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RESOURCE
GUIDE

for

POST-ADOPTIVE
FAMILIES

GUIDE
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Dear Friend,



first, we want to personally take this opportunity to thank you for embracing adoption. We know from God's Word that adoption is close to the heart of God. In fact, we know from Scripture that all of us who have placed our faith in Christ have been adopted! (ROMANS 8:15; EPHESIANS 1:5)

Throughout Scripture, God clearly calls us to care for vulnerable children and to welcome them in His name. A child whose physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs are met will make amazing progress, even in the face of the most daunting challenges. Many of these children come from hard places but are desperate to be loved. We want to help find families for these kids because we believe that every child is a precious gift from God.

Adoption redeems brokenness. Adoption gives a child the chance to belong.

It is our prayer that your family will consistently experience God's blessing in your adjustment to welcoming a new child (or children) into your family. We understand that some days will be challenging and we offer these resources as an encouragement and support. We have trained our counselling staff to specially understand the needs of adoptive families. If we can ever be of assistance to you, do feel free to call us at **1.800.661.9800** from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. PT; ask for a free one-time consultation with a member of Focus on the Family Canada's counselling team.

This resource guide is a compilation of educational articles about the adjustment period families experience after adoption. The material has been reproduced from Focus on the Family Canada's adoption care website at Waitingtobelong.ca. Visit this website for additional information, plus similar guides for pre-adoptive families and for friends, relatives, pastors and church communities who wish to support adoptive families.

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BONDING WITH YOUR CHILD

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Becoming a family



TIPS TO HELP AN ADOPTED CHILD BOND WITH THEIR FAMILY

For most of us, being part of a family is something we seldom reflect on. Our role in our family is so familiar and comfortable that we take many aspects of family life for granted. Children who have spent time in multiple foster homes or in orphanages, however, do not have a clear sense of what it means to live in a family.

Every family has its own “style” or “flavour.” Traditions, rituals, expectations and routines vary from family to family. Each new family member, including your adopted child, will inevitably alter your pattern somewhat. When your adopted child arrives, you will need time to adjust to one another. Some refer to this process as “cocooning,” and it is just as essential with an older child as it is with a newborn.

The most successful adoptive families I have observed are those who took their

need to cocoon very seriously, investing in both quality and quantity of time together. Here are a few tips from these families that will help you as you welcome your adopted child into your home:

1. Take advantage of government-sponsored parental leave from work – for dad as well as mom;
2. Don't leave adopted kids in someone else's care;
3. Minimize visitors to the home for a few weeks to months;
4. Consider home schooling school-age children while your family is still adjusting to one another;
5. Cut back on “extracurricular” activities

... successful adoptive families ... [take] their need to cocoon very seriously, investing in both quality and quantity of time together.

for a period of time.
Say no to volunteer work, trips and other opportunities that do not include the family;

6. Talk about how your family does things. Your explanation can be as simple as, “In our family, we eat supper together every night,” or “In our family, we say hello and goodbye with hugs;”
7. Do things together as a family: meals, chores, games, walks, worship etc.;
8. By all means take your child to church, but be aware that they may need to stay with you in the service for a while

instead of participating in the children’s program;

9. Expect some clinginess and anxiety when you leave and a need for reassurance that you will return. Don’t be surprised or alarmed if this carries on longer than you anticipated;
10. Remember that, if you have other children, their position in the family is being adjusted as well. Take time for each child and listen to their thoughts on how the adjustment is going.

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Attachment and bonding



A LOOK AT ONE FAMILY'S STRUGGLE WITH ATTACHMENT ISSUES

by Debi A. Grebenik, PhD

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-5, 7)

One family with whom I worked wanted to expand their family by adopting a child from another country. Their family consisted of the parents and two sweet-natured little girls. The parents wanted to adopt a younger male child. The little boy they adopted came into their lives through much perseverance in the adoptive process. They were thrilled to have him join their family.

Then, a few months after the adoption, he began to act out. His behaviours were targeted on the primary caregiver, his mother. He would yell at and hit her; defecate and urinate on the floor; cry and scream instead of sleep at night; and he wouldn't allow anyone to touch or attempt to calm him. As a result of his escalating behaviours, the mother began to react to him and became angry with herself for her negative thoughts toward him.

When I met them, she felt as though her son was in the process of ruining her family. She expressed how much she despised how he changed their family. She found herself yelling at him in response. The father became the only one who could soothe the child. Without his presence, the boy's behaviours continued to escalate.

The emotionally drained family needed answers. Why was this happening? What could they do?

First, I explained the issue of attachment and bonding. As parents interact with and relate to their children, children reflect what they see. They model facial expressions, voice intonations and physical gestures, and these elements contribute to the child's developing attachment capabilities. For some of us, this process is second nature; for others, it is unknown territory.

Attachment can be a complex concept. To understand, let's look for it in everyday life. The face of attachment is evident in children who, while playing with other children, go to their parent(s) and touch them or stand near them to "touch base" and then return to playing with their friends. Attachment is also seen when children run to their parent(s) when hurt, sad, afraid or overwhelmed. When attachment is present, the parent(s) can soothe this child. A child who is not attached may be hypervigilant; always on guard out of fear; or they may not

respond to the parent's words, sounds or gestures.

All different degrees of attachment exist. A child may have experienced an intermittent attachment process such as when parents are deployed, divorced or depressed. If there is even one significant adult in a child's life who will provide consistency and unconditional love and support, that child can attach. Attachment is based on the needs of the child.

Bruce Perry, MD, a specialist in child development and trauma, defines attachment as "a special enduring form of 'emotional' relationship with a specific person which involves soothing, comfort and pleasure."¹ An attached child finds security and safety in the context of this special relationship. It is within this secure and safe relationship that a child is able to develop emotionally, physically, socially, culturally, intellectually and spiritually. This connectedness provides the context for a child to learn, love, survive, work, create and grow.

Attachment is also demonstrated when the loss or threat of loss of the specific person evokes distress. Distress is manifested through behaviours: bouts of crying, throwing tantrums, periods of hoarding, moments of withdrawing, actions of self-mutilating and other significant behaviours.

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1. Bruce Perry, MD, *Bonding and Attachment in Maltreated Children* (Childtrauma.org), 2001

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A new definition of attachment/regulation



HOW EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS HELP CHILDREN LEARN TO MODERATE THEIR BEHAVIOUR

by Debi A. Grebenik, PhD

Psychoanalyst John Bowlby, drawing on concepts from ethology, cybernetics, information processing, developmental psychology and psychoanalysis, formulated the basic tenets of attachment theory. He defined attachment as the affectional tie between two people. It begins with the bond between the infant and mother. This bond then represents how the child's life relationships will be formed.

Bowlby stated, "The initial relationship between self and others serves as a blueprint for all future relationships."¹ In other words, it is at this beginning stage that a baby learns how to relate to others. Initially, his or her world is very small and focused only on the parents or primary caretakers. Their response to the baby will determine the baby's ability to attach.

In attachment interactions between baby and mother, the secure mother regulates (calms) the baby's shifting arousal levels, which affects the baby's emotional states.² If, during

stressful events, a sustained calm stage can be reached due to parental soothing, the child develops self-regulation skills. The child begins to learn how to self-soothe, and these skills form the building blocks of healthy and significant future relationships. The ability to self-regulate and be regulated is a prerequisite to the ability to form healthy attachments.³

This process is easy to observe when a mother rocks, holds or bounces her child, perhaps coupled with a shushing sound while the baby calms. Some babies settle down just at the touch, smell or sound of their mothers.

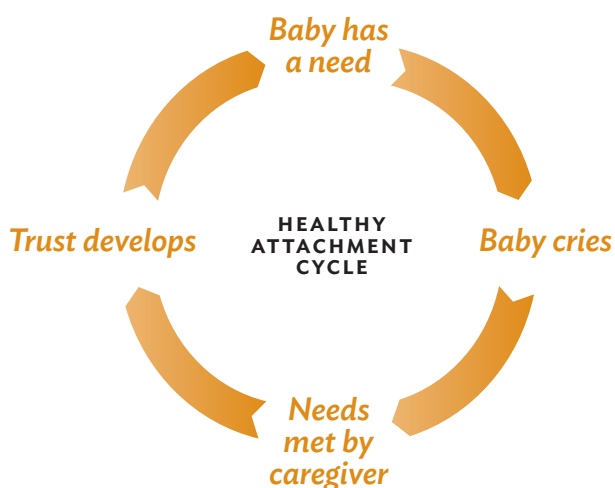
Babies, children and youth who did not experience this soothing process find it difficult to calm down in moments of stress. These are the individuals who may react with only a minor provocation. An adolescent who begins yelling, cursing or crying when asked to complete a task or chore provides an example of someone who is not able to self-soothe. Attachment can thus be defined as the dyadic regulation of emotion.⁴

Bonding involves a set of behaviours that lead to an emotional connection, (which is also known as attachment).⁵ Understanding this process is key to helping a child with attachment disorder.

THE POSITIVE INTERACTION (NEEDS-AROUSAL) CYCLE

As we've mentioned, attachment occurs when the caregivers, primarily parents, provide stable and consistent responses to the child's distress. Distress occurs when a baby or child experiences hunger, fatigue, illness or any other type of discomfort.

An emotionally healthy adult delights in taking care of his or her baby or child. The mother and father respond to their child with eye contact, cooing sounds, physical snuggling and rocking movements. In turn, the child responds with smiling, gurgling, clinging, sucking and playing. This reciprocal interaction creates the basis for attachment. See the diagram below.⁶



The safety and security that a strong attachment builds creates healthy cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual development for the child as he matures.

Children (biological or adopted) who do not get their needs met as babies and small children typically do not form a strong attachment with their parents. Even when adopting a baby, it is important to consider that the removal of a child from his or her biological mother creates a traumatic event in the life of the child.

One experienced mother, Amber Bartell, discovered this when she took little Amy into her home. As an infant, Amy had been passed from friend to friend by her mother. So when Amy was placed with Amber's family, bonding was anything but natural. In fact, Amy constantly pulled away from Amber. Whenever Amber tried to lay Amy on her shoulder, for instance, Amy held her body rigidly away from Amber. This continued until Amy was 11 months old.

So keep in mind that attachment with the new parents may not be automatic. Knowing this, parents need to understand not only the truth that establishing an attached, loving and committed relationship with their child is key, but also the fact that this may take some considerable time and effort. The adoptive parents' investment in fostering attachment can

mitigate the trauma experienced by the child in the removal from her biological mother.

It is also important to note that adopted children (who suffer from attachment problems) may experience difficulties during certain developmental phases such as adolescence. These difficulties occur because of the youth's inability to meet her own needs. Out of her frustration, she might express her anger by yelling, hitting, vandalizing, threatening or withdrawing.

As well, the parent of an adopted child may have missed out on some significant aspects of attachment in his or her own upbringing. The adoption process thus may trigger unresolved emotions for the parents. It is important for parents to be self-aware, understanding the challenges and blessings of their own childhoods. When beginning the process to adopt a child, parents often prepare financially, physically and spiritually, without considering what effect the adoption will have emotionally.

Remember the family mentioned in the article entitled *Attachment and bonding?* By the time I saw them in family therapy, the situation had escalated and they were almost ready to dissolve the adoption. As we plowed through what was going on in their lives, we were able to discover the real issues. Throughout the mother's life, people at every stage

Bonding involves a set of behaviours that lead to an emotional connection Understanding this process is key to helping a child with attachment disorder.

had given up on her and cast her aside. That's all she knew in relationships – rejection.

Instead of responding as the parent when things became difficult with her son, she became that little girl and felt rejected once again. As the mother understood and expressed her pain and hurts, her heart began to mend, and her ability to feel and express love to her son began to swell. She experienced her son for who he was – a little child who needed her calm presence, realistic expectations, unconditional love and unlimited

patience. She could now respond to his broken and wounded soul as his mother instead of as another broken child.

Through the power of prayer, processing pain with another person, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, healing can occur – both for the parent and the child. That is the quiet beauty of parenting hand in hand with God. This is also what gives hope; you can make a difference in the life of a child and, at the same time, you can become more of the parent God intends for you to be.

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1. John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*. Vol. 1: Attachment (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
2. Allan Schore, "The Effects of a Secure Attachment Relationship on Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation and Infant Mental Health," *Infant Journal of Mental Health*, 2001, 22: 7–66.
3. B. Bryan Post, *The Great Behavior Breakdown*, audio CD recording (Oklahoma City, OK: Post Institute for Family Centered Therapy, 2004). Postinstitute.com.
4. L. Alan Sroufe, *Emotional Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
5. Bruce Perry, MD, *Bonding and Attachment in Maltreated Children* (Childtrauma.org), 2001.
6. Adapted from a simpler diagram by Foster W. Cline, MD, *Understanding and Treating the Severely Disturbed Child* (Evergreen, CO: Evergreen Consultants in Behavior, 1979), 28.

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Promoting healthy attachment



A PEACEFUL ATMOSPHERE AND YOUR CALM, SOOTHING PRESENCE WILL HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILD BOND

by Debi A. Grebenik, PhD

Knowing the prenatal and early history of any child that you adopt is important; this information helps guide the parents' responses to the hurting child. Many interventions mitigate the effects of early trauma.

When a baby is placed in your arms for adoption, it is important that the parents give their baby the time needed to bond with them. If the child is older, some modification of these suggestions can be implemented. For babies, suggestions for an effective bonding experience include:

- Skin-to-skin time (make sure that the baby is against both parents' chests without clothes on to allow for maximum closeness). Remember that skin is our largest organ and both parents need to have skin-to-skin contact with their new baby.
- Minimize stress or chaos in the home.

- Provide a calm and nurturing environment for the baby.
- Be vigilant to follow through with promises or stated intentions as you build a relationship of trust and hope.
- Incorporate soft music, soft lights and muted sounds in the home.
- Minimize the number of visitors coming to the home; while everyone is excited about your new baby, you need time to bond and too many adults in the child's life makes that process confusing.
- Keep the child at home as much as possible, to make the schedule predictable and calm.
- Quantity of time does matter – it is important to spend a lot of time with your new baby or child. He or she needs you to be established as the primary caretaker in his or her life.
- Begin to take on the role of protector and keep your child safe. Compare this to a child who has

a disease with a suppressed immune system and you are trying to guard him from infection. You can do this by keeping him safe and protected, similar to protecting the emotional health of your new child. Be diligent in your efforts and you will reap the benefits of the attachment process.

- Pray and trust God to equip you with the wisdom you need to do what is best for your particular child.
- Realize that you are building the template for future relationships that the child will have.

Parenting children of all ages is dependent on the developmental age of the child. If you adopt an older child, the preceding principles are still relevant. Remember that your child may be at a much younger age emotionally.

For toddlers, it is imperative to remember that toddlers' verbal skills can be limited, inhibiting their ability to express their feelings. With this limitation, parents need to allow toddlers to vent their emotions while continually being present in the moment. For example, if a toddler begins to cry, scream or act out, the parent can sit down next to the child and calmly say

... it is imperative to focus on [your child's] stressors, not their behaviours, and to respond in love, not react out of our own fears and emotions.

that she is right there and she's not leaving. This statement needs to be repeated in a quiet voice until the child calms down.

For older children, it is important to work toward building a strong relationship with them. In addition, when working with youth, it is imperative to focus on their stressors, not their behaviours, and to respond in love, not react out of our own fears and emotions. Older children also need a contained, stress-free environment with calm, loving parents.

One family that I worked with adopted an adolescent girl. I encouraged both parents to spend one-on-one time with her daily, particularly during times of transition such as waking up in the morning, coming home after school, and at bedtime. These times were to calm her fears and build her trust in their presence and care for her.

Other soothing options include quiet music, soft lights and calming scents. Touch also provides a venue for soothing. Touch, rocking and massage are tools that parents use to provide relaxing and comforting opportunities for children. It is within the loving relationship between parents and their child that a child is healed.

You may want to seek therapy if you are overwhelmed and stressed and feel as though your child is struggling. If possible, seek out a Christian therapist with experience in working with adoptions or attachment. Ask other parents which therapist they used. Call the adoption agency and seek referrals, or call Focus on the Family Canada (1.800.661.9800) for a recommendation. You might consider joining a support group – online or near your home. Don't walk this road alone. Remember to seek a therapist who will work with the family, not just the child; one who will not shame or blame your child and who will see God's plan for you and your family.

HOPE FOR PARENTS

As Christian parents, we have a significant, life-changing resource in the presence of the Holy Spirit. As promised by the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit brings peace – He is the one who provides a defence against the current stressors of life and the power of past trauma events. As parents, you can learn and invest all that you can for your child to be healthy and whole. But the Lord alone can reach into the depths of your child's heart and psyche where no one else can reach and bring healing.

Remember the wise words of James 1:4, "Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." That verse encapsulates the parenting process: Endure. Trust. Relate. Grow. Enjoy.

Sow the seeds of attachment and you will reap the harvest of a meaningful and peaceful relationship with your child.

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For more reading on attachment and reactive attachment disorder, visit Focus on the Family Canada's website at Waitingtobelong.ca. We also recommend The Handbook on Thriving as an Adoptive Family which is published by Tyndale House Publishers.

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UNDERSTANDING DISCIPLINE ISSUES

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Unique challenges in disciplining adopted children

Healthy discipline for adopted children

When children have been abused

Unique challenges in disciplining adopted children



THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING YOUR EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH YOUR CHILD

by Sandra Lundberg

Disciplining a child who has been adopted presents a number of unique challenges.

You may feel that others are evaluating you as a person and as a parent as you establish your own family rules and expectations. Many parents find it difficult negotiating this balance between themselves and are even more frustrated trying to explain their decisions to family and friends.

Another challenge is the fact that children with multiple broken attachments and abuse often do not respond well to traditional methods of discipline, such as "time outs," corporal punishment, grounding or a demand to make eye contact and immediately obey

their parents. In fact, these methods may actually escalate conflict with the child.

And still another challenge to parents in disciplining their adopted child is that the child may bring pain from his past into the new family. The new family then experiences pain they neither caused nor expected. Many parents become discouraged and confused when this happens.

Before adoption, and early in the adoption process, many parents believe the love they provide their child will heal any early wounds and the adopted child will respond to them like other securely attached children. However, if and when this does not happen, the parents may feel hurt and rejected. They may become angry at this unfair situation and find it difficult to respond to their new son or daughter with compassion. They may even become angry at God and with each other. And all the while their new child and any other children in the home

need them to be a team – to be secure, loving and compassionate toward each other and their family.

WHY SOME TRADITIONAL METHODS DON'T WORK

Traditional methods of discipline can work well for children adopted at birth or without complicated attachment histories. In these situations, the parents have provided the love and nurture the children need in order to accept discipline as the loving training it is designed to be. On the other hand, children who are adopted when they are older or who have more complicated histories are not likely to respond well to some traditional methods.

Why is this? For one reason, an adopted child with a history of multiple placements and abuse often feels threatened by giving control to parents. This creates an impasse for both the parents and the child. Despite the child's fear and resistance, he needs to allow

the parents to be in control. He needs to experience his parents' control as safe and allow them to meet his needs. These experiences help his heart heal. For this reason, parents need to nurture the child at all times – when she behaves and when she misbehaves. Building trust and attachment must take precedence over "fixing" the child's present behaviour.

"Time outs," behaviour charts, love withdrawal, deprivation, grounding and reacting in anger do not work with many adopted children because they often have trouble thinking consequentially, and because isolation feels safe to them (i.e., they fear relationships even though they yearn for relationship).

Remember, this is the bigger picture to keep in mind when you are frustrated by your child's behaviour. Rather than fixing the behaviour or understanding your child's underlying problems based on his history, you need to create safety and security so that she can experience

emotional connectedness and healing.

Let's take a closer look at what can go wrong when using traditional discipline methods and some possible alternatives:

Time outs. "Time outs" are ineffective because adopted children need "time ins." They need ongoing interaction with the people who love them. Sending a child to be alone with instructions to calm down, think about what she has done and not come back until she's ready to behave makes no sense. A securely attached child responds to a time out from a position of wanting to please his parents and be in their presence. An adopted child with attachment issues may not yet even have this desire. And she often cannot calm herself without help. Before she came to your family, she may never have received the parental comforting she needed that would enable her to internalize that model and calm herself. Time with the parent when she is misbehaving can teach her to calm

Building trust and attachment must take precedence over "fixing" the child's present behaviour.

down and also to engage with people appropriately.

So if your adopted preschooler pokes your dog in the eye, do not send him to another room for a time out. Gently, but firmly, take his hand in yours, possibly look him in the face or have him sit in your lap, and say, "Gentle touches. We don't use hands to hurt." Then help him form

an appropriate behaviour. For example, if you feel confident he is mad at you for not letting him watch more TV and the dog was safe and easy to hurt, you may tell him, "Say, 'Mom, I'm mad at you,'" with an appropriate scowl on your face. He may react inappropriately again, but he will learn in time that it will not result in you not loving him anymore or sending him away from you. Instead, he'll get increased physical contact with you and emotional connectedness – the very things he needs though he likely does not want.

When might time apart be appropriate? Consider another example. If your teenage son curses at you and slaps you across the face, do not respond in kind. It may feel correct to slap him back, send him to his room and ground him for life. However, any of these responses will likely provoke further verbal and physical aggression. (Depending on the severity of the situation, recruiting outside help may be necessary.)

In this type of circumstance, it is wise to first remove yourself from the situation until you have both calmed down or you are calm enough to help him calm down. This is most easily done by walking out of the room and not saying any last words. If your child follows you, still trying to provoke you, then you may need to go into a room and lock the door. Although you are not staying with him through the physical and emotional arousal, he will likely calm down with a bit of isolation. Remember, he wants that distance.

When you are ready to re-engage, don't try to immediately talk through what just happened; instead, if possible, do an activity together. He knows what he did was wrong. A lecture won't help at that moment. Later, you can tell him what the consequence of his action will be. (Make sure it is something that requires more time together.)

Behaviour charts. Behaviour charts are problematic for adopted children

for two reasons. The first is that it seems nonsensical to be rewarded for behaviours that are not exceptional. For example, making the bed, not having a tantrum in a store, taking out the trash – these are behaviours that are reasonable to expect. They are not behaviours that require rewards.

The second reason behaviour charts do not typically work with these children is that they often have a poor ability to understand time. A goal of earning points all week may seem impossible. The adopted child may perceive this as an expectation of him to be perfect forever. Because this is too much pressure, he will intentionally not earn the reward.

If your elementary-aged child does not throw a tantrum in the store, you can tell his stuffed animals, "Andy did well not yelling in the store." The praise is appropriate to the behaviour, not overdone, and given indirectly so the child can overhear the praise without

having to "do something" with it. This is the path of least resistance for a child who needs to undermine his achievements or disagree with Mom and Dad. If the child has no problem accepting positive feedback then, of course, address the child directly. Again, keep it low key and appropriate to the behaviour. Not yelling may be excellent progress for Andy; however, it is within normal expectations.

Love withdrawal. Love withdrawal occurs when parents withdraw emotionally and physically to change a child's behaviour. This rarely works well as a form of discipline even with well-attached children. It will not work as a form of discipline for adopted children.

The adopted child has already experienced the greatest loss possible when she lost her biological parents. Trying to wait until she demonstrates loving behaviour toward you before you show love to her will not work. Because

of her previous loss, she can certainly hold out longer than you can. Worse yet, withholding expressions of love only reinforces her belief that she is not lovable, that she cannot be loved and that love is painful. In the meantime, no healing is taking place and she is not getting any closer to claiming you as her parent.

All children need to know that their parents' love for them is unconditional. This may not always be easy, but unconditional love modelled by the parents then provides a path to understanding God's unconditional love for us.

Deprivation. Depriving a child of things may be a popular way to change behaviour but it does not reach the heart. As you can well imagine, the child may begin to work the system. For example, he may begin to think, *If I feed the dog then I get my computer back.* In this instance, we would want the child

to begin to experience some empathy for the hungry dog and possibly desire to please Mom and Dad. However, this is only going to happen over time as the child allows himself to attach to the dog and the parents. In the short term, it's all about the child's wants.

Depriving a child of things seldom works with a previously abused child because the child rarely truly needs whatever is being taken away. He will tell you he didn't want it anyway. In fact, he would rather have control than things any day. Your child needs time interacting with his parents, not with things.

So if your adolescent makes a mess in the family room, don't just tell him, "No more Xbox® till you've put everything else away," and expect him to clean up by himself. Instead, say, "I see there is a mess in the family room. Let's clean up together, and then we can have some game time together." The joint effort enhances connection and takes the

power struggle out of the interaction.

Grounding. Parents who use grounding as a method of discipline are also working at a disadvantage. The child may be used to doing whatever he wants without getting permission. If he's not grounded he assumes he can still do anything that hasn't been specifically ruled out. Instead, parents need to be the ones who give permission because the child needs limits to be safe. Thus, parents need to be asked on a regular basis for permission to participate in activities. This control may need to last longer for some children than others. For example, a child who has experienced trauma will need to experience the safety of his parents' control in his life, and establishing this sense of safety will take time.

Corporal punishment. This article series on nurture and discipline would not be complete without a discussion of spanking. Parents who have ongoing relationships with the adoption agency or

social services will need to abide by the agency rules when it comes to spanking. If you have the freedom to make this decision without agency dictates, the following are issues you need to consider when deciding the appropriateness of spanking your adopted child: your primary goal in parenting, your definition of spanking, your guidelines for when to spank and when not to spank, and how your adopted child's age and individual history inform this decision.

Remember, your primary goal is to establish an environment that will encourage attachment and trust. Therefore, consider what your definition of a spanking is and when you believe it is appropriate. For the sake of this discussion, a spank will be defined as a swat with an open palm to the fleshy part of a clothed bottom. A spanking of one to three swats should sting just enough to get the child's attention in order to redirect the child. Spanking should occur infrequently after the age of five and be

phased out by 10 years old in favour of other disciplinary skills.¹ A spank is to be used only to shape predetermined behaviours that pose immediate danger to the child or to someone else, or when the child directly, willfully disobeys you.

In light of this, parents should never spank an infant (age range 0-18 months). It is the parents' responsibility to keep the baby safe by maintaining a safe environment. An infant is not being defiant by squirming when having diapers changed or making a mess when being fed. An infant is exploring his environment. Provide distraction while changing diapers so you can get the job done. And plan on cleaning up the kitchen too many times to count.

The decision to spank or not must also be specific to the parents and child. Spanking can escalate or exacerbate the conflict rather than correct a behaviour. It must take into account the child's history (abuse, neglect, reactive

attachment disorder, etc.). Most experts agree that it is never appropriate to spank a child who has been abused.

You must never spank out of anger. It must only be in response to a predetermined set of behaviours. Traditionally, this has been when the child is putting himself at risk or is being intentionally defiant. Therefore, it is not appropriate to spank if you find yourself reacting to your child pushing your buttons. In this situation, it is not fostering connection and long-term health. You have just lost control and, in so doing, lost your ability to provide safety and security.

Responding to an adopted child in anger or disciplining him while you are angry will not result in the healing and change of behaviour that you desire. Indeed, previously abused children are comfortable with you becoming angry. Anger keeps the emotional distance between you.

If the child was adopted as an infant, then the child may respond to a spanking as another well-attached child would. However, keep in mind that even an adopted infant will grieve his birthmother's voice and heartbeat and can struggle with attachment issues later. The older the child is at the time of adoption and the more complicated his history, however, the more likely he should never be spanked. You may feel that the older child may be the child who could most benefit from spanking; however, that is least likely to be the case and points to anger that is unresolved in you. (If you find yourself struggling in this area, seek professional help from a licensed therapist specializing in adoption issues. If you need a referral to a Christian therapist, call Focus at 1.800.661.9800.)

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1. Paul Reisser, MD, *Focus on the Family Complete Guide to Baby & Child Care* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2007), 274.

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Healthy discipline for adopted children



BEHAVIOUR CORRECTION MUST BE CARRIED OUT IN A CALM ATMOSPHERE, AND WITH UNDERSTANDING

by Sandra Lundberg

If possible, understanding any past injuries (emotional or physical) unique to your child will help you as you seek healthy discipline methods. Keep in mind that healthy methods of discipline should account for the child's age and personality and the parents' and the child's needs for control, safety, proximity and consistency in order to create a new environment where attachment and trust can grow.

Parents often think of their child in terms of her chronological age. When you think of your adopted child, you need to consider her chronological age *and* her emotional age. Her emotional age may be significantly younger than her chronological age. You may have a child who is 10 years old but functions as a four year old. You will need to tailor your interactions with her to the level of a four year old. This includes not only your expectations for her behaviour, but also the words you use to describe those expectations.

In addition, it means setting her boundaries in line with a lower age level. In so doing you will begin to make up for

the parental care she needed but did not receive during her early development. As you interact with her according to her emotional age, she will have the chance to "catch up" and thus actually "grow up" in the progressive manner God designed. If you have a six year old who functions as a four year old, then you will want to set a limit such as, "You may ride your bike to the end of the cul-de-sac while I am watching." As she matures, "You may ride around the block when you have my permission."

You need to help your child out of the aroused state of fear that often comes with discipline and bring him into a calm emotional state with you. If you will decrease your child's stress level, he will have the opportunity to learn from experience, which is necessary for change.

Let's say that Jane's four-year-old daughter picks the deli counter line to lie down on the floor and begin kicking and screaming. What should she do? This is a nightmare for most parents who would rather crawl in a hole than have their child act up in the grocery store. Although it may be very annoying if you are near the end of your shopping trip and the cart is full, your best response is likely to be picking up your child, with special attention to restrain flailing limbs, and carrying her out to the car, leaving the shopping cart for the store attendants to deal with.

Tantrums lose most of their energy without onlookers. When

the tantrum is over, you may or may not choose to go back into the store. If you do choose to go back in, remind her what the rules are for grocery stores (for example, stay in the cart at all times, do not take things off the shelves and no yelling). Usually after a few times of leaving the store the child realizes she can't manipulate you with misbehaviour and these outings become easier.

If you're dealing with an older child, obviously you can't keep him buckled in the cart. You can, however, require him to keep a hold of the cart with one hand, not take things off the shelves and not yell. If the hand comes off the cart, the cart stops moving until the situation is resolved. Again, usually "bad behaviours" decrease without an audience, so rapid departure, child in tow, may still be the best option. Don't start naming off consequences to be expected when you get home, as that will only escalate the arousal level for both of you.

Let's return to the story of Karen and Russell at the beginning of this article series. (See the article entitled *Disciplining adopted children* at Waitingtobelong.ca.) We must be aware that Karen is struggling internally because of the pain Russell has brought into her life. She is grieved because she didn't expect the adoption experience to go this way. Karen thought that her love for Russell would knock down all barriers and he would love her in return. She thought about the home where he first lived.

...parents who have adopted a child with significant attachment problems need to remember that their child's rejection is not personal.

She thought of his lengthy abuse history and multiple foster placements. She especially thought about saving him from all that. So why is Russell rejecting and disdainful her?

The key that Karen has not understood yet is that all of Russell's broken attachments and unmet needs have resulted in him feeling terribly threatened and fearful. Russell is not choosing to be defiant in order to "thank" his mom for adopting him. He simply needs different approaches to learning appropriate behaviour. He needs approaches that see incremental change as successful.

So, when Karen told Russell to look at her, and he did for a few seconds, but then averted his gaze, that was a positive step for him. She can change the course of the interaction by sitting near him on the couch, taking a moment to calm herself, then saying, "Russell, let's get ready to eat." He may look at her or not and he may or may not say a word. She may then gently put her hand on his and say, "Let's turn off the TV and put the toys away." She can begin to put up the toys, modelling what she wants him to do. She should not put away everything. Russell should help. (This may take some time, so she should turn off the kitchen appliances.) After the room is reasonably clean, they can move to the sink, wash hands and sit to eat together. This will be different than she expected, but step-by-step they will connect.

It is also very important to consider your child's personality and history when you are going to be transitioning to a new activity (e.g., going somewhere, getting ready for bed, picking up toys, etc.). Some children are able to quickly shift from one activity to another. Other children need a little advance notice of what is coming. This might mean going into the room, making eye contact — or otherwise establishing that what you are saying is being heard — and then saying something like, "Russell, dinner will be ready in about 20 minutes. In about 10 minutes you'll need to start getting ready to come to the table. I'll set the timer to remind you." Timers are helpful because they are objective when we are not. You may still need to come

alongside and move through the transition together, but in time it will become easier.

Each approximation is a good thing, not a failure because it did not reach the final goal. As your child's fear lessens, he will not always have an immediate fight, flight or freeze reaction. He can learn the cause and effect of his actions.

On really hard days, parents who have adopted a child with significant attachment problems need to remember that their child's rejection is not personal. Their child would reject anyone who tried to love her. She does not know what she needs. She fears letting someone else have control. She will protect herself against any further pain by denying that her new parents are important to her. Her thinking may be something like this: *When they get rid of me it will be on my own terms. I made them do it and it doesn't hurt so much because I don't love them.*

Remember, if you use discipline methods that heighten the stress level and physiological arousal, you will reinforce the patterns of brain activity, emotional response and behaviour that you want to extinguish. If you help your child calm down and connect with you even when you are correcting his behaviour, you will create an environment where he can flourish.

If your child is acting out more severely than the examples

given in this article series, you will need professional help to devise a workable plan for your family. This series is not meant to provide individualized advice. It is impossible to address the numerous unique situations that parents will face. Don't hesitate to seek professional help if the situation is beyond your control. If you need a referral to a Christian counsellor in your region, call Focus at 1.800.661.9800. Our staff would love to help.

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When children have been abused



UNDERSTANDING THE DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUES APPROPRIATE FOR WOUNDED CHILDREN

by Sandra Lundberg

For a variety of reasons, the nurture and discipline needs of children who have been verbally, emotionally, physically or sexually abused are more complicated than those of children who have not been abused. As we delve deeper into this important topic, I want to first establish the keys to nurturing and disciplining the abused child:

- Correct without shaming or breaking your emotional and physical connection;
- Be specific with your expectations;
- Be flexible;
- Be aware of your tone, word choice and eye contact;
- Initiate physical and emotional connection;
- Praise your child, indirectly if necessary.

By following these keys, you will offer the healing experience of meeting your child's needs. Your child will begin to learn that you, as her parent, can have control and she still can be safe. In time, she can let go of some of her vigilance and attach to you.

In the following paragraphs we'll look deeper at a few of these specific methods.

Correct without shaming or breaking your emotional and physical connection.

If a previously sexually abused child begins to stimulate himself while in your lap, then you need to distract the child from that activity; this could be done in several ways and would be determined by you, the parent. You might begin by simply shifting positions. If the child's sexualized behaviour continues, you need to correct it verbally. Be sure not to shame your child (verbally or nonverbally) while correcting this behaviour. Even if you shame the child nonverbally, the child is likely to internalize this as: *There is something wrong with me*. This is very confusing for the child because this activity may have been encouraged in her previous placement.

You might simply say, "Mommy (or Daddy) loves to snuggle with you. But rubbing like that is not part of snuggling. If you keep doing that you'll have to sit next to me instead of in my lap." Then continue with the story and snuggle time because that continues the nurture and emotional connection.

If the behaviour still persists, then stop reading and get up and engage in something more active: walking around the block together, baking cookies and so on. (Some parents might choose this option first.) Consider the fact that the inappropriate behaviour may seem normal to the child and it will take time to reshape the child's understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate. Or the child may have become bored and so started to stimulate himself. Even children who have never been abused may engage in some type of self-stimulation when bored.

Of course, sometimes parents send a shame message and break the connection physically and emotionally. If this happens for you, then prepare yourself for how you'll handle that situation differently, with compassion, when the opportunity arises again. Practicing your words beforehand can be very helpful. Your child needs to learn about appropriate touch that is not sexualized. Your child also needs to understand that sexualized touching is not appropriate for children. At some point, you can talk about the fact that those people who taught her this behaviour were wrong. This lays the groundwork to explain that sexualized touching is only appropriate between husband and wife.

Be specific with your expectations. Your hurt child may not understand that behaviour falls on a continuum. You will need to clearly explain what the child needs to do. For example, you

might use numbers when talking about expectations, five being the best behaviour and one being unacceptable behaviour. For a child of eight or 10 years old, the expectations for making his bed might be:

1. climbing out of bed and leaving it completely unmade;
2. pulling the sheets and blanket up and placing the pillow at the head of the bed; and
3. tucking in the sheets and blanket and smoothing out the comforter, placing the pillow at the head of the bed and putting the stuffed animals in order.

Be very specific in your explanation of desired behaviours.

If you want your child to make his bed with the sheets tucked in, say that. If you want the animals nicely displayed, say that.

Oftentimes we expect our children to know these things without our saying them. Also, our children may have learned to pretend they know more than they do or have more capabilities than they do. See what they are capable of, and

Parents of children who have been abused verbally and emotionally need to be cognizant of their tone, word choice and eye contact.

then tailor your requests so they can build self-worth by incremental success.

Be flexible. Remember to be flexible. This is especially important when it comes to things you cannot control. Primary examples of this are eating and bodily functions.

It makes sense to accommodate when it comes to eating. The child may hoard food because she is afraid there won't be any the next time she is hungry. Or she may desire sweets all the time. Do not allow her to have a refrigerator in her room. Instead, keep

a good supply of healthy snacks and offer her food throughout the day. Let her know she can ask you anytime she needs something to eat. The significant difference is that you are the one providing the food. As she learns that there is food available and that you are safe and not shaming her, this need will pass. Also, meeting these basic needs allows for bonding so that she can move beyond these needs to other, deeper ones.

For the common problem of destroying toys, do not get upset and talk about what the toy was worth or ask your child why he did it. Instead, you could respond with something like, "We can't play with that one anymore. We'll put it in the trash." Then walk to the trash can together and throw the ruined toy away. One less toy is not really a problem. You may be concerned that you'll end up throwing all the toys away. Usually that does not happen. Sometimes saying less and taking immediate action accomplishes more in this situation.

However, you know your child's maturity level best. Talking through situations may work with some children. After seeing the broken toy, you might say, "You must really be hurting; let's talk about it." An emotionally immature child is not likely to respond in a way to clarify why she destroyed the toy. She may be unable to put into words why she is angry or hurting. Again, you know your child best. Keep his maturity level in mind when deciding how to respond.

Be aware of your tone, word choice and eye contact.

Remember that children who have been abused are very vigilant to read their parents' attitudes without a word being spoken. They began doing this to protect themselves, and it is likely to become a skill they sharpen for the rest of their lives. Parents need to be willing to consider what they are communicating to their children through nonverbal as well as verbal cues. This may mean being willing to take feedback from a spouse, social worker or friend about something that you were not even aware of about yourself.

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Parents of children who have been abused verbally and emotionally need to be cognizant of their tone, word choice and eye contact. They may learn over time that a certain word or combination of words sets their child off because it always preceded abuse in their biological family, prior placements or orphanage. Once parents become aware of these triggers, they can creatively work around them.

While these specific methods – and others mentioned – may seem lax in teaching correct behaviour, they actually are quite stringent. The focus is not on letting the child do whatever she wants, but on teaching the child in every situation that the parent is ready, willing and able to be in charge. This loving control prepares the child so she can learn correct behaviours in a meaningful way.

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HEART TO HEART CONVERSATIONS

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Post-adoption depression
Talking to your child about adoption

Post-adoption depression



HOW TO HANDLE THIS SURPRISINGLY COMMON PHENOMENON

It's very important to be aware that some parents (usually moms) experience what has been called "post-adoption depression." When an adoptive family has worked and planned and waited and hoped for so long, it's hard to imagine that the family life they had so eagerly anticipated may not be the wonderful experience they expected.

Perhaps you identify with some of these situations:

- Friends and family have questioned the wisdom of your choices;
- Agency and/or government staff have been probing intrusively into your personal life;
- You fear that being honest about how you feel will jeopardize what you have worked so hard to achieve;
- You fear that your faith is not sufficient or that God has abandoned you;

- You feel guilty that you are not bonding well with your child;
- You are blaming your child for not meeting your expectations.

Whatever the case, there is help out there if you (or your spouse or friend) are feeling this way! For helpful articles on this topic, visit Focus on the Family Canada's adoption care website at Waitingtobelong.ca. You may wish see a doctor or give Focus on the Family Canada's counsellors a call at **1.800.661.9800** for a confidential consultation on how you can move forward.

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Talking to your child about adoption



CELEBRATING ADOPTION WHILE EASING YOUR CHILD'S SENSE OF LOSS

As adoptive parents, our view of adoption is primarily positive. Even though we may have been motivated by infertility or by compassion for children in need, our choice to adopt brings satisfaction and fulfillment, even when it is trying.

For our children, however, adoption brings with it loss as well as gain. As a child develops, this sense of loss will become increasingly apparent.

Our task, then, in discussing adoption, is to balance celebrating the blessing of adoption without ignoring or invalidating the loss it represents to our children. Here are some ideas to help you engage in this discussion as your child matures through different ages and stages.

INFANTS

When you hold and rock your adopted baby or toddler, take the opportunity to tell them how glad you are that you adopted them. Tell stories of how God placed them in your family and begin a life book to record the story.

PRESCHOOLERS

As your child becomes old enough to begin asking questions about “growing in their mother’s tummy,” begin to talk about their birth parent(s) in age-appropriate ways. In an open adoption, you can show photos, invite their birth mom over and reveal to the child that this is the mommy whose tummy they grew in, or talk about generic reasons

their birth parents could not parent them (i.e. death, addiction, poverty). Give only as much information as a child is old enough to handle.

When my daughter was this age, periodically and often for no apparent reason, she would become emotional. I would ask if she was thinking of her birth mommy. We had not met her, but we had a photo and minimal information about her. My daughter would usually acknowledge that this was indeed what was making her sad.

At this point, we would go together to the computer. My daughter would compose a little note that I would type and save to send to the orphanage, as this was our only point of contact with her mother. Typically, she would tell her birth mother that she missed her and was thinking about her, and would add how much she liked living in Canada with our family. Then she would simply say goodbye. Usually this chance to express herself was all she needed to be ready to move on with her day. Weeks would go by before she needed to write another note.

The underlying principle, I learned, was that this exercise:

1. Validated my daughter's feelings;
2. Gave her an appropriate emotional outlet;
3. Provided her with a sense of connection, which is of vital importance to an adoptee.

PRE-TEENS AND TEENS

As children move toward adolescence, they may become more inward-focused and appear to have less need to talk about adoption. This may be because they feel secure in their identity. It's more likely, however, that they are at a stage where they are sensitive about appearing different. At this age children are more peer conscious and fear being singled out. This can be an especially tricky phase for transracial adoptees. Parents should be vigilant and proactive about equipping these kids to respond to their peers in ways that assert pride in their race and adoption. Peer relationships with other adoptees (transracial or otherwise) can help kids feel less "different."

During adolescence, teens are working on identity and independence as well as the development of intimacy. They may be ready to learn painful details, such as their conception due to rape or incest, that their mother was their age when they were born, or other painful circumstances that may have surrounded their origin. Usually a child needs to know the truth about his or her identity to be at peace with it.

Often this is the stage when a child will consider searching for their birth parents. As the adoptive parent, it is important that you validate your child's psychological need to know "where they came from," to offer any information you can, to listen non-judgmentally to your child's needs, and to realize that this is about them, not about you!

One adult adoptee once commented, "Before I met my birth family, I felt like a book with the first chapter missing. I knew most of the story; I just needed to know how it began."

Children need to know that it is okay to integrate who they are as an adoptee... with who they are as a product of their birth family.

FOR ALL AGES

At each age and stage, here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Be proactive, but not pushy. Bring the topic up, but if your child doesn't want to talk, back off for now;
2. Offer information and a listening ear, particularly when a child's emotional response seems out of proportion to the situation;
3. Children need to know that it is okay to integrate who they are as an adoptee ("your" child), with who they are as a product of their birth family. The point of connection may be an actual relationship with someone in their birth family, but in many circumstances that connection may be to someone or something that represents that phase of their life – the country, a social worker, a foster parent, orphanage staff or a volunteer, for example.

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