



ICING ON THE CAKE

A Parent Prep Recipe

By Jean MacLeod

When I adopted for the first time in 1996, my Social Worker prepared me with her recipe for success. Children who have been adopted are like layer cakes, she told me. They come to us with a few more layers than a child born to us would have, and it would be up to me as an adoptive parent to be aware of what potential issues lay below the surface. I smiled brightly and nodded, but I was confident that I would love my baby enough that love alone would solve all possible multi-layer problems...

And that was my sole preparation for the explosions in my home 'cake bakery' four years later. My intense little girl experienced an intense reaction to adoption issues, centered I later discovered, on sadness over birthmother loss and anger at the outside forces that had controlled her young life. She was living a subtle mutiny, but she was unable to tell me what was making her so contrary, so anxious, and so unhappy.

I called a psychologist friend who specialized in adoption and attachment issues, and described what my daughter was going through. I told her that most of the time things were fine, but that I felt my daughter was both sadder and angrier than she had any reason to be. What could possibly be going on?

My friend listened, then told me that adoptees grapple with life transitions at different points during their child- and adult-hoods. Sometime between the ages of five and ten the transition includes a realization that in gaining a family, the child has suffered significant losses. An adoptive parent needs to be prepared and proactive in order to assist their child, she said. Children need help interpreting both their positive and negative emotions and need acceptance for what they're feeling on all levels. Adoption, my friend added, is like a cake with many layers...

This time I understood. But how was I supposed to know how to be "prepared and proactive"? Nothing in my upbringing had taught me how to parent a layer cake, and no one had ever alluded to the specific challenges of being a mom to an adopted child. I quickly learned that adoption parenting was a two-way learning opportunity, and that in order to help my child integrate her emotional life, I would need to examine my own.

Understanding Your 'Inner Parent'

Psychologist Doris Landry warns, "You are your parents—you will parent like your parents parented (which can be good or bad), unless you make a conscious effort to change."

We all carry the remnants of our childhood inside of us, and sometimes our children's issues can re-awaken issues we've had in the past within our own family of origin. What does this have to do with adoption parenting? *Our past and present relationship with our parents has influence over what we are able to do for our children.*



--A parent may feel irritated by an over-clingy, anxious, or fearful child, if the parent's own childhood anxiety or fear wasn't met with comfort and understanding.

--Adults who grew up feeling rejected may not be able to effectively parent an angry son or daughter, if they also fear that drawing boundaries will cause their child to reject them, too.

--Parents will find it very difficult to guide their adopted children through abandonment fears if they haven't healed from the loss felt at their own parents' death or divorce. To be a better mom or dad, our own childhoods must be addressed.

Dr. Dan Siegel, in his book *Parenting from the Inside Out*, stresses that "the first step in raising happy and healthy children is to fully understand and learn from your own childhood experiences."

Understanding Your Adopted Child

Children without a conduit to express their feelings of confusion, fear, sadness and anger may act out with inappropriate tantrums or behaviors (or act in, with depression, boredom and withdrawal). An adopted child may be extra controlling, or exhibit intense anxiety about loss or separation. Helping a child who is experiencing age-appropriate adoption issues can be baffling and overwhelming if a parent is unprepared, or is dealing with triggered reactions based on his or her own unaddressed or unresolved issues. Luckily, understanding what our parenting is based on, gives us control over our present and future options and actions. Countering our parenting imprint can be really tough, but positive results with our children help to reinforce our efforts!

Moms and Dads need to be especially aware of their 'inherited' parenting style, and its influence on family closeness and communication. We want to be emotionally available for our children and we want to be able to make the type of conscious choices that strengthen the parent-child relationship. An honest, essential connection with an adopted child is a parent's greatest reward...it is the icing with sprinkles on the multi-layered cake.

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Resources:

[Parenting from the Inside Out](#) by Dan Siegel, M.D., & Mary Hartzell, M.Ed.

[Real Parents, Real Children](#) by Holly Van Gulden & Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb