



# UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

AUGUST 2016

[utahadopt.org](http://utahadopt.org)

# UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



Anmon, age 9  
Photo by: Ryan Cummings

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*“ I love you as you are as you seek to find your own special way to relate to the world, or the way you feel is right for you. It is important that you are the person you want to be and not someone that I or others think you should be. I realize I cannot know what is best for you, although perhaps sometimes I think I do. I've not been where you have been, viewing life from that angle you have; I do not know what you have chosen to learn, how you have chosen to learn it, with whom or in what time period. I have not walked life looking through your eyes, so how can I know what you need? ”*

-author unknown

The above poem is an excerpt from the book,  
"Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control."

By Heather T. Forbes, LCSW.

Look for this book and other resources in our newly designed  
**Utah's Adoption Connection Lending Library**  
To be launched this fall on

**www.utahadopt.org**



**On the Cover**  
*Sophia, age 13*

Say hello to Sophia, a bubbly girl with an engaging smile! A creative child, she has talents for dancing and making jewelry. Sophia has fun dressing up, and loves styling her hair and trying out new make-up techniques. Described as sweet and caring, she interacts well with both adults and peers.

Sophia is a sixth grader who benefits from an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and counseling.

The caseworker prefers a two-parent or a single-mom family. If your family can provide a loving, committed and patient environment, we urge you to inquire. 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: Beckah Greenwood

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](http://www.utahadopt.org).

# Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Abuse or Neglect



## Introduction

Children who have been abused or neglected need safe and nurturing relationships that address the effects of child maltreatment. If you are parenting a child who has been abused or neglected, you might have questions about your child's experiences and the effects of those experiences. This factsheet is intended to help parents (birth,

**PART ONE OF A TWO  
PART SERIES.**

LOOK FOR PART TWO IN THE  
NOVEMBER 2016 EDITION



Child Welfare Information Gateway  
Children's Bureau/ACYF/ACF/HHS  
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Eighth Floor  
Washington, DC 20024  
800.394.3366  
Email: [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov)  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov>

foster, and adoptive) and other caregivers better understand the challenges of caring for a child who has experienced maltreatment and learn about the resources available for support. (In some cases, the term “birth” parent is used to distinguish parents with children involved with child welfare from kin or foster or adoptive parents.)

## What Should I Know About My Child?

Learning about your child’s unique history is an important first step for all parents and caregivers in providing a healing environment for children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Try to consider the child’s background and history from the child’s point of view. What has happened in the child’s life—both good and bad—and how might this impact the child’s behavior and family adjustment? This history is one of many variables that will affect how you can help your child heal and thrive. For instance, your history with the child and other factors specific to the maltreatment (e.g., type of abuse or neglect), specific to the child (e.g., age, resilience), and specific to you (e.g., parenting experience) all come into play.

Parents who reunite with a child who was in out-of-home care, relatives that provide care for the child of a family member, and foster and adoptive parents may confront different challenges when raising a child who has experienced maltreatment. The amount and types of information you are able to obtain about your child’s history may also depend on the type of parent-child relationship.

**For birth parents.** Many children whose parents are reported for child maltreatment are not removed from their homes; instead, the family receives in-home services. For children who do enter foster care, the primary goal is usually family reunification, and the majority of children who enter foster care due to child abuse or neglect eventually return home (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In both cases, the goal is to reconnect and build strong parent-child relationships in a safe home environment that promotes child and family well-being. While birth parents may know just about all there is to know about their child’s background, they may need to learn more about any foster care or kinship care experiences that their child has had, and they may need to learn more about the possible impact of abuse or neglect on their child. You may wish to talk with your social worker about your child’s history, and sharing your concerns will help your social worker help you and your family, including help seeking professional mental health services.

**For kinship caregivers.** Some children who have been abused or neglected enter formal or informal kinship care with a grandparent, aunt, or other relative. Kinship caregivers may become responsible for a child unexpectedly or may confront issues that didn’t exist when they raised their own children. Kinship caregivers may or may not have a good history of their child’s background and any maltreatment experiences. They may not have received training in providing out-of-home care and may need to be brought up to date on what has happened to the child, as well as any possible impact of abuse or neglect.

**For foster and adoptive parents.** Foster and adoptive parents may not be aware of their child's past traumas or the extent of the abuse or neglect. Although they have received training to prepare them to care for the child, they may not be completely ready for the unique situation of a particular child. While child welfare agencies are required to provide all available information about a child, some information may not be obtainable, and some children may not feel comfortable disclosing past abuse or neglect.

Child Welfare Information Gateway's factsheet *Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child* addresses the questions prospective adoptive parents should ask their adoption agency, reasons some information may not be available, and where to find more information: [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_background.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_background.cfm)

Educating yourself about your child's history and about child abuse and neglect and the services available for help will better prepare you and your family to face the challenges ahead and continue down the road toward healing.

## What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?

Recognizing the signs of abuse and neglect is the first step toward getting help for your child and your family. Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect have varying symptoms, some of which are presented below. The presence of one or more of these signs does not prove that maltreatment has occurred, but caregivers who are aware of these indicators are better equipped to seek appropriate services.

While there is a Federal definition for abuse and neglect, States also have specific laws addressing the definitions and consequences. As of 2010, the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child abuse and neglect as "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm."

Child maltreatment falls into a number of categories:

- *Physical abuse* refers to a nonaccidental physical injury (e.g., hitting, kicking, burning, etc.) by a parent or other caregiver in the parenting role.
- *Neglect* is the failure of the parent or caregiver to provide for the child's basic needs—food, shelter, supervision, medical care, and emotional nurturing.
- *Sexual abuse* refers to not only forcing or coercing a child to engage in sexual activity but also to exploitation through pornography.
- *Emotional abuse* is usually a pattern of behavior that hurts a child's emotional development (e.g., constant criticism, threats, withholding love, etc.).

Some signs of physical abuse in a child:

- Has unexplained burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, or black eyes
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
- Reports injury by a parent or another adult caregiver
- Abuses animals or pets



Some signs of neglect:

- Lacks needed medical or dental care, immunizations, or glasses
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs

Some signs of sexual abuse:

- Reports nightmares or bedwetting
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- Attaches very quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment

Some signs of emotional abuse:

- Shows extremes in behavior, such as overly compliant or demanding behavior, extreme passivity, or aggression
- Shows either inappropriately grown-up behavior (parenting other children, for example) or inappropriately childish behavior (frequently rocking or head-banging, for example)
- Is delayed in physical or emotional development
- Has attempted suicide
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent

### What Is Trauma?

Trauma is any event that threatens someone's well-being or the well-being of a loved one. It can take many forms, from experiencing maltreatment to witnessing domestic violence or surviving a natural disaster. Children and youth's response to trauma varies; some may be reluctant to trust, some may act out, and some may be withdrawn. In extreme cases,

children may develop posttraumatic stress syndrome, depression, or other mental health conditions. With help, children who experience trauma can cope, heal, and even thrive. This is called "resilience," and parents and caregivers play an important role in the healing process.

Some signs that your child has experienced trauma include:

- Night terrors or a fear of going to sleep
- Bedwetting or other issues with bodily function control
- Anxiety, confusion, agitation, temper tantrums, or other emotional control issues
- Self-mutilation, purging, or vomiting (The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center, 2012)

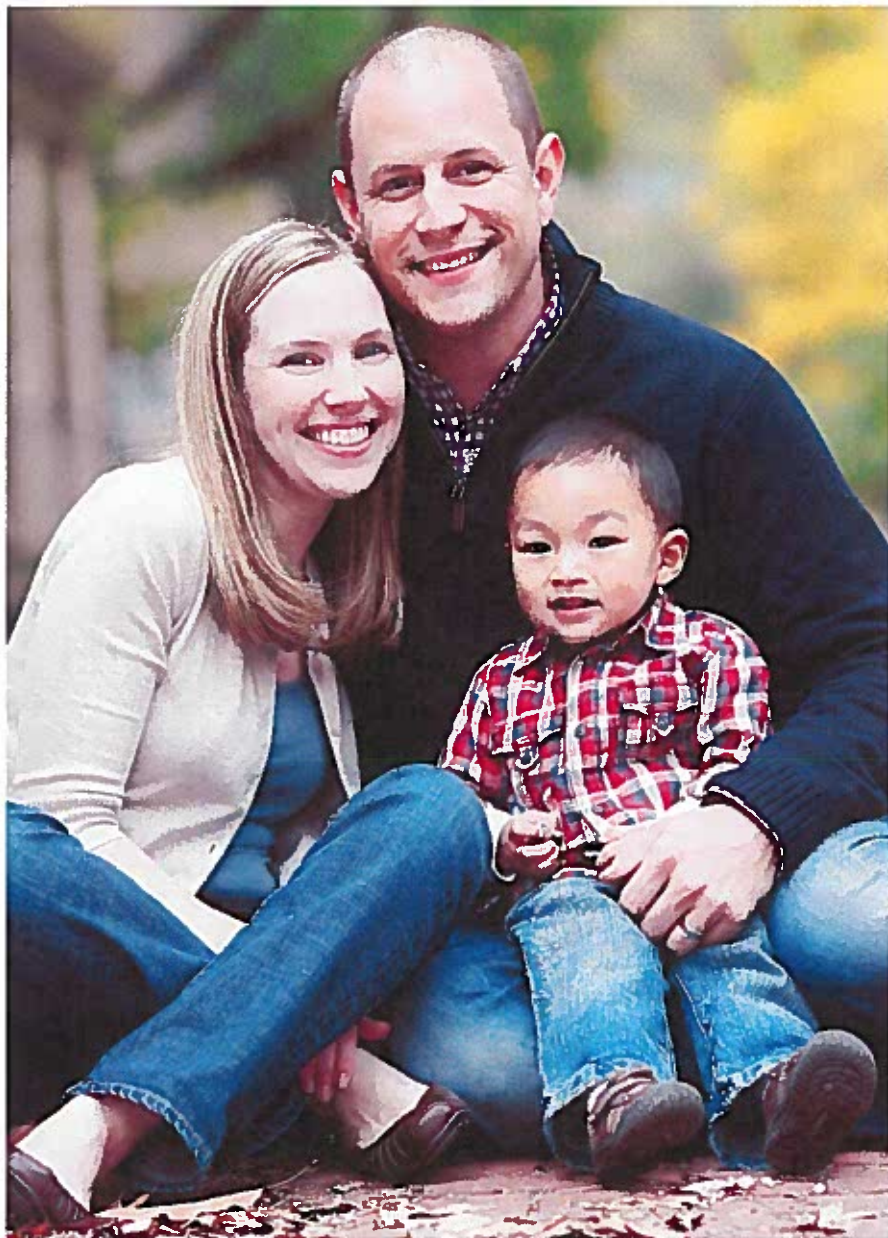
### RESOURCES ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT AND TRAUMA

Child Welfare Information Gateway's factsheet *What Is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms* offers information about how to spot abuse and neglect and provides a list of resources: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/whatiscan.cfm>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's web section on *What Is Child Traumatic Stress?* <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers/what-is-cts>

## PART ONE OF A TWO PART SERIES.

LOOK FOR PART TWO IN THE NOVEMBER 2016 EDITION



# 3

## Tips for New Foster Adoptive Parents

by Danielle Helzer, first published in Huffington Post

Four years ago, my husband and I started our journey as foster parents with a set of unrealistic expectations. We didn't know any foster parents. We found no books titled *What to Expect When You're Expecting Children You Did Not Create*. And because we live under a pop-culture rock, we weren't aware of what modern media had to say about foster parenting. Our training classes were informative, but there's only so much that can be covered in such a short time frame. We naively thought that if we just loved kids, that

we'd fix everything. We were seriously under-prepared for our journey as foster parents. If you're starting the process to become a foster parent, or if you're fairly new to this gig (like me)—consider these three things I wish I would've known as a new foster-adoptive parent:

1. The trauma your kids have experienced will impact you. After three years of helping our two kids process their trauma, I noticed a change in my de-

meanor. I was always on edge; my body was tense as I waited for the next blow up or negative phone call from my kids' school. Because my body was tense all day, I tired more easily. Some days all I wanted to do was sleep—a total switch from my normally energetic personality. After particularly trying weeks, I'd find myself slipping into a dark mental state. I told my husband many times that I was running away because I started believing the lie that I was no good for my kids. Sometimes I was so overwhelmed that all I could do was sit at my din-



ing room table and stare at the walls. I honestly thought I was losing my mind, but then I stumbled on an article that defined secondary trauma for adoptive parents. It was suddenly clear: I was experiencing symptoms of secondary trauma. In our training to be foster parents, we learn about how trauma will impact our kids. We learn that early childhood trauma negatively impacts brain development and the development of the nervous system. We learn about the consequences of these delays and what behaviors will develop as a result. Going into this gig, I knew how trauma would impact our kids, but nobody told me that my kids' trauma would impact me. Learning about secondary trauma didn't fix my problems, but it allowed me to give myself some grace. Understand secondary trauma and watch for it in yourself, and then go easy on your tired soul.

2. Don't be afraid to find a therapist...for yourself. Yes, your kids will likely need a therapist to help them process their transition from their biological family to their foster or adoptive family, but you may need one, too. Don't be ashamed...you're not broken—you're just doing difficult work that needs to be processed with someone who is detached from your experiences. I reluctantly started seeing a therapist a few months ago, and it's been one of the best choices I've made for myself. My therapist has listened to me gripe, given me unbiased advice, taught me calming strategies, and encouraged me. I am a hot mess, but my therapist helps me deal more gracefully with my mess. If you can,

find a therapist who understands the nuances of the child welfare system so you don't have to spend a lot of time explaining the technicalities of your family situation. Maybe, like me, you have crappy insurance. If so, consider checking with your licensing agency to see if they have any therapists they can provide. Some employers also provide a certain number of free therapy sessions a year to help employees cope with life.

3. Foster-adoptive parenting is not about us; it's about the kids. I know this sounds basic, but hear me out. There will be days when your kids will take all their trauma and anger out on you, and you will want to throw in the towel and run away. Just today I stood in front of my closet and wondered what I'd need to take with me when I ran away to my parents' house for a few days of respite. I even went as far as texting my mom to let her know I'd be letting myself into her house to escape the crazy of my house. But I didn't go. Because my kids' mothers couldn't take care of them, they don't trust me to take care of them. I can't slip up in these early years with my kids. A broken promise, losing my cool, forgetting a snack—their traumatized brains will notice all of it, and it will make the attachment process more difficult. Leaving in a moment of desperation would have grave effects on my kids' attachment to me as their forever mama. My kids—your kids—they deserve parents who stick it through the tough times. You see, this work we do raising kids that aren't our own flesh and blood—it's hard. But let's consider how difficult it is for our children as

they struggle to adjust to a new family, identify and process their trauma, and maybe even let go of their biological families. This work isn't about us; it's a love offering to our kids.

No matter how many books we read or foster-adoptive parents we know, we still may not feel 100% equipped to be a foster-adoptive parent. And that's okay because we will learn as we move through this journey. If you're a new foster parent: Hang in there. Practice good self-care; we can't take care of others if we're not taking care of ourselves.

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Danielle Helzer is a wife and momma to two hilarious and brave school-agers adopted from foster care. Previously a high school English teacher, Danielle now fills her days chasing after her kids, working part-time as a writing coach at a local community college, and writing about parenting, intentional living, and faith at <http://daniellehelzer.blogspot.com/>.



# Post Adoption Support

Are you looking for Post Adoption Support in your area?  
Visit us online at

[www.utahadopt.org](http://www.utahadopt.org)

and click on Post Adoption Resources for a list of community supports in your area, cluster groups or adoption related Facebook pages.

## Finding Support

Many adoptive families seek out others whose families are similar to their own to provide friendship and support, and to exchange ideas and information about caring for their children. It is often also helpful for adopted children to spend time talking with other children who have been adopted.

### Community Resources in Utah listed by county

#### Eastern Region

- [Daggett, Duchesne, Uintah \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Daggett\\_Duchesne\\_Uintah\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Daggett_Duchesne_Uintah_10_2016.pdf)
- [Carbon, Emery \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Carbon\\_Emergy\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Carbon_Emergy_10_2016.pdf)
- [Grand, San Juan \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Grand\\_San\\_Juan\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Grand_San_Juan_Counties_10_2016.pdf)

#### Salt Lake Region

- [Salt Lake \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Salt\\_Lake\\_County\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Salt_Lake_County_10_2016.pdf)
- [Tooele \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Tooele\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Tooele_10_2016.pdf)

#### Southwest Region

- [Iron, Beaver, Kane \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Iron\\_Beaver\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Iron_Beaver_Counties_10_2016.pdf)
- [Garfield, Wayne, Piute \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Garfield\\_Wayne\\_and\\_Piute\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Garfield_Wayne_and_Piute_Counties_10_2016.pdf)
- [Sevier, San Pete \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Seiver\\_Sanpete\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Seiver_Sanpete_Counties_10_2016.pdf)
- [Washington \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Washington\\_County\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Washington_County_10_2016.pdf)

#### Northern Region

- [Cache, Box Elder, Rich \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Cache\\_Box\\_Elder\\_and\\_Rich\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Cache_Box_Elder_and_Rich_Counties_10_2016.pdf)
- [Davis \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Davis\\_County\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Davis_County_10_2016.pdf)
- [Weber, Morgan \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Weber\\_Morgan\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Weber_Morgan_Counties_10_2016.pdf)

#### Western Region

- [Utah, Juab \(https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources\\_Utah\\_Juab\\_Counties\\_10\\_2016.pdf\)](https://www.utahadopt.org/uploads/Resources_Utah_Juab_Counties_10_2016.pdf)

## Cluster Groups

The Utah Foster Care Foundation has designed groups that are called Clusters. These groups provide training for foster and adoptive parents about a variety of topics from school issues to working with children who have experienced trauma. Anyone is welcome to attend the cluster groups.

- [Cluster Groups \(http://www.utahfostercare.org/im-a-foster-parent/clusters/\)](http://www.utahfostercare.org/im-a-foster-parent/clusters/) Foster and Adoptive Families
- [Domino Foundation \(http://www.dominofoundation.org/\)](http://www.dominofoundation.org/) Transracial Group
- [Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption \(http://www.frusa.org/\)](http://www.frusa.org/)
- [Grandfamilies \(http://www.cssutah.org/our-programs\)](http://www.cssutah.org/our-programs) Support for families providing relative care. (Kinship)



## Finding Support

Many families are finding support online with some of the most active groups on Facebook. Here are a few:

- [Adoptive Families \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/adoptivefamilies/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/adoptivefamilies/)
- [Adoption Learning \(https://www.facebook.com/Adoption.Learning.Partners?fref=ts\)](https://www.facebook.com/Adoption.Learning.Partners?fref=ts)
- [Adopting the Older Child \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/114654941931517/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/114654941931517/)
- [Adoption in Ukraine \(https://www.facebook.com/ukraine.adoptions\)](https://www.facebook.com/ukraine.adoptions)
- [Ethiopian Adoption Support Group \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/1676678739137727/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1676678739137727/)
- [Families with Children From China \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/115226558496568/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/115226558496568/)
- [Families with Children From Guatemala \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/62806800775/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/62806800775/)
- [Parenting FASD Kids and Adults \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/parentngfasdteensandadults/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/parentngfasdteensandadults/)
- [Utah Transracial Adoption \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/288126787426/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/288126787426/)



**National Adoption Center®**

*There are no unwanted children...just unfound families*

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

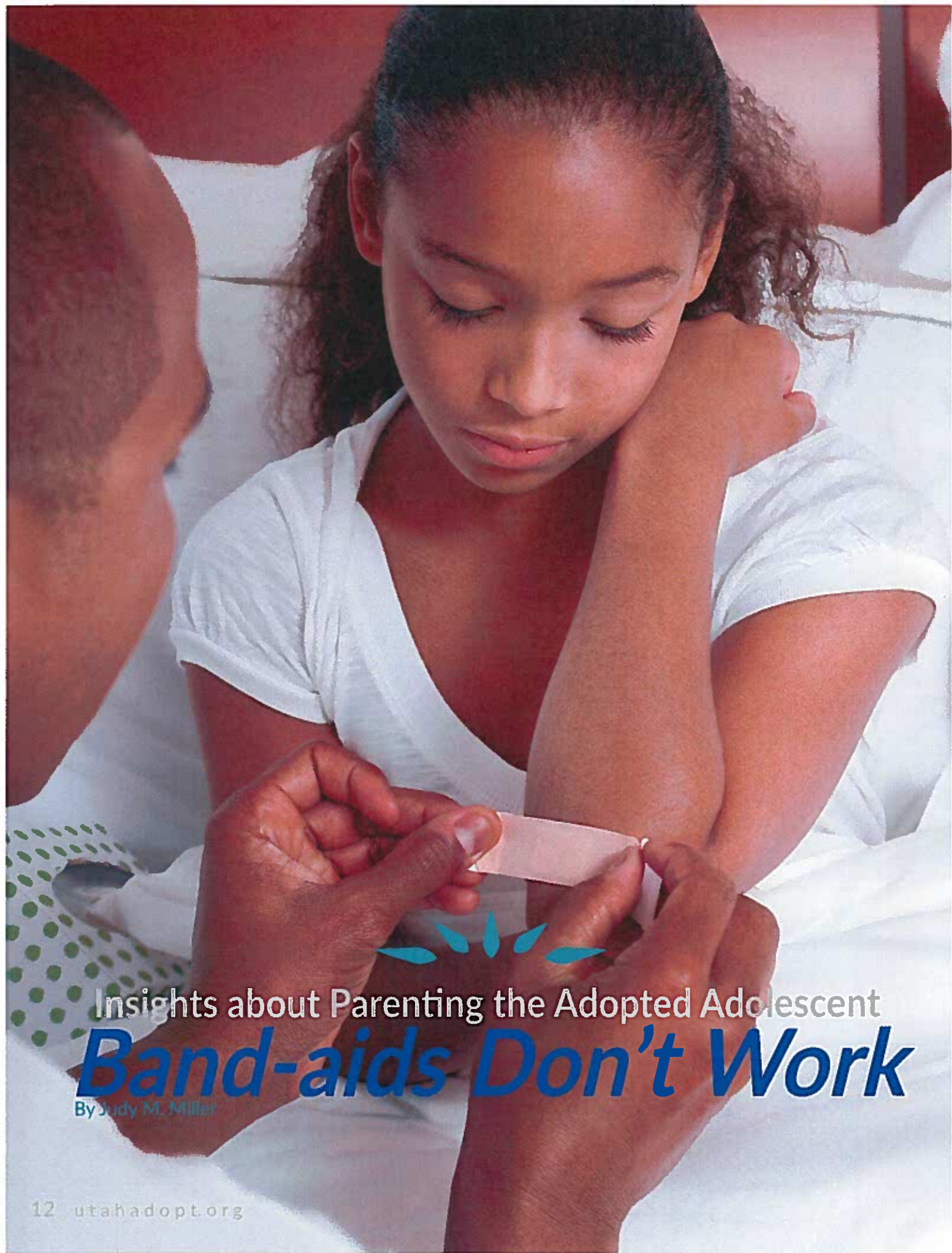
If you, or a family you know, have a child who participates in the National School Lunch Program, your family may qualify for Comcast Internet Service at the low cost of \$9.95 a month plus tax. There are no price increases, no activation fees or equipment rental charges. In addition, the family may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

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

If you think this program might be right for a family, it's easy to get started. Visit [InternetEssentials.com](http://InternetEssentials.com) to learn more, or call 1-855-8-INTERNET (1-855-846-8376) to enroll and begin. There are also pilot programs for college students and seniors living in certain areas; check the website for more information.

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





Insights about Parenting the Adopted Adolescent  
***Band-aids Don't Work***

By Judy M. Miller

Are you an adoptive parent or considering adoption? Has your child reached adolescence or coming close to it? Here are some insights about parenting adolescents who have been adopted.

### Loss is always part of adoption.

Regardless of circumstance or age, be it minutes or years old, the child who joins their family through adoption, has suffered profound loss. The initial loss is separation from the child's birth mother, and that loss expands outward to encompass birth family, birth culture, and birth history.

### Loss is the "hub" of inherent issues in adoption.

Loss must be considered, understood and honored by parents so that they can support their child as they navigate from childhood into adulthood. Loss accumulates, one layer stacking upon another. The hub can be quite deep.

Varying degrees of grief, guilt and shame, rejection, identity, intimacy, and control are often experienced throughout the adopted person's lifetime. These feelings tie into loss and extend from it, like the spokes of a wheel. These feelings are known as the inherent issues in the adoption "landscape." Inherent issues affect many who have been adopted, as well as the majority of birth parents and adoptive parents. For the purposes of this article, I only address the issues as they pertain to a person who has been adopted.

### Inherent issues ebb and flow life-long.

Feelings tied to having been adopted typically begin to make themselves known with the onset of adolescence, as early as the age of six, just when the hormones begin to fluctuate in preparation for puberty. Children also begin to understand much more about adoption and how it has and will forever impact them.

Often adoptive parents find themselves dealing with puberty and one or more adoption issues. As any parent who has raised a child can share, no one ever feels quite ready to parent a teenager. And parenting the child who has been adopted requires even more preparation—knowing the child's history (and historical framework if adopted internationally) and how that can affect them, understanding the core issues and how to use them as tools in parenting, and having a level of true empathy for the child.

### There might be more going on than the core issues.

Depending on circumstances; the child may also have suffered neglect; exposure to drugs and/or alcohol, experienced or witnessed sexual, emotional or physical abuse. These hard truths are difficult for parents to share, however necessary to discuss with their child. This information is part of the child's story and it is important for parents to share and discuss all of their child's birth history and related facts with them prior to adolescence, in age-appropriate language.

- Education promotes understanding. Understanding encourages empathy, which in turn provides patience.

These tools are necessary to effectively parent the child who has been adopted.

- If seeking therapy for your child, address your own first. Think of airplane cabin decompression: put your oxygen mask on before your child's. If you don't you can't possibly help your child.

- Work with a therapist well versed in adoption and adoption issues. Therapists unfamiliar about adoption and inherent issues in adoption will be ineffective.

Yes, any "hard truths" are difficult to share because parents have so much emotion invested in the adoption journey and love their children so deeply. But to not share the difficult truths leave children unprepared and open to injury by others and questioning why their parents, who love them and have their best interests at heart, did not tell them The Truth(s).

### Education about loss in adoption empowers parents to help their children.

Loss, neglect, abuse, attachment and a whole range of other topics are now examined and discussed during adoption

preparation education with "waiting" parents. Adoption preparation education was not available when my husband and I adopted. We were unprepared.

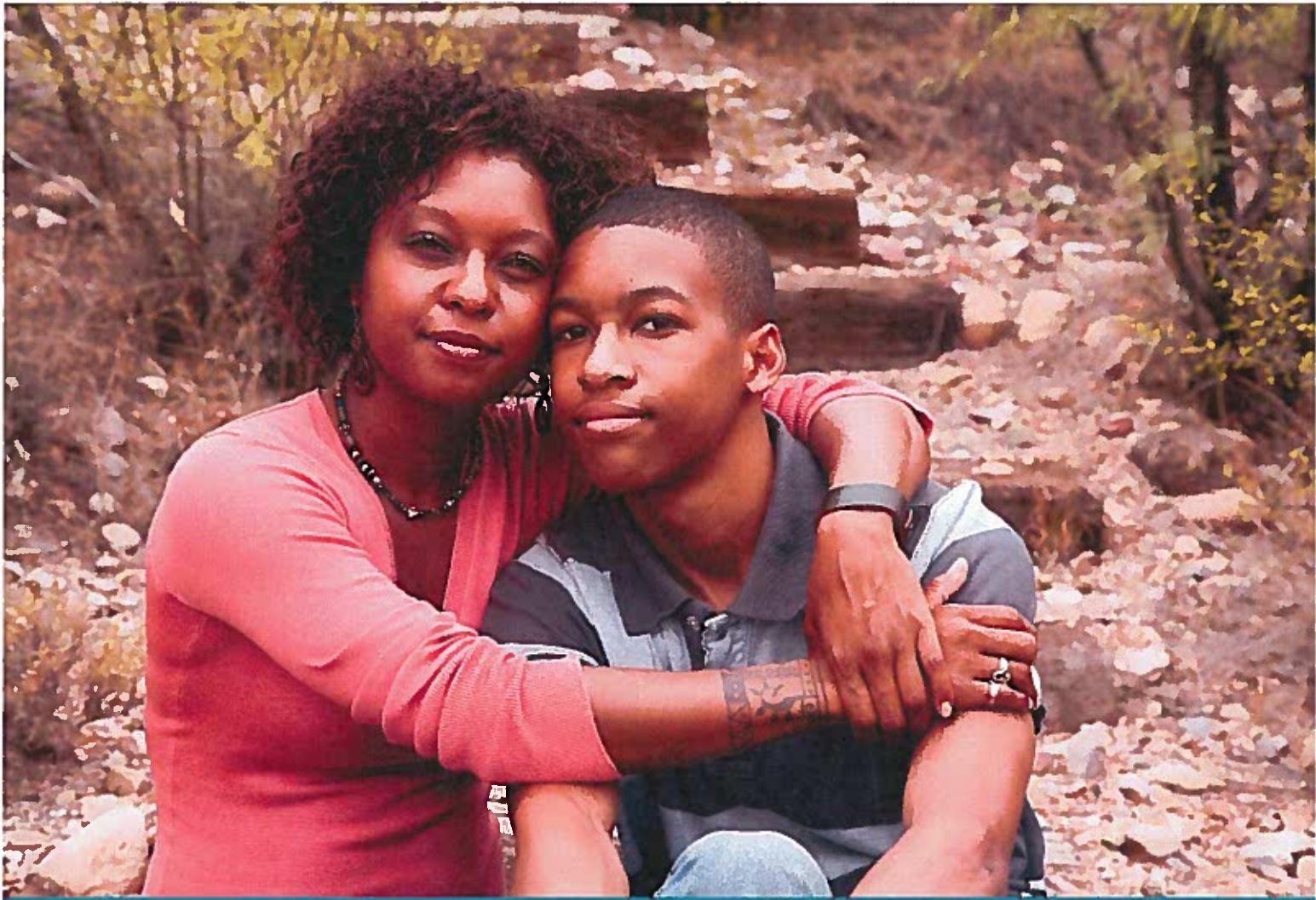
We began to educate ourselves when seeking therapy for our daughter. Great concern over her obvious distress mingled with profound joy when our daughter joined us in her infancy. The enormity of what adoption meant—forever uprooting and separating my daughter from the rich ancient culture she was born into—became crystal clear in that instant. Though resilient as humans are, she grieved for some time while she adjusted to parents, family and a society that didn't look, sound, feel, or smell like what she was familiar with. She did attach, but sadness and grief stayed. Her psychosocial development stalled.

Our love was not enough. It was only a huge bandage that kept the wound from becoming infected further. The bandage of our love didn't and couldn't address the underlying cause of the wound and, therefore, why it wasn't healing. Part of that education was about loss and how it affects the child who has been adopted—feelings of grief, guilt and shame, rejection, identity, intimacy, and control. In understanding what she was facing we were able to better support her needs and help her resolve and eventually talk about what she felt.

Judy M. Miller works with pre- and adoptive parents, equipping them with new techniques and information and encouraging and empowering adoptive families through difficult times. She is the author of the internationally-known parent guide, *What To Expect From Your Adopted Tween*, and a workbook for adopted adults, *Writing to Heal Adoption Grief: Making Connections & Moving Forward*. Judy has also created a guide for those looking for advice, suggestions, and honest dialogue about how to best support friends or family members on their adoption journey—*For Families and Friends: Advice, Suggestions, and Honest Dialogue About How to Best Support Parents on Their Adoption Journey*.







# How Do I Prove LOVE to my Adopted Child?

by Selena Boyts

One of the most monumental and unforeseen obstacles I have faced as an adoptive parent is how to prove my love to my adopted child. This issue seems to be made more complicated by the fact we adopted him through the foster care system as a preteen. Adopted children struggle with feeling connected, loved, a part of the family; and foster kids are truly plagued with doubt and confusion over their feelings towards their caregivers. Love is often a foreign concept to them, or has been displayed in unhealthy ways. They are unfamiliar

with how healthy love is supposed to feel, the way it works, and how it plays a role in relationships. By the time a foster child is adopted they have been disappointed time and time again by people who made promises they didn't intend to keep, and their ability to trust is depleted. They often arrive on our doorsteps as empty hollow shells of their previous selves. They are void of every emotion that may open them up to be hurt. As parents we become frustrated when the only emotion they seem to possess is anger. We cannot understand

why they can't "get it". Why can't they see how much we love them? Or why we love them. We cry ourselves to sleep after a long day of giving and giving, with no reciprocation. We often feel like giant stars, burning bright with good intentions and open hearts, doing everything in our power to make sure that child feels loved. And yet, our struggling kids are like black holes, sucking every bit of light from us, draining us dry, and leaving us feeling lifeless. For people who have never experienced this kind of one-way relationship with a child I probably



sound heartless, cruel. But, the reality is my heart is full, caring, and in constant search of a relationship with my adopted child.

It's been quite the journey. Our family has been through hell and high water with our son. But here we are. We are still his parents and he is still our son. He has pushed us away. He has pushed and pushed, and run away, and hurt us over and over again. And, yet, we stand next to him. No matter what. It's been nearly 6 years since he arrived on our doorstep a broken little shell of a boy, and one thing I have learned is that only time, consistency and open communication can prove my love to my child.

Consistency comes to me like second nature. Say what you mean. Mean what you say. Be a person of your word. Do not make promises you don't intend to keep. Yadda Yadda. Time comes naturally as well. Obviously. But, there's no rushing it. Trust me. I've tried. Time takes time. And you have to allow time to work for your benefit, instead of fighting it, or trying to rush it. Now, the concept of open communication with my child? Much different story. It took a while for me to learn. I used to bang my head against the thick wall our son had built up around himself, trying to make him listen to me. Then one day I realized in order for him to feel validated and safe, I needed to listen to him. This wasn't easy, and it took consistency and time to learn.

Learning how to listen, and creating moments of safety, allowed my son the freedom to open up and share his feelings. This was incredibly difficult sometimes. I had to learn to pick my battles and tell the protective Momma Bear laying in wait when to pounce on problems and when to let them slide. I quickly discovered it could be hurtful when I didn't look at the situation from his perspective. I had to learn how to not take it personally. So hard to do, by the way. Learning how to listen to my son has taught me that those uneasy feelings of his stem from somewhere deep within him, and were created long before he

entered our home. But, now I'm the closest person to him and I've created a safe place for him to share those feelings of fear and anger, and so they pour over onto me.

Children in foster care experience a grueling nightmare when being removed from their homes. They suffer serious abuse or neglect at the hands of people they should be able to trust. Then they are placed in the care of complete strangers, consequently experiencing additional severe emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems. Physical problems often arise as a result of these experiences. Most children who have experienced abuse, neglect and foster care learn to shut down and look out for #1. They go into survival mode. Children in foster care, or who have been adopted through foster care, often struggle with blaming themselves and feeling guilty about removal from their birth parents. They wish to return to birth parents even if they were abused by them. Children can be left feeling unwanted if awaiting adoption for a long time. Their feelings of hopelessness grow if there are multiple changes in foster placements. They have mixed emotions about attaching to foster/adoptive parents, and feel insecure and uncertain about their future. They are often reluctant to acknowledge any positive feelings for foster/adoptive parents. Having said that, most foster children show remarkable resiliency and determination to go on with their lives. Sometimes, they just need a listening ear and an open heart to hear them. After all, they deserve the opportunity to be heard; to share these doubts, fears, anxieties. When you open your home and heart to children in need of care, this task is both rewarding and difficult. However, learning to listen and then validating your child's feelings through genuine sympathy/empathy is an essential skill. The relationship with the child will be better, because the more validated they feel, the less conflict you'll have. You will also find that vali-

dation opens children up and lets them feel free to communicate with you. They will be less likely to close up, or "shut down", emotionally. Most foster/adopted children live in an emotional shell. Sometimes you see glimpses of that shell opening and then without warning it can slam shut! But remember, if there is a communication breakdown, if there is a wall between you and your child, it was probably built with the bricks of invalidation. And this may have been built up over time, so it will take time to break it down. This can sometimes feel like a slow and tedious process. Just remember, when you consistently listen and validate your children, you are allowing them to safely share their feelings and thoughts. You should be constantly reassuring them that it is okay to have these feelings, and demonstrating that you will still accept them after they have shared their feelings. (This is very important, because these children are so fearful of rejection.) Be sure to let them know that their perspective is highly important to you. This will help them feel heard, acknowledged, understood and accepted. And they will know they are loved.

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Selena is a stay at home mother to a beautiful preschooler and an adopted teenage son. She loves writing for her blog [selenaboys.com](http://selenaboys.com), and one of her articles was featured on Rage Against the Minivan. She is best known as a lyricist and has written for a few local bands in Colorado Springs.

She is also a self-published author. Her short story, *The Monster in the House*, is a fictional depiction of her adopted son's real-life story; his childhood, time in foster care and his eventual adoption into her family. The little boy in the story endures frighteningly traumatic events early in his life and is eventually abandoned by his mother. He wanders alone for a long time until his 'Happily Ever After' finds him.

Selena's experiences as a foster parent and adoptive mother have shaped her honest and genuine writing style you'll encounter in her writing. She will make you laugh with her quippy sarcastic point of view, and move you to tears with her profound honesty. You can read more of her work at [selenaboys.com](http://selenaboys.com).

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Brittany Wright works in the Ogden office of Utah's Division of Child and Family Services. She works consistently from a permanency perspective. She truly believes that unadoptable is unacceptable and is very child-focused. Brittany always makes her Child and Family Team meetings a priority.

She is very responsive to all members of the team, and reaches out to include and utilize team members strengths and resources. Brittany understands the value of good transitions, she has a long term view and always keeps this in mind even when things get difficult. She works hard to make sure that child and family has the tools they need to be successful before the child is placed in an adoptive home.

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