the expression “the weight of the world being lifted off of your shoulders,” but I don’t think I’d ever literally seen it happen until this moment. It was as though he realized in an instant that everything he had been feeling and thinking was not only “ok,” it was also very real and quite normal. And the fact that I was understanding, even if it could not fully understand – that was all he seemed to need.

Our walk lasted over an hour as we continued talking about what he had been feeling and processing over the past several days. We talked about how it was “ok” to feel these things, but it wasn’t “ok” to act the way he had been acting. Instead, he needed to find a way to talk with Mom or me about it. As important, I assured him we would do a better job of being available for him, especially during times like these.

I can’t honestly say that I truly understand all that he must have been feeling or thinking in his little heart and mind. And frankly, the connection between all of that and his behavior still somewhat alludes to me. But I know that his feelings are very real.

Amidst all of the tinsel and lights and despite the excitement of being out of school and the anticipation of the gifts and fun of Christmas day, the reality is that my kids – not unlike other kids who were adopted – still have profound losses that cannot be erased and must not be ignored. And sometimes, even against their own wishes, their past and what they have lost comes crashing in. Even at happy times like Christmas.

In the face of all this, my job – whether at Christmas, on birthdays, on Father’s Day, or whenever – is to always be available for my kids. To be open and willing to listen and talk, and allow all of who they are to become part of our holidays and special occasions. As we do this, I realize more and more that rather than taking away from these happy times, embracing them and all of their past allows them to be more fully present – and allows us, as a family, to be more connected as we move forward.

After learning from my son why Christmas stinks sometimes, I no longer look at Christmas quite the same as I once did. But of course, I wouldn’t have it any other way.





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