

# WHAT ADOPTIVE PARENTS CAN DO

By Nancy Verrier, MFT and Adoptive Mother

- Deal with the reality of the adoptive situation: different from biological family. Parenting plus!
- Attunement: Mother must be alert and empathic to signs of loss and grieving. Soothe infant.
- Mother's soothing important to child's achieving self-regulation. Thousands of repetitions.
- More difficult for mother to know what to do for this particular child: (1) no genetic markers and (2) separation trauma.
- If at all possible, stay home with child; he doesn't need one more disappearing mother.
- Brain research: First three years most important for neurological connections: Connections determined by child's perception of environment. Imprints during this time are lasting.
- Events of first year are imprinted in 'implicit memory' - no recall, but tremendous influence on attitudes, behavior, emotional responses, and sense of self and others.
- Understand a child's coping mechanisms: acting out or compliant. Compliant doesn't mean untroubled.
- Acting out child will demonstrate 'wrong mother' idea by making adoptive mom wrong about many things. This interfaces with his need for control.
- Validate child's feelings. Do not defend against or reassure; he will feel discounted.
- For more info: Don't ask "why." Rather, "I'd like to hear more about that..."
- Try to understand the difficulty of growing up without seeing oneself reflected anywhere.
- Celebrate birthday before the actual day. (Birthday often "separation day" for child.)
- Don't be late picking up child from school, activities, etc. (triggers abandonment fear).
- Fear sometimes keeps child from letting in love. Be patient. Not personal: not rejection of you.
- Tell child about being adopted before she knows what it means. Keep subject open for discussion.
- As she gets older, answer her questions honestly. Don't speak for anyone else (i.e. birthmother). Never say: "Your birthmother loved you so much she wanted you to have a good home." Even if true, it makes no sense to child: One doesn't give away what one loves. Always tell truth.
- Open adoptions preferable to closed adoptions. Children need genetic markers and secrets are toxic. Honor promises. (This also goes for birth parents.) Step families can do this; so can you.
- Learn to understand the differences between behavior (acting out or compliant) and the child's true personality. Behavior will often be different outside of family. Easier for others to see true personality. Child's true personality may enhance hidden traits in parents' personalities.



- Acknowledge, respect, and value the differences between adoptee and other family members.
- Encourage child's talents and interests, even if they are different from yours or you previously had no interest in what he is interested in.
- Because the child will not be able to verbalize his pain, look for other forms of communication: art, poetry, music, play, projective identification (where child projects his pain onto parents).
- Behavior is often metaphor for beliefs: feels stolen, may steal; living a lie, may lie; people disappear, may hoard food, etc. Interpret for child.
- Core issues: abandonment, loss, rejection, trust, intimacy, guilt and shame, control, and identity.
- Learn to understand child's anger as sometimes a cover for pain. Empathize with pain.
- Never threaten abandonment, no matter how provocative child becomes.
- Acknowledge child's feelings: Never say, "You shouldn't feel that way." Feelings come from the unconscious and are valid. Teach child to find appropriate ways to express those feelings.
- Allow child to be himself: Withdraw expectations which do not fit his personality or abilities.
- Do not try to take the place of the birthmother. She is real to him/her. You are a different person and very important in his/her life.
- Adoptees are often diagnosed with ADD. This is a result of the trauma and has nothing to do with intelligence. Hypervigilant: Trauma causes problems with attention, distractions, and stimulus discrimination. It is then difficult to focus on studies. Parents and teachers need to be patient.
- Prepare child for changes in routine. Fears surprises (like disappearance of mother).
- Because of interruption of natural order, child will not understand cause and effect or consequences as readily as other children. Especially difficult during adolescence. Consequences need to start early and be fair, immediate, and consistent. (Trying to repattern brain imprint.)
- Child needs strong boundaries and limits, even though they fight against them. Needs to feel safe, contained, and cared for. Is puzzled by his own behavior. Needs rational, stable parents.
- Father will not be having same experience as mother. Needs to empathize and support, rather than criticize her.
- Both need support group to compare notes with other adoptive parents and avoid isolation.
- Parents very important: Child desperately wants and needs your love and understanding.

Important books: Parenting from the Inside Out by D. Siegel & M Hartzell, A General Theory of Love by Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, The Primal Wound and Coming Home to Self by N. Verrier, Building the Bonds of Attachment by D. Hughes, Parent in Control by G. Bodenhamer, and The Epidemic by Robert Shaw.

For more information contact:

Help One Child • 858 University Ave. • Los Altos, CA 94024 • 650-917-1210 • [www.helponechild.org](http://www.helponechild.org)