

Adoptive Parent Preparation

Adoptive Parent Prep begins with the realization that moms and dads can proactively plan to help their adopted children transition into the family with a little upfront advice from adoption professionals and experienced parents.

Making educated choices about building a family via adoption means investigating the pros and cons of domestic and international adoption, understanding the ramifications of adopting an older child, special needs child or sibling group, and accepting what it may require to become a multiracial family.

Planning 'how' to parent is as important as choosing a program or compiling a dossier. Adoptive parent expectations may be based on a long-held dream, but living with a child who is experiencing normal adoption reactions can be overwhelming for a parent who is not sure what is going on or where to go for support. The real rewards and joys of parenting adopted children are huge, but without guidance, the real challenges can also be draining, confusing and depressing. Parenting with perception and knowledge will give moms and dads the tools to tackle the mild-to-major spectrum of possible attachment and adoption issues, and decrease the potential for parent stress and post-adoption depression.

Emotional Preparation

Helping a new baby, toddler or older child connect to mom and dad is an important first step in the parent-child relationship, and a significant step toward building a strong family foundation. Displaying empathy and sensitivity toward an adoptee's grief over previous losses, and learning how to guide the adoptee towards awareness and resilience, are important tasks for adoptive parents.

These tasks may offer parents learning opportunities on multiple levels: in order to help an adopted child emotionally bond, parents need to understand the child's issues and perspective; parents also need to reflect on the model of their *own* upbringing so they can consciously make different parenting choices appropriate to their adoptee's life experience and needs.

Grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and extended family and friends all play significant roles in a successful adoption, but should be educated about the parents' attachment plan and parenting choices prior to the big event. Enlisting family and friends as supportive 'helpers' while setting clear and reasoned boundaries for the adoptee's first months at home, may alleviate tensions and set the stage for continued extended-family participation.

Practical Preparation

Love may be the key ingredient of an adoptive family, but love alone is not enough to be an effective adoptive parent! It takes effort, patience and compassion to understand the



underlying issues and emotions of adopted children, but happily, a mom or dad's two strongest parenting tools are always available and on-call: *play* and *communication*.

These two intertwining tools reinforce each other while gently breaking down barriers to parent-child intimacy. New babies and toddlers need lots of one-on-one time while transitioning to mom or dad, and play can provide the magic connection. Child's play may be simple, but playing for a child's love, playing for keeps, is both imperative and purposeful. Nothing should be as satisfying to a son or daughter as a parent's touch, eyes, and smile. 'Therapeutic' play between a parent and child recognizes the importance of a parent's position, and places Mom or Dad in the starring role as The Best Toy in The World. Swimming pools and playgrounds provide excellent venues for teaching reciprocity, dependence and joy--with the added benefits of being sensory-rich environments.

Relaxed, interactive play leads to easy conversation, and utilizing honest, open communication on a regular basis creates a family relationship built on trust. Adoption is a lifelong process; accepting the ongoing need to talk about feelings, and learning to discuss tough topics, strengthens an adoptive family at its core. Lifebooks (a collection of information focused on a child's pre-adoptive life) and other life narrative tools (children's literature, videos and artwork) make it easier for parents to delve into deeper conversations about birthparents, abandonment, race and heritage, and to normalize thoughts and emotions surrounding the adoption experience.

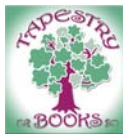
Baby Care

Infant adoption requires a repertoire of practical baby care from parents, but expectant adoptive moms and dads are usually excluded from the same prep classes that pregnant parents attend. Age and infertility may also remove adoptive parents from some of the same societal support that pregnancy naturally engenders, but it's important for adoptive parents to claim equal space within the parenting community, and to give themselves permission to fully 'claim' their new baby.

New parents may wonder about adoption-related related issues and the normal, developmental ages and stages. Parents may be considering a return to work, and the impact of daycare on an infant who has experienced multiple caretaker transitions. They may have questions about medical matters and birthfamily genetics. Newborn adoption may involve a relationship with birthparents, and the need to define boundaries that circumscribe an extended, adoptive / birth family relationship.

Older Child Adoption

Adopting an older child demands an extra level of preparation and proactive parenting from adoptive moms and dads. Missed emotional and physical developmental milestones need a 're-do' before a child can truly move forward with assurance. Helping an older child adoptee develop a secure attachment to new parents is crucial to a child's success within the family, with new friends, and at school. Older children may resist 'babying' but parents can get creative about parent-child play and time spent in family-



only activities. Parents may wish to consider home-schooling initially, in order to help the child prioritize relationships, close learning gaps and transition to the new environment.

Hurt Children

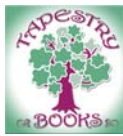
Hurt children who have suffered trauma, abuse or neglect, may also need help to learn how to deal with new parents and the transition process—along with their past fears and distress. Adoptive parents need to be detectives to determine the cause of challenging gaps or the underlying basis of behaviors. Is the child displaying behavior that was appropriate within his old life at the orphanage? Are triggers occurring that remind the child of past hurt or injury? Watchful parents can help a traumatized adoptee celebrate his or her survival strengths while supplying parental and professional help for the relational or institutional ‘injury’, or for post traumatic stress disorder.

Chronic anxiety may be an indication of unresolved trauma. Anxiety and difficulty with transitions often go hand in hand. A child’s easy transition to new circumstances is based on an infancy and childhood of complete trust. While transitioning seems like a natural skill, it is really an outgrowth of temperament, a child’s belief in a safe, secure world, and his or her unshakeable faith in invincible parents! An adopted child has experienced loss and understands the terror of vulnerability; she or he knows that change isn’t necessarily a positive event, and deeply fears that it could mean losing the current parents, friends and home. *It has happened before.* Change forces anxieties to the surface.

Parents can learn to teach coping skills to their over-anxious, uncertain children, while helping their sons and daughters deal with the fear and loss issues that lie beneath the surface. Adoptive parents need to realize that their child’s anxiety or troubled behaviors can be a *normal result* of what their child experienced before joining their present family, and not hesitate to look for therapeutic support. Anxious and traumatized children may benefit from therapy in order to navigate and integrate their past and present life stories.

Medical Issues

Medical issues may influence an adopted child’s health, temperament and behavior. An adoptee may be affected by environmental toxins, nutritional deprivation, disease and parasites, genetic predisposition, or by maternal drinking and drug usage while in utero. Parents can help to mitigate an exposed child’s physical and mental damage with aggressive early intervention. New research points to the benefits of helping the brain heal past traumas through neurofeedback. Attachment is also linked to brain development; a child with attachment issues may benefit from concurrent psychological and neurological therapies. Speech and language are inextricably linked to the brain, and to early life relationships and experiences. Biomedical diets help an adoptee’s immune system maintain balance, while sensory work promotes behavioral regulation. A holistic, ‘umbrella’ approach that connects and simultaneously treats the physical, mental and emotional states is most effective in helping adopted children reach their full potential. Parents who learn the language of diagnostics and remediation techniques



are better equipped to seek out knowledgeable professionals for information and intervention.

Common Concerns

The unknown possibilities inherent in adoption may sound scary, but deciding to parent a child is still a powerful declaration of faith, hope, determination and love. Romanticism has no place in adoption, however! Parent prep resources can be a useful means to gauge a family's readiness to adopt, and can help prospective adopters clarify what they can provide or handle.

Choosing to parent a special needs child, for instance, demands an understanding of the long-term medical and financial ramifications of the child's need or disability, and the impact of these potential issues on the existing family.

Adopting transracially requires adoptive parents to become race conscious, and to take responsibility for reaching out to people of differing cultures and ethnicities. Ignoring racism is not an option for multi-racial families; examining the importance of competent transracial parenting prior to adopting is a necessary exercise, and one vital to family fit.

Family fit means more than having enough space at the table—like all moms and dads, adoptive parents must decide if what they have to give will be enough, and if a better family balance will be created by adding a child. Parents must also carefully consider family fit when adopting out of birth order, or when creating sibling-ship between an adopted child and a birth child. Consciously building a family is a satisfying, joyful experience, but the work goes more smoothly when results are expected, understood and nurtured.

All parenting is a leap of faith, but adoptive parents have a few extra choices to make while leaping into the decision process. Parent education, through books and workshops--and parent awareness, through self-understanding and experience, are useful measurements of readiness for those poised to adopt. The popular saying "Hope for the Best; Prepare for the Worst" needs to be revised for parents who plan. "Hope for the Best; Prepare to *Be* your Best" is the truest adage for savvy moms and dads, and for confident, successful adoptive-parenting.

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