

Family Helper, By Brenda McCreight, Ph.D

Article for “Family Helper”

I have been a child and family therapist for twenty five years (when did I get that old?). In my therapeutic and coaching practice, I work with adoptive and foster parents to help them develop strategies for managing children with the challenging behaviours that are associated with attachment trauma, FASD, ADHD, anger management, and simply learning how to belong to a loving family. In B.C., all adoptions must be done through either the government services, or through a licensed B.C. agency and so the families I work with have adopted through the government adoption services which only place waiting children from the B.C. foster care system; and I work with those who have adopted through licensed agencies which facilitate international adoptions of infants, toddlers, and children from foreign orphanages or from the foster care system in the U.S.

It never ceases to amaze me how, once the decision has been made to adopt domestically, people start to creep out of the woodwork with tales of horror and woe about children adopted from the public system. Suddenly everyone can tell you a story about some child from _____ (fill in the blank, although it's usually some southern U.S. state), who terrorized his adoptive parents and ruined their lives. I even had a hair dresser start to tell me how his adopted nephews tried to kill their mother, and he was telling the story while cutting my daughter's hair! Most children who are adopted from the public system are not newborns by the time they are placed. They will have had many significant life problems to deal with long before their first birthday. Each and every day that they were ignored, or hurt, or left to feel abandoned, will have caused a degree of damage that the adoptive parents will have to heal. And it's true that the process of healing takes time and energy and resources that the adoptive parent may not have anticipated. But, is that enough to forgo the experience?

Recently, I have been hearing people say “Adoption isn't for the faint of heart”. I take umbrage with that (I am not sure what umbrage is, but it is such a great sounding word that I am sure I would take it if I knew the meaning). Let's face it, life isn't for the faint of heart. Even those who have not adopted challenging children have tough times in their lives (look at poor Britney Spears, all that money and she still can't find clothes that fit!). So, I think we should stop moaning about how tough it is to raise challenging children, and start focusing on how lucky we are to have them. I know...if you are in the middle of a crisis right now, it will be hard to think how this could be called luck. Well, stand back a minute and look at your life again. This child, rages and all, has given you the opportunity to be a parent, and that is what you wanted. He has also given you the opportunity to learn new ways of talking and listening, new ways of relating, new ways to value your relationships, and maybe some new friends (okay, so the police officer that caught him stealing last Thursday isn't a friend yet, but trust me, a couple of years from now he will be your best buddy). Your child has moved you from complacency to valuing every moment that is good in your life; and, from smugness to humility.

Our children start off in our families with some real issues. The hardest for many is that they have to do all their learning about how to be a child and how to belong to a family in their growing up years, instead of in infancy when they were supposed to. That means the adoptive family is going to go through stages where the “tough” part overwhelms the “rewards” part. So, what are some simple strategies to help you hang in there till the rewarding times start to overtake the tough times (yes, they will). **Well, after being a therapist for twenty-five years, and an adoptive parent for twenty-four years, here's what I think it comes down to:**

1. Focus on changing yourself, not the child. He is just who he is, tantrums, lying, and all. You are the functional, intelligent adult, and you have the ability to learn new ways of parenting. Once you have done that, he will be able to learn new ways of being a child.
2. Live your life as if the problems (remember, I said the problems, not the child) didn't exist. Don't focus every day, and every decision, on Junior. Because, as we all know, Junior is going to come

out of this just fine eventually, and there is no point putting your life on a shelf for two years, or getting divorced, while he sets a new standard for 'attitude'.

3. Get enough sleep at least four times a week. If you have to, take shifts, or once in a while hire a babysitter while you nap.
4. Get an updated psychological assessment (on the child, not you) as well as blood tests and allergy tests. It may be "older child adoption issues", or it may be that Junior was never properly assessed for his needs as a younger child. Psychology is an ever changing field, and problems that were not well understood when you adopted Junior may be more easily addressed now.
5. Learn and use conflict resolution skills. Formal conflict resolution skills really work. They won't change Junior, but they will change how you engage in the argument and how you feel about yourself afterward.
6. Find a way to enjoy at least an hour with Junior once a week, once a day if possible (but if that was possible, you wouldn't be reading this article). Take him out for a fast food lunch and just let him talk on, and on, and on.....without benefit of your advice or opinion (I bet your parents did that with you). It won't change anything, and it might raise your blood pressure, but it will help you to know him in the present, and to give you something good to think about when you are lying awake worrying about the meeting with his teacher tomorrow.
7. Find a hobby or interest that makes you feel good. Take a couple of hours a week to focus on you, not on Junior.
8. Let the rest of the children have a 'normal' family life. Take vacations without Junior so that the siblings still get to have a childhood. Don't miss their soccer games just because Junior came home stoned, he's only going to sleep anyway, so leave the argument till later and go cheer the one who is still behaving.
9. Believe in your child and your family. Your belief that your family can make it and that Junior will be okay again, someday, are often all that our children have as a guiding light to that destination. They want to get there too, despite what it looks like now.
10. Remind yourself that this will pass. As someone once said, "Everything works out in the end, and if it hasn't worked out, then it isn't the end." Twelve year olds are in process, they are not finished. Neither are you!