

# Emotional Vulnerabilities of an Adoptee

-by Sherrie Eldridge

Speaker and author, Sherrie Eldridge, an adoptee herself, is passionate about assuring those touched by adoption that they can grow because of the unique challenges adoptive family living presents. She is the author of the highly acclaimed books *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew* and *Twenty Life-Transforming Choices Adoptees Need to Make*. As President of Jewel Among Jewels Adoption Network, Inc., a non-profit adoption educational organization, she offers extensive online resources, including inspiration, encouragement, projects for parents and kids, newsletters, workbooks, and an upcoming adoption book club.

## Emotional Vulnerabilities:

- I need help in recognizing my adoption loss and help with grieving it.
- I need to be assured that my birth parent's decision not to parent me had nothing to do with anything defective in me.
- I need help in learning how to deal with my fears of rejection—to learn that absence doesn't mean abandonment or a closed door to an opportunity that I have done something wrong.
- I need permission to express ALL my adoption feelings and fantasies.

## Educational Needs:

- I need to be taught that adoption is both wonderful and painful, presenting life-long challenges for everyone involved.
- I need to know my adoption story first, then my birth story and birth history.
- I need to be taught healthy ways for getting needs met.
- I need to be taught that others may make hurtful comments about adoption and about me as adoptee.
- I need to be taught that the hurtful words are usually well-intentioned and borne out of ignorance.
- I need to be taught specific ways to respond, in order to take my power back and not feel victimized. (Suggestion: *The Wise-Up Workbook*, by Marilyn Schoettle, M.Ed.)

## Parental Needs:

- I need parents that are skillful in meeting their own emotional needs so that I can grow up with healthy role models and be free to focus on my development, rather taking care of them (by Connie Dawson, LPC).
- I need parents that are willing to put aside pre-conceived ideas about adoption and be educated about the realities and special challenges adoptive families encounter.
- I need to hear my parents openly express feelings about infertility and adoption, thus producing a bond of intimacy between us.
- I need parents who have grieved their own losses, such as infertility, miscarriage, death of a child, etc., so that they can be emotionally available for me. This is one of the greatest gifts they could give me.
- I need a non-competitive attitude between adoptive and birth parents. Without this, I will struggle with loyalty issues.

## Relationship Needs:

- I need friendships with fellow adoptees.
- I need to be taught that there is a time to consider searching for my birth family and a time to give up searching.
- I need to be assured often that if I am rejected by my birth relatives, it is symptomatic of their dysfunction, not mine.

# Taming Temper Tantrums in the Adopted Toddler

-by Sherrie Eldridge

A desperate mom of a 21-month-old son wondered if her son had “infant rage.” He had been relinquished by the birth mother at three days of age, spent 15 months in a foster home, and then was adopted by them.

His high-pitch screeching, thrashing around on the floor, jumping and throwing things, and hitting people was about driving her crazy. Anything could trigger his tantrums. Simply putting him down so she could take off her coat, or saying no to him for any reason, could send him into a tailspin. If he stumbled, but didn't fall, he'd go into a tantrum. If someone picked him up after a stumble or fall, he'll settle and cuddle. If her husband or she picked him up after he stumbled or fell, he would freak out even more and lashed out to hit.

This mother tried various ways of handling the tantrums--putting him in his playpen, ignoring him, trying to reason with him. Nothing worked. Can you relate, moms?

## Two Principles for Tantrums

Two basic principles helped this mom. I learned them from Domenica Labasi, a very talented therapist from Quebec. First, you must contain him so that he can learn to contain himself. Second, always combine discipline with attachment. So, when he throws a tantrum, sit down behind him, grab both hands in yours so that they cross over his chest, tell him that this is not acceptable behavior but that you will sit with him until he quiets down. Hold him until that happens.

The end of the story is that she incorporated these principles for three weeks and said, “My son has not been in the playpen since. I have been holding him during his numerous tantrums throughout the day and it has been very successful. I hold him close, facing me, cupping his face in my hands to gain eye contact and I talk to him about the situation surrounding the tantrum. I let him know I am holding him until he settles and until I feel calmer, too. Usually he gets rather angry and attempts to bite, kick and hit, but I continue to hug him close, restraining his hands and legs and gently talk into his ear asking him to relax, reassuring him that he is okay. Slowly, he begins to settle.

Now he handles himself much better and the tantrums are less severe and less frequent. Previously, he would throw a tantrum if he stumbled or dropped a toy. Now he will stop, call me, or look toward me. I let him know he is a good boy and everything is okay. Then I give him a quick hug or kiss whatever he bumped and encourage him. He is much happier and I can see that he is more secure. Thank you for responding to my distress and for the valuable advice.”

## Where to Find Help

Children with attachment problems, like David, are afraid of touch. You can teach them that touch is good by implementing certain play techniques. There is a wonderful organization called The Theraplay Institute of Chicago, which offers training sessions for parents and therapists [www.theraplay.org](http://www.theraplay.org). Their book is called *Theraplay: Helping Parents and Children Build Better Relationships Through Attachment-Based Play*, by Ann M. Jernberg and Phyllis B. Booth (Jossey-Bass Publishing).

# Teaching Kids How to Respond to Nosy Adoption Questions

-by Sherrie Eldridge

Adoptees are often good targets for school bullies because many still carry a victim's mindset. We unknowingly let others take advantage of us, due to a sense of powerlessness resulting from the early-life loss of our birth mothers. We have lost our ability to see our options, our choices that will lead to an abundant life. We need to learn to take our power back and become responsible through making healthy choices!

Marilyn Schoettle, M.Ed., created a wonderful system for teaching adoptees, no matter what our age, to take our power back when misunderstandings and insensitive comments come our way.

## A Win-Win System

It is a win-win system, for it not only teaches the one who is hurt to make the right choices, but it also educates the sender about the appropriateness of the message. It is also suitable for parents because oftentimes bullies can be adults. "How much did she cost?" "Who is the *real* mom?" "Why is his skin a different color?"

Schoettle named it the "Wise-Up Method" and based it on the acronym

W-I-S-E, with each letter representing a choice to take one's power back when misunderstood. Let's go through examples of each option:

**W— WALK AWAY!** This provides maximum self-care for the child and inadvertently teaches the other person about adoption—that was a hurtful, inappropriate statement. For example, after your international adoption, a woman may come up to you in the grocery store and ask, "Why did you go way overseas to get a child when there are so many children that are waiting to be adopted here? If your anger was about to spill out and you were in an extremely vulnerable spot, you would choose to walk away.

**I—IT'S PRIVATE!** This sets a verbal boundary and doesn't let the person go any further. Suppose an adult adoptee announces to his friends that he's going to begin searching for his birth family. They say, "Why would you want to open *that* can of worms?" Simply using this option, with a smile, would stop further insensitivities. If not, you could resort to W!

**S—SHARE!** Here the adoptee begins the opening up process when he/she feels strong enough to reveal feelings. The adoptee may say, "I am so glad that I was adopted."

**E—EDUCATE!** This is sharing knowledge about adoption to help the insensitive person grow. For example, an adult adoptee who was reunited with her birth mother, discovered that her birth mother was riddled with guilt. The adoptee could choose to educate her birth mother by saying, "Almost every birth mother I know has this kind of guilt. In fact there is a classic book about birth mothers, *The Other Mother*, by Carol Schaeffer. Why don't we go to the library and find a copy?"

# Why Adoptees Get Mad at their Moms

-by Sherrie Eldridge

Many moms of adopted children can't figure out what they've done wrong, what makes their children reject them, even though they have literally poured their very souls into their children. This anger may manifest in shouting matches, temper tantrums, refusing to let you hold her hand when walking through the parking lot, or refusing to go for a walk with you on Mother's Day.

It's downright hard for a mom not to take this rejection personally, but it is absolutely necessary that you don't—both for the welfare of your child and your own sanity.

If you understand the core reason why your child is rejecting you, it will be easier for you to detach from an emotional response and help your child comprehend the source of her anger and deal effectively with it.

## Misplaced Anger

Anger is a scab over a wound, a secondary emotion. In other words, it happens in response to another occurrence, which is pain. No doubt, your child has the anger problem, which manifests in rejection toward you as a mom, but what is the great hurt? You haven't hurt her! You've done everything humanly possible to demonstrate your great love for her.

In reality, the anger is misplaced. Your daughter is not angry at you; instead, she is furious at her birth mother for leaving her behind. No matter how loving the birth mother and the adoption plan, the absence of the birth mother translated to your child as pure abandonment. That is the deep hurt beneath the scab.

Because your child doesn't understand this dynamic, she lashes out at you, with misplaced anger. The birth mother isn't around, so you receive the brunt of her anger.

You may be at the end of your rope, feeling crushed beyond belief by her multiple rejections. Truth be known, your child may wonder what is wrong with her—what is the cause of this overblown anger toward you?

## How to Help

Understanding adoptee loss is the key to helping yourself and your child overcome this common adoption hurdle. Many parents read *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, make notes in the margins, and then give it to the teen to read. This has opened many conversations.

If you can help her understand the source of her anger, then she can begin to manage it through grieving her loss (professional help may be needed here) and going forward toward healthier relationships, with you and others.