



Supporting Adoptive Families:

Adoption Awareness Month

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All adoption is born out of loss. Adoption can be a beautiful way that God brings families together and redeems the painful consequences of our broken world, such as broken relationships, sin, natural disasters, etc. But there is no adoption that does not involve some form of trauma or loss, certainly for **the child and birth parents** but also for the **adoptive parents: the adoption triad**. Adopted children have a higher risk of mental health issues than non-adoptees, but their struggles often go unseen or misunderstood by those outside of the adoption community.

To support adoptive families well, you must understand and have a lens of early childhood trauma. Adoptive parents' feelings of love alone are not enough to counter the effects of trauma. Though safe, unconditional love is absolutely what these children need, their love, as well as community support, must be skilled and wise to meet the unique needs of children affected by attachment trauma.

1

Listen and validate the family's experience

When adoptive families share their experiences, we may not always understand but we can listen without judgment or minimizing. Well-meaning phrases that are intended to encourage such as “Kids are resilient” or “Just love them and they’ll be fine” can feel invalidating.

Another comment often heard is “Oh, they were so young. They don’t remember, do they?” Neuroscience shows that memory is both explicit and implicit. Though the children may not recall the sequence of

events that led to the circumstances of their adoption, their early experiences and trauma are stored in their body and their implicit—or unconscious—memory. It can have a lasting impact and create ongoing challenges. Listen with grace for the parent and child.

2

Promote and use positive adoption language

Language matters. Children and families can internalize our unintended subtle messages. Be aware of the potential bias in our words and use language that communicates the value of all members of the adoption triad as well as the adoption process.

SAY THIS

- Birth mother/father/parents
- Parenting her baby
- Make/choose adoption plan
- Daughter/son/child
- Unintended pregnancy
- Born to unmarried parents
- Terminated parental rights

NOT THIS

- Real mother/father/parents
- Keeping her baby
- Give up/place for adoption
- Adopted daughter/son/child*
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Illegitimate
- Surrendered/released/relinquished

**For the sake of clarity, we’ll use “adoptive parents” and “adopted child” in this Toolkit.*



3

Help families create space for grief and life's complexities

Many people look at adoption as something beautiful, and it can be, but it also involves losses, complexities, and challenges. Potential challenges include a deep-seated fear of abandonment and grappling with a sense of belonging and racial identity in

transracial adoption. Adoptive children may feel like they do not quite belong in the family raising them, nor do they belong in their birth family or culture of origin. The child may feel like, “Everyone in my family is athletic and I’m not;” or “I don’t look like my parents or siblings.” Adoptive parents and children have to navigate complex relationships with birth families, especially in open adoptions.

Adopted children often suffer quietly with disenfranchised grief, which is grief that is not typically acknowledged or validated by society, because they internalize messages such as, “You should be grateful” or “You were lucky to be adopted by such good parents.” They love and feel thankful for the parents who have raised them but also may feel a longing for their birth family, which can bring feelings of guilt or resentment. Be cautious of the perspective of seeing adoptive parents as rescuers. A better perspective is to see that adoption is a blessing for both the adoptive parents and children while also acknowledging the loss.

Encourage adoptive parents to consider decisions with their children’s best interests in mind even when it might be difficult. Can they support their child in finding their birth parents or maintaining a relationship with them? Can they be intentional to cross racial and cultural barriers so their children can feel more connected to their cultural roots? Help adoptive parents process and grieve their fears and pains connected to hard, complicated decisions.

Help them invite and make space for their children to honestly voice their questions, hurts, and longings without taking it personally.

If parents never bring them up, children will not feel free to do so. Parents must set the tone by asking and talking about it openly and often.

4

Help parents prioritize felt-safety and connection

All children, but particularly those who have experienced trauma, heal and thrive when parents foster felt-safety and connection. Remind parents to be mindful of their tone, having soft eyes and healthy touch. In the initial phases of their relationship, parents should be encouraged to say lots of yeses, have fun, and not focus too much on corrective discipline or be overly strict.



For children’s traumatized fear-based nervous system to reset, it is important for them to actually FEEL safe, not just BE safe. For example, children who have experienced food insecurity may exhibit food issues such as hoarding. Though they now have enough food, they may still need a level of control for them to actually feel safe that they will not go hungry. This may mean letting them always carry a snack in their pocket, even if they don’t eat it, or have a snack box in their room. To foster a meaningful felt sense of safety for the child, encourage parents to attune and see the need behind the children’s behavior.

5

Traditional parenting methods may not work

As you support adoptive families, recognize that traditional parenting methods may not be suitable for children with a history of trauma. Do not insist on traditional parenting techniques that might have worked for others, such as time-outs or ‘cry it out.’ Instead, help parents think through their children’s early experiences to wisely provide corrective experiences for them.

Children who have experienced loss and potentially not being well attended to (e.g., in orphanages), may have internalized implicit messages that they are ‘unlovable and all alone’, ‘people may leave’, or ‘it’s my fault’. For them to grow up securely, they must internalize the corrective gospel message that their needs matter, there will be ever-present help in their time of trouble, and that they are unconditionally loved no matter what. For example, instead of doing time-outs, which can unconsciously send the message that the relationship is severed when they misbehave, teach parents to do time-ins where they stay near the child with their calming presence and reassurance while the child regulates.

If you as a caregiver have not learned much about developmental trauma and are unsure

how to encourage parents, refer them to trauma-trained professionals or support groups. [The Connected Child](#) by Karyn Purvis is a good book for parents and caregivers looking to support families.

6

Refer to appropriate interventions

Adoptees may deal with significant mental health effects. Depending on the quality of care experienced in their early years, some may also struggle with language and motor delays and sensory processing challenges. For more context, refer to our Toolkit, “[When Senses Overwhelm](#)” (May 2017). Some adoptive parents may blame themselves, feeling like if their love were strong enough, it should have cured all things. Educate them on the effects of trauma to normalize their experience. Encourage them to seek appropriate referrals, such as early intervention, occupational therapy and play therapy that is attachment and trauma informed. Some examples of such therapies are:

- Trust-based Relational Intervention (TBRI)
- Attachment, Regulation & Competency (ARC)
- Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP)
- Theraplay

[Creating a Family](#) is a website with many resources and links to these therapies.

Through Jesus, we have been adopted into God’s family with the spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). As we grow in wisdom and love, finding our security in Him, may we help adoptees grow in confidence of the unconditional acceptance and belonging in their families and community.