



ADOPTION EDUCATION, LLC

OLDER CHILD ADOPTION

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Lessons I Learned

From a 4 year-old ...

By Cindy Champnella

When the child came to me, I was whole and she was broken. Or so I thought. If I had only known then that in the process of her becoming whole, of her reconciling her past with her new life, that the veneer of my life, my assumptions, the things I had formerly believed to be true, would be stripped away...

I can now say, five years later, she has become whole or maybe as whole as she will ever be. Her teachers tell me with a mixture of pride and wonder that she blends invisibly in any group of children that she is in and that no outside observer would ever sense where she had been or what she had been through. I credit her with this. If sheer force of will can be used to put back together the pieces of a shattered life, she had this in spades. If you can make yourself love and trust and believe again, when absolutely nothing in your previous life gives you any reason to think that your heart will not be once more trampled, she succeeded in doing so. If you can embrace a foreigner, one whose very countenance makes you recoil, and claim her as your mother by willing yourself to do so, she did. I am humbled by her strength; thank goodness one of us possessed.

Adopting Jaclyn was a decision I made solely with my heart; if I had stopped to think about the adoption, even for a moment, I would never have done it. I never read anything about older child adoption until I got on the plane to go to China. And, truthfully, if I had read any of it I would never have gotten on that plane in the first place.

My first year with Jaclyn was an amazing roller coaster ride of ups and downs. The dizzying downward slides made me, at times, question my sanity. But always, the joy that Jaclyn brought into my life helped balance the angst. But I desperately needed support. I struggled. I was discouraged and confused and amazed and bewildered – often at the same time. I lost perspective as I broached the challenge of becoming a mother to this unfamiliar four-year-old that had claimed my heart.

I wish there was a way that I could now tie those lessons up with a bow and offer them in some formulaic manner to those with the fortitude, heart, and spirit required to venture into the unknowns involved in older child adoption. But for this experience, there are no easy answers. I guess the single most reassuring piece of advice I can give is simply to admit that I am living proof that you can have no idea what you are doing, manage to do just about everything wrong and still have things somehow turn out OK. So here's a chance to learn from my mistakes, to do as I say not as I did, and to hopefully glean something helpful along the way. For me the light at the end of the tunnel was the eventual love and trust of a remarkable child who has changed my life in more ways that I can count. I ended up fine. But it didn't start out that way ...

Expect Rejection

To say that Jaclyn was disappointed when she met us would be the understatement of the century. In fact, on the return visit to the orphanage a few days post adoption she marched up to the orphanage director with this disparaging pronouncement: "My parents are foreigners!" This was clearly not the deal she had signed up for. Jaclyn, very conscious of issues of race from the start, wanted desperately to be adopted by a Chinese family. Any Chinese family. In fact, on our last day in China she begged plaintively with our driver to adopt her – any reprieve from going off with the foreigners was welcome. Much later, when she had both the language and the courage to express herself, she told me that the reason she did not like me in the beginning: "Your nose and eyes are a little bit yucky!"

But fear can also play a part in rejection and, as a result, you must be continually vigilant. If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the heart-pounding panic that ensued [sic] when I realized that while we were distracted looking at some tourist attraction, Jaclyn had stealthily gotten away in a crowded park and hidden from us. It didn't bode well for my mothering abilities to have already lost the child I had parented for all of three days.

Advice I'd offer to handle this:

Preparation Helps. Make sure you send a photo book in advance so that the child can be prepared for your yucky face. Remember, however, that the child is often not shown the book until right before the adoption.

Get Out. Don't sit in the hotel room and look at each other. Not only did her anxiety increase as she came face to face with me, but mine increased as well and she could sense my fear. Most children have a natural curiosity about what is in the outside world so getting outside to see the sights tends to distract [sic] the child.

Hang On. While you are out and about keep your eyes on your child and their hand in yours so that they don't get away from you. Jaclyn could not remember much about life outside the institution so some of her natural curiosity and lack of socialization also caused potential safety concerns – twice she tried to run into five lanes of heavy traffic.

The Food Factor. An important first step in establishing trust and minimizing fear is food. Jaclyn told me later that her biggest fear in coming with us was that she would not get any food. Almost immediately I offered her snacks, which she hid in a stash, but her spirits rose considerably at every meal.

Expect to Have Second Thoughts.

Rejection can be a two-way street and the shame that comes from the realization that you are secretly hoping for some way out of the commitment to the child you have longed for forever can lead to all kinds of self-recrimination. Love doesn't happen overnight on either side of the equation. I had formed a vivid impression of my future daughter based on a few photos and some second-hand information from a family who had met her. Imagine my shock when the sweet, quiet, shy child that had been described to me turned out to be a tiger. The fact that she was completely and totally unfamiliar to me somehow surprised me. An older child has already formed a distinct personality and you need to discover that; you cannot predetermine it. And it takes a long time to see who they really are as you peel back the layers of what they have been through.

Strategies here include:

Fake It Until You Feel It. In a performance that should have garnered an academy award, I feigned love and caring for a child that I sometimes didn't even like. And, to be truthful, I believe the faking went both ways – once Jaclyn realized there was no way out she, too, determined to try to love the yucky-faced mom she was saddled with. But a scary accident that resulted in my first tears cried with her and for her and the surprising knowledge that came with them – that I truly loved this child and she was now my own—somehow was sweeter because of the time it took to get there.

Don't Be Too Hard on Yourself. You're not a bad mom if you don't fall in love right away – you're an honest mom. Love can't be willed and doesn't have any 'shoulds'; love has its own time and path.

Love is Not Enough.

If I only had a nickel for every well-meaning person who congratulated me on my bravery and assured me that with enough love everything would be OK. Here's a reality check – for some of these kids, many who have suffered unspeakable trauma, there isn't enough love in this world to

make it OK. They need more, much more. Some need structure. Some need reassurance. Some need support. Most need all three. And many need professional help and guidance.

Remember this:

Real Problems Need to be Dealt With in Real Ways. Read everything you can get your hands on. Use internet adoption groups to get advice and support. Seek out therapists or social workers who specialize in adoption issues. And don't get scared.

Adjustment is Not a Linear Path.

I somehow thought that every day would be better and certainly that every week should be. Wrong. Often there is a "honeymoon period" and then a crash. In my case, the honeymoon never happened. We went from problems to getting-used-to-problems to life-now-seems-normal-with-these-problems to disaster. In fact, the most trying period of time came about 8 months post-adoption. A friend congratulated me at that milestone indicating that it was now evident that Jaclyn trusted me enough to show her most challenging self—it was the ultimate test to see if I would stick around when times got tough. But it was hard to celebrate this, much less to endure it. Spending every minute of every day with a cranky, difficult, bossy, I'm-going-to-challenge-everything kid nearly did me in.

In hindsight, I offer this:

Remember, This Too Shall Pass. When you're in it and things are going badly it feels like it's going to last forever. You are not going to be able to 'fix' all that has happened before in a few months. Or years. Or maybe ever. And 'fixing' isn't the goal. It's about acceptance and overcoming and learning and growing. Keep a long term perspective – you're on a journey of discovery together.

Maintain Control and Structure. Do not change any rules or routines just because it appears that they will never be adhered to. Consistency is critical.

Keep Calm. Your anxiety, fear, and anger ratchets up the child's anxiety, fear and anger. Count to a hundred. Count to a million. Take a walk. Scream into a pillow. Cry in the shower.

Keep Loving Them. At their worst, and most out-of-control, is when they desperately need to know that they are loved and accepted and that you are never, ever going to give up on them.

Socialization Takes Time.

In an incredible act of sheer lunacy I scheduled a trip to Disney World, the land of sensory overload, three months post-adoption. Then I was somehow surprised when I found Jaclyn head first in a fountain congratulating herself on her good luck in finding so many coins that others had left behind. Later in the day her older sister tattled that Jaclyn was chewing gum. My husband and I exchanged puzzled glances as neither of us had given her any. Then finally the light bulb went off – she was happily chomping on gum that she had scraped off the bathroom floor! I reprimanded her severely and was sure that this matter was taken care of ... until the next day when her sister reported once again that Jaclyn had gum. Of course she was clueless as to how to behave and what was expected of her! Only much later was she able to explain to me how confusing this had been for her. When they told her at school that food on the floor was dirty and had germs she puzzled over it and then concluded: *"In China there no such thing as germs! You find food on the floor, it your lucky day!"*

Some thoughts on this:

Review Expectations. In any and every new situation, you need to tell the child what behavior is expected. Be specific on what is OK and what will not be tolerated. Expand the list as you go along because it is nearly impossible to think of all the 'don't dos'.

Watch Their Reactions. Unlike other children her age who had been socialized in the US, Jaclyn was terrified of many things that she had never been exposed to; she simply didn't understand what would happen next. When she was ready to get on the bus to go to school she asked: "Mama, will I ever come back from kindergarten?"

Explain, Explain, Explain. For a period of time I thought of my life as a continual game of 'Jeopardy' as I tried to answer all the questions of one very short contestant. They need to understand; show them how things work. Just like you need to explain to a toddler the fridge door must be kept shut, many older adoptees need to be told these things too.

Be On Guard for Sensory Overload. TV, cars, movies, the circus – all of them may be new experiences. Advance preparation on what to expect is helpful but also ease them into new stimuli.

A New Value System Takes Time to Develop.

Many older adoptees not only have institutional behaviors, but may also exhibit behaviors that were at one time integral to their survival. For Jaclyn, stealing was one of those. The teacher called to report that she had been caught going through her classmates' coat pockets. She shoplifted from the store on the field trip. She tip-toed out of bed to sneak things from her sister's room. She hid candy in her underpants. She later told me she had often stolen food to give to one of the younger children in the institution who had food taken from him by older kids. For her, stealing was an adaptive behavior not a 'wrong' one. My job was to help her understand a whole new moral code based on 'right' and 'wrong' instead of survival.

Sisters Don't Happen Overnight.

Along with my other delusions, I had a fantasy of a new playmate for my other kids. After the first few days my older daughter had only one question: "Why is she so mean?" Jaclyn brought with her wariness of older children. In the orphanage she had often seen the older kids bully and take advantage of the younger ones. Survival of the fittest was her norm and, as a result, she often was aggressive. She had a menacing stance with upraised fists that appeared, always behind my back, at the least provocation and sometimes without any provocation at all. She also saw other children as competitors for scant adult attention. But I believe that there was another issue here, too. She had left behind in the orphanage two children that had become family to her. About one of them she stated simply: "I gave him all my love." She had now lost them both, in addition to her birth family who she also recalled. Given this, how willing was she to love again?

So how can you facilitate the sibling bond?

Prepare Your Children. They need to understand the 'whys' behind the new sibling's often puzzling behavior.

Encourage Empathy and Support. Make this a family issue – you're all in it together. Ask for their help.

Empathize With Their Frustration. They're kids after all, not saints. They don't have the perspective of adults. And it is annoying to have a new sibling steal your stuff and become the mom-hog.

You Now Have a New Job: Educator.

One of your primary duties will be helping those who interact with the child, especially teachers, understand the 'whys' of your child's behavior. I had a livid teacher call me to relate that the children had all been in line to go to the bathroom. A child cut in line in front of Jaclyn and she exploded. The teacher intervened and instructed Jaclyn to 'let it go'. Assuming compliance, she was furious when Jaclyn neatly checked the other child into the sink as soon as they got out of the teacher's eyesight. Understanding that Jaclyn's former life experience involved living in an orphanage with 380 children that lined up daily for virtually everything and that being in the back

of that line often meant no lunch if they ran out of food, or wearing, the left-over shoes that were two sizes too small, helped the teacher understand that 'place in line' was not a trivial matter for this child.

Strategies that might help here include:

Seek First to Understand. Unfortunately, most older adoptees are not as disclosing about their past lives as Jaclyn was. So read all you can on institutional behavior and think about cause and effect responses. For example, I could hear Jaclyn on the playground when I was two football fields away. But she had also clamored for adult attention with hundreds of others so her piercing voice was simply a way to be heard. Once you 'get it', it somehow becomes easier to tolerate.

Help the Child Understand. Use positive reinforcement to encourage them to abandon old behaviors. But remember, too, that this is also a process and feeling safe is a prerequisite to letting go of what worked in the past.

Help Others Understand. Speak candidly with those who will be an on-going part of your child's life. Then, ask for them to be your partner in encouraging new behaviors.

Feelings Are Paramount.

You can't have the rug pulled out from under you and not feel anger and confusion and grief. Jaclyn told me once: "I don't know how to make the mad go away." She came to me with not only a list of grievances, but also with deep anger about being wronged. And judgments about those who had wronged her, including her birth mother. In the beginning, I recoiled from those outbursts and tried to make her understand a different perspective. I thought I could somehow talk her out of her anger. The truth was I felt uncomfortable with the depth of her rage. What I didn't get was that it was hers, not mine, and only she could find the key to releasing it. Forgiveness, if it ever comes, is only hers to bestow.

What would have worked better:

Allow the child to feel it, own it and express it. Her teacher often used the expression that many use with angry toddlers: "Use your words, not your fists." If anyone can tell me what the words are that would be big enough to express her feelings, I'd love to hear them. In hindsight I'd let her use her words, her voice, and her fists too, if she needed to. Get a punching bag. Show them how to punch a pillow. Give them a safe place to scream if they want to. And don't try to use logic and facts to counteract feelings.

Understand that sadness and grief can happen anytime with no seeming connection to current events. To know Jaclyn was also to know sorrow. When the demons of her past grabbed hold of her she sobbed, nearly catatonic, while I attempted to comfort her. Her grief had such depth that I don't believe any of my attempts to calm her make [sic] the slightest difference. At first I was puzzled by the lack of triggers – what in the world had caused this crash? Then I finally realized that the triggers were unknown to me, like fleeting ghosts that only she could see.

Make it safe for them to tell their story. Pieces of the past seemed to come out at the most inopportune moments –when I was exhausted and hoping to crawl into bed, when we had to rush to the airport, when we were at the doctor's office. And then Jaclyn would watch carefully for my reaction before going on. If I seemed upset or sad or too interested or probed too deeply with my questions, the conversation stopped. A neutral expression and reaction were critical to her continuing to speak of the recollection. And this was anything but easy to pull off when the story being recounted would make me want to recoil or sob or pound something with my fists. I sometimes felt that if I gave into the sadness that I felt about where she had been and what she had been through that my tears would fill the room. But getting it out was healing for her and she needed for me to be able to handle it.

Realize that you may never get the missing pieces. Most older adoptees talk very little about the past. For some, the memories are too deep, for some they are too wounding. And

if they don't want to talk, or can't find the words or don't know why they feel the way that they do, that has to be OK, too.

Control Equals Safety.

When the world turns upside down with no say on your part, the need for control becomes the invisible elephant in every interaction. Jaclyn would eat noodles only with the little white fork. She would drink only from the red glass. Each item on her plate could not touch another. Her pony-tail could only be in the sparkled rubber band. Jaclyn was crushed that no one wanted to play with her because her version of playing involved barked orders like "You will be this!" or "You will do that!" But I often wondered if your whole life had spun out of control, when you had been uprooted from home, friends and family and all that is familiar twice before you were five years old, how big your need for control should be? When she felt safe, the need for control diminished. Notice that I didn't say it went away.

What does help:

Provide Structure. Jaclyn was used to the structure of an orphanage routine where children walked in lock-step to a rigid schedule. When given time for 'free play' at kindergarten she immediately organized a small posse to invade the little kitchen and showed the kids neat ways to throw the plastic dishes like Frisbees. She simply did not know how to handle 'free choices'. In fact, the routine at school was much easier for her than figuring out how to live in a family. Structure and the certainty that came from knowing what would come next helped provide her with security and some continuity in a world that had turned upside down.

Understand that a Strong Will is also an Adaptive Behavior. Many older adoptees survived, when others did not, because of their fortitude. So I think of it this way – if I survive Jaclyn's childhood, to say nothing of her adolescence, I'm pretty confident she will be a woman to be reckoned with.

Choices. Whenever possible give them choices. This allows them control within boundaries that you have defined.

Choose Your Battles. A battle of the wills better be over something huge.

Food is Fundamental.

Although many adoptees have a variety of food issues, an older adoptee may have a longer history of deprivation. For Jaclyn, food was the most tangible sign of security. She had to have food with her all the time, everywhere she went and in every situation. I found stashes of potato chips behind my couch and under her bed. She took food with her in her backpack even on trips to the corner store. If we were going anywhere, she had to know what food would be there. And even if we were going somewhere to eat, she still brought food along just in case. She not only had to have food with her always, but had to be in control of any situation that involved food. When I served dinner, she had to monitor what went on her plate. If a doggie bag came home from a restaurant, she needed to grab it, examine it, know what it was and who had eaten it and, most importantly, why she was not there when it was consumed. And if I refused to tell her what I had eaten, she'd smell my breath.

What manages this:

Never let Food be an Issue. It was obvious, even to me, that this was a biggie. And I eventually learned to open my horizons on issues like what was an acceptable breakfast. Jaclyn simply didn't like American breakfast foods, and still doesn't. So we learned to compromise; I abandoned cereal and eggs and she abandoned popsicles and mandarin oranges. We settled on peanuts, dill pickles and spinach with lots of garlic.

Let them have Access to Food Without Permission. Control on something this primal to security doesn't work. I showed her shelves of low-fat, low-sugar snacks that she could help herself to whenever she wanted.

There is no timeline. Five years later, food is still fundamental. But I am happy to report that there are no longer potato chips under my couch.

Race Matters.

And if you don't think race matters, you're going to learn otherwise. I never really thought race would be an issue because it wasn't for me. My first clue was Jaclyn's birthday party. I had given her invitations for all the girls in her class. I noticed on the day of the party that she had invited only other children of color. Then I made time to notice her interactions at school and discovered that she segregated herself at lunch and often stood in tight circles with other children of color while keeping her back to the Caucasian children. One day Jaclyn came home and told me that she needed an eye examination because something was wrong with her eyes. "Eyes supposed to go like this," she said while pulling hers open. Later came the story about why she didn't like a boy in her class: "He always call me 'Jaclyn, you Chinese girl,'" she said sadly.

And how does a parent, without any first-hand experience regarding issues of race, tackle this?

Ask Adult People of Color to Help You. Talking to Jaclyn's Asian tutor helped me understand that separating along racial lines was sometimes OK. "You don't understand," the tutor said to me. "Sometimes you just want to be with your own people. Then you can relax and you don't have to explain why you're not good at math since all Asian people are."

Be Inclusive. We have dear friends that are Chinese in addition to friends of other ethnic backgrounds. Jaclyn loved having a chance to spend time with others who shared her heritage.

Mingle with Other Families that Look like Yours. It goes without saying that the groups such as Families with Children from China provide wonderful opportunities for socializing with families that share your child's heritage.

Make Them Proud. I told Jaclyn to proudly affirm that she was Chinese. After all, she was from a spectacular country with a proud and noble history. I also told her that I believed that some of the most beautiful and smartest girls in the world came from China. I wasn't sure if it was the right response until I saw her eyes fill with tears and heard her heart-felt words of thanks.

Be There.

You have to just be there constantly and consistently for as long as it takes. And everything else in your life needs to take a back seat. I got a call one day from a friend with a very serious problem. I went to the basement to talk to her because I could not hear her over the ruckus in my living room. After a few minutes Jaclyn noticed that I was missing. I found her in the front yard, on her knees, hands outstretched to the heavens screaming; "MAMA! MAMA!" Her terror was palpable. When my husband had to work late she would call down from her bed: "Daddy? Daddy?" every time she heard a sound. This went on once until 3:00 a.m.

Six weeks after I adopted Jaclyn she told me for the first time that she had two mamas. Once she called her 'go-away China mama' and I was dubbed 'this-a mama'. And then she shared her most basic fear: "I scared this-a mama go away."

How do you respond to this?

Develop a Mantra. For me it was “Mama goes. Mama always comes back.” I said this every day, every time I went anywhere. I hoped that if she heard it enough, she would one day believe it.

Actions Speak Louder than Words. Over time, just being there counts.

Every Child’s Story is Different.

The tough thing about preparing is that there simply isn’t anyway to know what’s ahead. Your child may have none of the issues described here, but others that we didn’t experience. Different histories present different issues. And similar events can trigger different responses. The value in preparation and in reading is that you at least know where to get help, that others have managed similar issues and that you are not alone. But you have to manage the fear factor, too. During the waiting phase, I found myself for a time addicted to an internet adoption group. But the more I read, the more I panicked. I suddenly began to envision a child with Reactive Attachment Disorder, parasites, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, sleeping issues and an identity crisis all happening simultaneously. Not a pretty picture. For some, expecting the worst makes the rest seem manageable. For me it was easier to just stick my head in the sand.

And so, after reading all of this, are you left wondering “is it all just too hard?” What I would say is this: my experience in life has been that things that prove to be the most satisfying are often the most difficult. I think of Jaclyn as both the greatest sorrow and the greatest joy in my life. But when I close my eyes and think of my proudest moment, it certainly must be the day that I graduated from “this-a mama” to “always-come-back Mama.” Jaclyn explained to me why her younger sister was whimpering when I dropped her off at Sunday school. “She doesn’t understand that you always-come-back, Mama,” she added, “And I be always-come-back, Jaclyn!”

When I think of my greatest triumph, it was surely the day that I noticed that the suitcase Jaclyn had kept at her bedside for almost two years, neatly packed with her favorite treasures in case she once again had to leave, was now gone. But nothing compared to the day she told me, with great anguish, about what it felt like to live in an orphanage and stand and watch “the mamas” arrive over and over to adopt babies while the older kids languished. When I asked her if she felt sad she explained by saying; “I happy for the babies to get mamas. But I not sad for myself. I didn’t want those other mamas.” Then she gave me her brilliant smile and added; “I was waiting for you!”

A few months ago we had a dear friend who was going through a tough patch. The combined stress of work problems, family problems and financial problems had culminated in some frightening chest pains. Jaclyn, an inveterate eavesdropper, heard us discussing this troubling situation and had her own insight: “I know what’s wrong with Uncle Al,” she said solemnly. “He’s wishing for too many things.” And then she added quietly, “When I lived in China I wished for only one thing – a mama. If you wish for too many things your heart aches.” And so, if you’re reading this and your heart aches because you want to parent one of these remarkable older kids, I guarantee you there is a not-so-small person somewhere on this earth who shares that ache.

But can you do it? If you understand parenting as a marathon, not a sprint, if you aren’t too proud to ask for help, if you’re open to the unexpected, if you have a strong support system, if you’re prepared to commit for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, this may be for you. But it’s also for you if you want to hear the word “WOW!” shouted in exuberance over the ordinary things in your life, if you want to see the world through the lens of wonder, if you want to try to hang onto the hand of a child who runs joyfully into new life, if you want to hear a heart-felt “thank-you” over

something you formerly took for granted, if you want to fall in love in a way you never saw coming or see a smile that rivals the beauty of even the most magnificent sunset.

Just remember to hang onto your hat ... it's a wild ride!

Cindy Champnella is the author of "The Waiting Child: How the Faith and Love of One Orphan Saved the Life of Another". All proceeds from her book are designated for the charity, [Half the Sky Foundation](#). This foundation, which was founded entirely by parents of Chinese Adopted children, is intended to benefit children who live in Chinese orphanages. Champnella is mother to six children including two adoptees from China. She has worked as an adoption social worker and is currently pursuing her PhD in psychology with a specialty in adoption issues.

Grief and Loss

In Older Child Adoptive Families

By Susan M. Ward

Feelings from the Past

My daughter, Hanna, was six when I adopted her from a Russian orphanage. As I prepared to travel to Russia, reading everything I could about what to do and how to act at the orphanage, I saw a list of questions to ask of the orphanage staff about your child's background and early years. That didn't seem particularly important to me; her past was her past. Her 'real' life would begin with me. ***How wrong, naïve, and uneducated I was!***

Within 48 hours of being home, Hannah was talking about her birth brothers! How could that be? I knew she had birth brothers, but I'd been told she had not interacted with them in quite some time, and had no memory of them. Why was she talking about them ...?

During the first couple months home, Hannah shared stories with me about the orphanage, and about her birth mom. My Russian was limited so I couldn't understand all of it, but I did realize that she was sharing lots of emotional experiences from her past.

Four months after Hannah came home, I took her to a therapist to for [sic] help with her outbursts, aggression, and noncompliance. During the sessions, the therapist talked about 'the hole' in Hannah's heart due to the gaps in information I had about her past, and about being adopted. She also mentioned Hannah's possible grief about being separated from her birth brothers. I started to understand. I began to read. I found out about grief and loss in adopted children, especially in older children.

Later on, when Hannah and I started seeing an attachment therapist to help with Hannah's just-diagnosed Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), this therapist too, talked about grief issues, especially grief and loss in children. I continued reading.

I began connecting the grief and loss to post traumatic stress disorder, and the post traumatic stress disorder to attachment and bonding challenges. I finally understood why I should have asked those questions at the orphanage about Hannah's past. Her past was part of her present. And, grief and loss were woven into all parts of her life.

Exploring Grief and Loss in Adoption

My new understanding led me first to explore grief in children, then grief in adopted children, then to the topic of grief and loss throughout the lives of adoptive families. My new found interest provided me with an opportunity to help educate other adoptive parents. It also showed me how seldom the topic of grief and loss is discussed, whether in the context of children and their healing, or families and their parenting challenges.

Part of the reason that the information is limited is that the topic of grief in children is fairly new; it wasn't too far back when it was assumed that children simply did not grieve. There is now an awareness that children do grieve, and that they grieve differently from adults. Most resources available however, are for children dealing with death—death of a grandparent, sibling, or parent. Our children are more commonly suffering from loss—the loss of their everyday life, of who they are, of all that is familiar to them. And, when it comes to parental grief and loss in adoption, there's a hesitancy to cast a pall of somberness over the excitement of creating a new family.

Few joyful occurrences in life come without some measure of difficulty, challenge, or even grief. In the joy and excitement of adoption, don't be surprised or overwhelmed to find elements of grief

and loss intruding upon your life, and your child's life. Read about it, understand it, and use the information to grow the strongest family you can.

Adoptive Parents: Grieving the Dream

As parents, adoption agencies, and social workers, we view adoption as happy and joyful. A child without a family now has one. A family yearning to share its love can now open its heart. Most adoption books, web sites, agencies, and social workers use words and phrases like, "fulfilling, joy, happiness, tears of happiness, meant to be together."

Adoption, however, often involves the hurtful, pain-filled, gnawing emotion of grief. The grief can be for us, for our children, or it can be our children's grief.

At the beginning stages of adoption, grief may be part of pre-adoptive couples as they face issues of infertility. It can be part of a single parent's issues of loss in not finding a spouse. It can also be an emotion of birth parents who want to parent their child, but realize they don't have the resources and choose to place their child with adoptive parents.

As parents go from adoption planning to placement, expectations for the child they plan to adopt may include words like "smart, sweet, athletic, curious." But adopted children, like biological children, come with no guarantees. After a child is home for a while, parents may realize their child has a physical, emotional, behavioral, psychological, or learning disorder. All of these can mean abandonment of your dream child. As you grieve and grow, you must learn to let go of what you hoped your child would be, and to embrace what your child is.

As adoptive families adjust to their new lives, there can be substantial changes in relationships: relationships between spouses, siblings, extended family, and friends. These changes may be temporary, or sometimes, they may be permanent, requiring a period of grieving for relationships that may be changing significantly, or even ending.

One mom of an older adoptive child shares, "The grief that has most touched our family is the loss of the life we had pre-adoption. Everything changed, more than we were prepared for, even though we had prepared. We grieved (and sometimes still do) the loss of independence, freedom, a relatively calm and happy home, lost friendships (or the time to maintain these friendships). We miss being able to have a conversation without being interrupted! We grieve when special occasions are overshadowed by a child's loss of control and manipulation.

"Having said this, we are adjusting and we have grown and changed in positive ways. We are very slowly coming to love our son, to believe in him, to want to assist him to be the best he can be even if it costs us. He has totally changed our lives but some of those ways are very positive. It is now hard to imagine our lives without him."

Tools to Tackle Grief

I'm a big fan of solution focus strategies. Here's my 'short list' of very concrete ways to help our children be very resourceful in dealing with their own feelings, including those of grief and loss.

Validation

In my worldview, Validating is an important resource. To validate another's experience means to accept that for them it is real. We can offer empathy to our children for their grief.

Affirmation

Affirmations are positive statements that reinforce feelings about grief ... "I'm sure if that were me, I'd feel (insert feelings here)."

Ritual

Rituals are really lacking in today's world. Children derive feelings of security and safety from them. Developing family rituals and traditions are great ways to build family strength and increase parent/child bonds.

Measuring Success-Journaling

As children learn to process, a Journal can be an effective means of helping them not only recognize their feelings and successes, but allow them to look back over time and see how much progress they've made.

.....*Deborah Anderson, birthmother, bio mother and adoptive mother to many*

Grieving Children: How Can Parents Help?

In considering our children's new life with us, intellectually, we understand that our children may not have that same sense of joy that we do about being adopted, especially during the first weeks and months. Practically, though, do we allow and even create enough opportunities for adopted children to grieve their losses and their past?

In *Helping Children Grieve and Grow*, Donna O'Toole and Jerre Cory write, "Especially for children, a loss may be based on safety, comfort, and familiarity, rather than on what adults speak of as love or affection." Additionally, O'Toole and Cory write, "When children feel overwhelmed by intense feelings they may naturally make their world safe by distancing themselves physically or emotionally, by pretending or by denying the reality of the loss."

Nine-year-old Hannah, adopted at age six, said, "*The hardest part of grieving is learning to say good-bye. We have to say good-by to things that are in our hearts but sometimes these things in our hearts gave us bad habits.. habits that we can't let go of easily.*" As adoptive parents, we must not overlook our children's grief because it is not easily seen or noticed. We need to listen, watch, discuss, and comfort, even when the grief is not easy to identify. Our children have left familiar surroundings... people they know... school... food... language... routines. Attending to their grief is a critical element to integrating them into our family.

Dr. Victor Groza, an Associate Professor and the Interim Associate Dean for Research and Training at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, and author of *A Peacock or a Crow? Stories, Interview and Commentaries on Romanian Adoptions*, suggests that prospective

adoptive parents should read about the abandonment, separation, grief, loss and mourning of adoptees, that is evident throughout the life cycle.

When helping your child, newly home or home for years, here are some tips for helping them to acknowledge, accept, and grow from their grief:

- Talk about your own and other people's losses and grief.
- Read books to your child about loss and grief and show how others have lived through their losses.
- Suggest that your child keep a journal where she or he writes or draws about feelings.
- Find ways for your child to commemorate their past: light candles, create a special section in their life book, frame a particular drawing pertaining to their memories.
- Help your child to find positive ways to express their feelings: physical activities, praying, crying.
- Help your child learn to cry. Many of our children have been taught not to cry. Help them understand how healing crying is. Let them see you cry.
- Share a therapeutic story with your child, a story about grief that can be adapted to fit a variety of scenarios relating to grief and loss in children. (See *The Sad Rabbit* on the next page).

For many children impacted by issues of grief and loss, parent interventions like discussion, activities, and stories, will eventually ameliorate the issues of grief and loss. But, some children may need additional help from a therapist or grief-counselor.

Many of us are taught that grief, sadness, and loss are negative emotions, to be hidden away. In fact, grief is a process that brings us to reconciliation. Our pain doesn't disappear. The issue we're facing isn't gone. But, through discussion, tears, and sometimes prayer, we can grow, change, and become stronger.

The book *Healing and Growing through Grief* presents grief as a journey towards growth. As the loss is remembered and integrated into the present there is once again energy to invest into the present and the future. This is more than survival. Personal strengths, insights and compassion have been gained. A future can once again be imagined and new relationships and opportunities can be explored and experienced. Grief, in some way, will touch all adoptive families. Accept it, learn from it, and grow from it.

--Susan Ward is the founder of *Heritage Communications*, a writer/lecturer, an adoptive mother, and also runs *Older Child Adoption*, a site with many resources for adoptive parents. Her website is www.olderchildadoption.com

THE SAD RABBIT

A therapeutic story presenting the idea that children can express their grief through one or more actions or activities that represent their loss.

"Shaggy, the brown and white bunny sat ... and sat ... and sat. He didn't do anything. He didn't eat. He didn't play. He didn't think. He didn't cry. He just sat. Shaggy's grandmother had died last week.

Friends came by Shaggy's house. They asked him to come out and play. He said "no". They asked if he wanted to go for a walk. He said "no".

After several weeks of feeling a big hole inside him, he decided he needed to talk to someone. Someone who would help him feel better.

One person told him to be active, to play, to get outside, to stay busy. So, he spent a week running, and hopping, and playing, and running, and hopping, and playing. He still felt the same ... like he had a big hole inside him.

Another person told him to not think about it, not to be sad. So he spent weeks pushing the memories and thoughts of his grandma out of his mind. Every time he started to think of something nice or funny his grandma had done or said, he squashed that thought away. But, it didn't help. He still felt like he had a big hole inside him.

Another person told him to wait and the sad, bad feelings would go away. He thought to himself. I've been waiting. My grandma died weeks ago, and I still feel like I have a big hole inside me.

One morning he woke up and said, "I know who will help! I need to talk to Mrs. Owl." He hopped out of bed, hopped out the door, hopped down the path, hopped along the river, hopped through the woods, and came to Mrs. Owl's house. She was SO glad to see him!

Just as he had guessed, Mrs. Owl knew exactly what Shaggy needed. First, she told him that that big hole inside him was normal. That everyone who has someone die, or move away, or who has a person go away from their life feels that big hole. Some people can't eat. Some people cry a lot. Some people feel lonely. Some people can't sit still. Some people are grumpy. She explained that everybody's sad is different. And, that's ok. "There are three things you need to do," she told him, "to feel better inside."

She sent him off to visit Mr. Turtle. Mr. Turtle was very pleased to see him. Mr. Turtle sat down with Shaggy and explained that one thing he needed to do was to tell his grandma that he was mad that she had died. "How can I do that?!" Shaggy yelled. She's gone! She's dead!" Mr. Turtle said, "Yes, that's true. But still, you need to say that you're mad."

All of a sudden, Shaggy's eyes got big, his chest puffed out, and he yelled, "WHY DID YOU DIE, GRANDMA?! WHY DID YOU LEAVE ME?! I'M SO MAD AT YOU! I MISS YOU!!" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he began to cry. Softly at first, then loudly, he cried big tears, and more tears, and even more tears. Mr. Turtle just sat quietly and patted his head. After a long time, Shaggy looked up and said, "I think I ... Maybe I feel ... Why do I feel ... a little bit better?" Mr. Turtle said, "Sharing your inside feelings help you feel better. And, crying helps you feel better, too."

Then, Mr. Turtle sent Shaggy off to visit Miss Robin.

Miss Robin was very pleased to see Shaggy. Miss Robin sat down with Shaggy and explained that one thing he needed to do was to tell his grandma what he missed about her. "How can I do that? She's gone. She's dead." Miss Robin said, "Yes, that's true. But still, you need to share all the things that you miss about her.

Shaggy curled into a little ball. His eyes almost closed. He whispered, "Grandma, I miss your cookies. You made the best cookies in the world. And, Grandma, I miss your voice. Your funny voice when you read silly stories to me. And, Grandma, I miss being in your garden with you. You had such pretty flowers and you used to tell me all the flower names..." After he stopped talking, he got very quiet. Then he began to cry. Softly at first then loudly, he cried big tears, and more tears, and even more tears. Miss Robin just sat quietly and patted his head. After a long time, Shaggy looked up and said, "I think I... Maybe I feel... Why do I feel... a little bit

better?" Miss Robin said, "Sharing your inside feelings help you feel better. Remembering why the one you love was special helps. And, crying helps you feel better, too."

Then, Miss Robin sent Shaggy to visit Mr. Bear. Mr. Bear was very pleased to see Shaggy. Mr. Bear sat down with Shaggy and explained that one thing he needed to do was to build or draw or make or plant something that would help him remember his grandma for a long time. "But what can I do," said Shaggy, "I'm just a little rabbit?" Mr. Bear said, "Well, let's think about it... What could you do so that every time you look at it, you will think of your grandma, and smile...?"

Shaggy thought and thought. I could draw a picture or I could make something with clay or I could write a poem... I know! I'll plant some flowers! The kind Grandma liked! I can plant them, and water them, and look at them, and smell them... and it will make me smile because I will think of my grandma!" He got a big smile on his face, then the smile faded, then he looked sad then he cried. Mr. Bear just sat quietly and patted his head. After a long time, Shaggy looked up and said, "I think I... Maybe I feel... Why do I feel... a little bit better?" Mr. Bear said, "Sharing your inside feelings can help you feel better. Think of ways to remember people who aren't in our lives any more helps. And, crying helps you feel better."

Slowly Shaggy got up. He stretched. He said, "I feel soooo tired... and maybe I feel a little tiny bit better."

As Shaggy walked home, he thought about the three things he had done. He had told his grandma he was mad at her for dying. And he had cried. He had shared what he had missed about her. And he had cried. He had thought of a way to remember his grandma in a nice, long-time way. And he had cried.

He did feel a little tiny bit better.

When he got home and told his mom and dad about his idea for making a garden to help remember his grandma, they agreed that it was a wonderful idea! Over the next few weeks, Shaggy picked out seeds and planted them. He watered them He pulled out weeds. And, soon, he had a beautiful garden. It wasn't exactly like his grandma's garden, but every time he looked at it, or pulled out weeds, or cut pretty flowers to put into a vase, he thought of his grandma, and he smiled. The nice memories of his grandma were with him every day. He still missed his grandma, but he felt a tiny bit better inside.

.....***By Susan Ward***

ADOPTING AN OLDER SIBLING GROUP

Joys, Challenges and Issues

By Cathy and Chas Long

My husband and I have six biological children. We love parenting, and had talked of adopting older children someday, as the older children generally get overlooked when people are considering adopting a child.

We turned to international adoption and adopted a sibling group of four from Russia, which consisted of one boy and three girls. We also adopted a girl from another orphanage at the same time, and three years later we adopted another daughter. Some of what we have written about are the behaviors these children had to learn in order to survive.

Our children were ten years old, eleven years old, thirteen years old, almost fourteen years old and almost fifteen years old when we adopted them. Today, we have two fourteen year old daughters, a fifteen year old daughter, a seventeen year old daughter, an eighteen year old son and a nineteen year old daughter. Not all of their behaviors were due to their early upbringing or orphanage life; some of it was normal, run-of-the-mill teenage angst. My children are like most teenagers. They worry about their skin, their weight, being physically fit, their grades, and being pretty. They are interested in members of the opposite sex, and a wide variety of music. They throw fits and slam doors. They criticize each other and nit-pick each other unmercifully. In essence, they are just normal teenagers that happen to talk with a lovely accent and an interesting turn of phrase. They are our children, stinky feet, pimples, dimples, and all.

Our 3 Greatest Challenges

Combating Their Fear and Lack of Trust. Our children still have horrible nightmares about their 'papa' in Russia and will wake up afraid that he will come back to steal them. They are ever watchful. When they first came to America, the girls would all stand behind their brother and peek around him, to look at us or at a stranger. They were uncomfortable when someone just dropped by without calling. We always told them when we knew we would be having company, who the company was going to be, the purpose for their visit, and how long they would stay. They did not like us leaving the house without them. The children wanted to go with us, and when we got to our destination, they immediately wanted to know when we were going home. It took a long time, but they did learn the routine of our lives. Their fears become less evident the longer they are with us, because they feel more secure about their environment and our commitment.

When we got upset with them, they reacted as if we hated them and would be mad at them forever. They had to be reassured a lot, and we still give our sons and daughters hugs and tell them we love them. The children were never allowed to hug anyone in the orphanage.

Teaching Effective Listening and Communicating Skills. The children are easily distracted so we have to keep them focused on a conversation. They just were not used to adults actually talking to them. We sit around our dining table and talk after most meals. Some of the children will stay and ask questions, while some will leave the table in favor of finishing homework, or watching a favorite program on TV. Usually, when one of the children says, "I have a question", the other children will stay to hear the question and listen to the answer. Sometimes we have some very long, in-depth conversations about bodily functions, two-faced people, or why there are different cultures and different traditions in the family.

Communication is vitally important to everyone's growth, development, and understanding. They have needed to learn to talk to other people. The children were never taught manners and had to learn acceptable social behaviors. We have one daughter that simply does not apologize. If she

accidentally runs into one of the others, her attitude is, "Well they shouldn't have been in my way". If I ask her to say "thank you" when someone does something nice for her, she will tell me, "I didn't ask them to do that nice thing, so why do I have to thank them?" Those conversations are long.

Irrational Love/Hate for Old Relationships. The children have mixed feelings about their biological parents. On one level, the children love their birthmother, and on another level they feel sorry for her. Another child will talk about how much he or she hates her. The best thing we can do is to listen to them talk. We encourage them to try to see their mother as an individual, not just as their mother, so they can understand the problems she was dealing with. The children's parents drank heavily and would leave the children along [sic] for long periods of time. When their parents were home and drinking, they would fight with knives and hurt each other and the children. We have tried to help our children see that this was perhaps the only way their birthparents could cope with life. Their parents had almost no education, and could not read or write. We talk about how important a good education is, as it brings understanding and knowledge on a personal, as well as academic, level. Our son, Matt, still says he hates his mom because she did not love them enough to do the right thing. When asked "what was the right thing she was supposed to do", all he could answer was, "She was supposed to love us and care for her family like a good mom; not be a drunk – or worse".

Their mother passed away a year and a half ago and it is tragic. All four of our children grieved, but in different ways. Emily, the oldest, cried a lot, and talked about all of the wonderful and loving things she remembered about her mom. Matt just said, "She lived like a drunk and she died like a drunk!" Harsh words for sure, but he has always blamed his mother for his being sent to an orphanage; oddly, he never blames his father. Chloe cried and rocked. She talked about wishing that her mother could have loved her, and then said, "Now I guess I will never know."

Our children have two older sisters. The oldest is six years older than Emily, and was not very nice or loving. The children have another sister who is a year and a half older than Emily, who lived in the same orphanage. They were very close to her. We learned about this older girl just before we came to Russia to adopt the children. We were told that we could not adopt her as she was over sixteen years old and that she resided in a hospital for very ill patients with tuberculosis. We didn't learn until months later that we were lied to. Emily misses Ula the most; she writes to her sister and talks with her on the phone. She wants Ula to come and live in the United States, but Ula is afraid to leave Russia.

The Three Biggest Issues for Our Children

Learning Expected Social Behaviors. The children had to fend for themselves when they were not much more than toddlers. They had to scrounge through their neighbors' trash for their food, or raid a local garden. In the orphanage, life was also survival by their wits.

They had to eat their food very fast or the older, stronger kids would take their food away from them. They learned to hoard their food in case one of the caregivers became angry at them and deprived them of their meals. They had to be sneaky and secretive in order to survive; the children have the ability to look you in the eye and lie through their teeth. We had to teach the children social skills slowly. Once one skill was mastered, we moved on to the next.

We had to teach the children table manners first. We started by passing bowls of food around the table. The curious thing was that although the children would readily pass the food, they never took so much as a spoon full for themselves. We realized that the children we [sic] taught not to touch the food, but wait to be served. Also, they were unsure how much food they should serve themselves, never having done that before. The children were home two years before they would take what they needed! They are all very bright and quickly learned the correct way to use their

utensils and their napkins. It took a while for them to learn that it really was alright to drink their beverage during the meal instead of waiting until the meal was over.

Next we taught them to use polite words for what they wanted or needed. Words like “please pass the potatoes”, followed by “thank you”. They learned so fast. We had to work on being respectful and not talking loudly over everyone else. Also, if someone asked them a question that they either did not understand, or just refused to answer, they would avoid eye contact and act as though the other person had not spoken at all. If they felt they were being criticized, they would many times stare straight ahead and freeze their movements. It took a lot of talking, but the wall slowly came down. We learned that they froze up in the orphanage because the caregivers so often beat them or demeaned them that the only way to survive was to close in on themselves.

We had to teach the children that running across the couch, loveseat, and recliners, was potentially dangerous! I finally figured out that was how they secured their spot for television viewing for the evening. They had to learn to go into the living room and gently sit down in their preferred seat. When we went out in public I had to teach them how to cross the street. They were not used to so much traffic and simply would not look in either direction. We spent time every day for the first four months at our local library. We would only stay for about ten minutes before the children felt insecure and wanted to go home. This did not change until the children had been home for almost a year. By then we were use to staying thirty minutes. We used the same routine with grocery shopping, where they also had to learn not to pick up or try to unwrap any item. Again, they learned quickly.

Living in One Culture After Growing Up in Another Culture. Their Russian holidays were different from ours, as were their traditions. Our children don't remember much celebrating before they went into the orphanage. They came to know about the holidays and some of their traditions through different caregivers, but never celebrated their holidays in the orphanage. Christmas was not observed, but they did get a piece of candy on New Years day. They knew about Mother's day, but it was not observed. Many celebrations were all toasted with vodka, much drinking and singing or dancing.

The children had never celebrated their birthdays or even knew of anyone who celebrated the day of their birth. They had never seen fireworks before, and were utterly fascinated with the Fourth of July. Halloween was really confusing for them, but the children had a lot of fun dressing up in homemade costumes and going trick or treating. Thanksgiving was overwhelming because of the amount of food that was put on the table. Their first Christmas with us, was also the first Christmas they had ever celebrated and they got to learn about why this was such a special time for us. They loved to sing the old carols. In Russia they did color Easter eggs, but only used red onion to dye the eggs. They were gleeful participants in their first Easter egg hunt!

Understanding the Concept of Family. The children did not understand what family meant, except that they were brother and sisters. 'Mom and dad' were adults that would go away for weeks at a time and leave them with no food, water, or heat in the winter. When the parents did eventually come home they would get drunk and fight with knives. Our children have been with us over four years now and every once in a while they will say something like, “we have been here four years and you have not beaten us yet.” Or, “we are waiting for you to get drunk and leave us.” Slowly they have learned that this is who we are: we work to pay the bills and take care of our children. We are active in their educations, their sports, and their interests. We spend long hours talking to them and answering their zillions of questions. We love them and give hugs good night. Our son Matthew is a senior in high school this year. When we went to College Night, he would not look at any college that was more than an hour away. He said, “That is too far from my home”.

Our Three Greatest Joys

Witnessing Their Love of Being Educated. The children have learned so much and it seems that the more they know, the more they want to know. Their teachers are so surprised at how respectful they are to their educators. The children will sit [sic] and watch the history channel with dad and ask a lot of questions, then watch the science fiction channel and want to know about fictional characters. We've read to them from the very start and they always listened in earnest. They are so curious about their whole world!

Listening to their never-ending questions and answering their questions has been a gift. It's like looking at the world again, but this time through different eyes. As we explained and answered their many questions, the children would ask more or different questions. We learned a lot about ourselves as we explained our thoughts, beliefs, and how the world worked. Our older children were charmed by their new siblings and greatly fascinated by their perspective.

Simply enjoying each unique individual and watching them grow. We have been given a unique opportunity to get to know these incredibly resilient children. They were all physically delayed due to poor nutrition, and emotionally undeveloped. We have watched immature kids grow into intelligent, self-possessed young adults. It has been a joy to witness their personalities bloom and their individuality come forth. Their journey has proved what a strong, intelligent group of young people we have added to our family.

--Cathy and Chase Long are bio parents to six children, and adoptive parents to six children from Russia, four of whom are bio sibs and the fifth was in the same orphanage.

Common Issues of Older Children Adoption

Lying. Growing up in an orphanage with hundreds of other children, our children had to be very resourceful in getting what they felt they needed in order to survive. They all came home with the ability to lie in the most convincing way! They lied, because to tell the truth was to be vulnerable, causing them to get beaten by the caregivers in Russia. Learning to tell us the truth was a gradual process, as they had to learn to trust us and trust that we were not going to hurt them in any way.

Hoarding. Hoarding may be a life-long issue for the children. Most of the time, they did not have enough to eat in the orphanage and were hungry. I always kept fresh fruit on the table when they came home, along with nuts, granola bars, crackers, and peanut butter. Plus, we raised a large garden and they could pick, clean, and eat food whenever they wanted it. After they had been here a few months we learned that they also used to sneak and eat the cat food. They found it to be quite tasty and could not figure out why I didn't pour them some in bowls like I did for the cat. Because of being hungry for so long, they would take extra food and stash it somewhere in their room; mostly under their pillows or under the covers at the foot of their bed.

The hoarding did not stop with food. When I bought school supplies, they hoarded mechanical pencils, erasers, folders with cute pictures on them, and markers. I still keep the school supplies in a cabinet where they have free access to it all. The only rule is to tell me what they took, so if we run low I can purchase more. They keep their clothes... all of them. We have just in the last year been able to get them to let us have their out-grown clothes to replace with new items. They tell me they are saving the clothes to give to their children some day.

Discipline. We found early on that when you discipline the children, you don't spank them. They were beaten at their orphanage by mean caregivers. You also don't take away something they

value because they were used to having things taken or stolen from them at the orphanage. Taking the girls makeup or CD Players away, then telling them they have to earn the right to get their things back, is a lot different than just removing their favorite possessions.

When our children get in trouble they have to do extra chores. In the beginning we would tell them what chore they had to complete as punishment. The chore may be pulling weeds in six rows of beans in the garden or scrubbing the front porch with a small bucket of hot soapy water and using an old tooth brush. Or they were given the task to take a pitch fork and turn the compost pile out by the garden. None of these are pleasant chores, but the children get the added bonus of spending time with one of us while they work. They get attention from mom or dad, and at the same time are being taught the value of tempering their actions.

We made up a list of acceptable behaviors and posted them in my work room, as they spend a lot of time talking to me, individually and as a group, while I'm working. My work room is not a public room in our house so they don't get embarrassed by visitors being able to see our list. We also made another list of all of the chores they could do for unacceptable behaviors. They get to pick a chore on the list, which gives them a certain amount of control over the situation.

Mothering By Older Sib. Emily felt that since she was the oldest then she had to mother her younger siblings and keep them in line. She was so afraid that if she didn't make them behave, that they would all be sent back to the orphanage. We had to sit her down and tell her that this was her time to be a teenager, not 'the mother' or even the 'caregiver'. Over time she let go of the role of authority figure. We had to have many conversations with her about letting herself enjoy life now, before she has the responsibility of her own family.

.....*By Cathy and Chas Long*

Older Child Adoption *Transitioning from Primary School*

By Julia Rollings

Middle School and High School Bring Big Changes

The transition to upper levels of school are tough on any youngster, but for adopted children it can be very difficult. No longer is there one teacher who is (hopefully) familiar with the child's history and knows them personally.

The child has to cope with a lot of change: new school, new students, a whole range of unknown teachers, changing classrooms for each class, rather than having a classroom and desk of their own, and a whole load of novel demands such as managing a timetable and study program. Add to this the personal challenges occurring at this time in their lives, as they hit puberty and have to cope with a rapidly changing and unfamiliar body, and complicated new social expectations. Moving to middle or high school can be exciting but it is tough on adolescents.

High school is especially tough on parents. It can come as a real surprise how quickly a child seems to grow up after starting high school. Suddenly their child's social life seems centered around friends rather than family, and peers become a huge influence. It is hard not to feel that you've lost some of your influence as you see the first glimmer of adulthood behind your adolescent's eyes.

My first experience of cutting the apron strings came with seeing my youngsters off on their first day of primary school, but the move to high school felt more like a gentle farewell to childhood. Goodbye hugs were given at home to avoid any embarrassment in front of friends, and there was no question of following them to the classroom to see how they'd cope!

Some of my adopted children have needed a formal support structure, but others haven't and would have resented the intrusion. It is up to parents to foresee which child might drown without help, and for those children it is important to put support in before they start to flounder. My son Sadan's transition to high school involved some planned steps. Sadan was aged around five on adoption, and mute from the day he was abandoned until a few weeks after joining our family (something we were unaware of until his older brother, Madhu, aged around 10, had sufficient English to explain why his brother didn't speak). Sadan's trauma was deeply internalized and hard to access. Abandonment had, I believe, permanently wounded his psyche. His schooling required us to meet a whole different set of challenges to those of his brother-and Madhu's were grave, given many missed years of education.

We took Sadan to all the open days and nights at his new high school so he could learn the layout of the buildings and start recognizing a few of the teachers. His primary school also arranged for him to visit the school for a day and to take along one friend from primary school with him. We spoke about his new high school whenever we drove past it, and involved him in selecting his school clothes. Finally, with Sadan's permission, I made an appointment to meet his principal, school counselor, year coordinator, and a teacher before the school year began. I explained in detail Sadan's early deprivation, his insecurities, his ability to mask a lack of understanding, and his vulnerabilities. His success or lack of success, at school could depend on the crowd he fell in with, as we believe he would be easily led astray. The high school identified a boy, Simon, who was willing to act as a mentor for Sadan in the first week, and this helped Sadan considerably. On the first day of school Sadan asked me to come in with him but once inside the school he spotted Simon and was happy to go off with him to the school assembly.

Suggestions That Might Help the Middle/High School Transition:

Minimize Challenges. One of Sadan's biggest fears was traveling to and from school on a bus. It took a few weeks of negotiations with the local bus company for us to succeed in having a minor route change that allowed Sadan to catch one bus from near our home to his school rather than have to change buses at the terminal. This made a huge difference in his confidence. There was no worry about what to do if his bus didn't arrive, as he was either still at school or still near home, so help was at hand.

Make it Clear that This is not the Only Option. We chose the school we thought would suit Sadan, but we made it very clear to him that he could change if it didn't work out. We told him he needed to give it a fair go, but if after some time he was still unhappy we would look with him for another school.

Think laterally about your child's talents. A few of us might adopt a budding Charles Dickens or Greg Louganis (both adoptees) but don't count on it. More likely we will parent children who struggle in the classroom and whose early deprivation leaves them with lifelong challenges. School is the center of a child's world, the place they negotiate friendships and sort out social groupings. School can offer opportunities to the athletic, artistic, dramatic, or empathetic child, and this may be the area where you can build your child's self-esteem when the academic side of school doesn't come easy. Whether the academic side of schooling is a challenge or not, all children will have a few areas where they shine. Sadan still couldn't read in fourth grade, but he was king of the monkey-bars at lunchtime. His palms were always calloused but his self-esteem grew. He would come home from school and tell me what new feat he'd learned on the playground that day. We enrolled him in gymnastics classes for older boys.

Choose the Right Clothes and Accessories. With a large family on one income I buy things that are bargains rather than trendy brands of styles. This works fine with the younger children, but with older children it matters what they are wearing. I still don't spend a lot of money but I made sure Sadan came with me and had a choice of style when I bought his things for high school. It would do him no favors if his hair cut, sneakers or school bag was a source of teasing at school.

Academic Success is not Critical. Some of our children will be permanently impaired by their early deprivation, so for some older children the aim should be functional literacy and numeracy, and decent social skills. Make sure your child doesn't feel that their worth is dependent on their ability to get top marks. I've demonstrated this to all my children by reading their school reports with them and always reading the 'teacher's comments' section first. I've told them I'd much rather read that they are trying their best and are considerate of other people than see how many As and Bs they received. Their effort matters more than the results.

Postscript. Sadan moved to his new high school at the start of our school year in January and he has just completed his first year. He is in a small special education class for some lessons and joins a larger class for less academically challenging lessons such as P.E. and cooking. The structure and spirit of his small school means that the adolescents receiving special education support are not teased, and his friendships extend throughout the school. On the final evening of school before our Christmas break we received a letter inviting us to the presentation evening. Sadan was one of only three students in his class, and the only student receiving special education support, to be given an annual award: an engraved trophy for 'Academic Excellence'. He loves high school.

DELAYING SCHOOL ENTRY

For an older adopted child

Advice now given to Australian families adopting older children from overseas is to delay school entry in order to give the child time to settle into the family. I can now recognize my son Madhu's (aged ten on adoption) eagerness to attend school as being rooted in his early deprivation. He'd asked his Indian father if he could go to school but was told "School is for rich children. Poor children work." This explained in part his desire to go to school, just as his years of being barefooted explained his particular affinity for shoes.

I also now recognize that starting school a few weeks after joining our family allowed Madhu to maintain an emotional and physical distance from us. It relieved him of much of the daily challenge of negotiating emotional relationships. This didn't cause us long-term difficulties, but if Madhu had been a different child it may well have negatively impacted his attachment. It was a time when he was grieving and going through monumental adjustments, I realize now that several more months at home would not have damaged his education. I kept my other older adopted children home for an extended time. This has meant they are generally a year or more older than their classmates it has not caused anyone any difficulties.

I believed an extra year under their belts might help counter the imbalance created by their difficult experiences, lack of English, and lack of familiarity with Australian culture. They needed a little extra time to understand some of the basic building blocks most children acquire early in life.

..... *By Julia Rollings*

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OLDER CHILD ADOPTION RESOURCES

The Waiting Child:

How the Faith and Love of One Orphan Saved the Life of Another

By Cindy Champnella

Our Own: Adopting and Parenting the Older Child

By Trish Maskew

Parenting the Hurt Child

By Gregory Keck, PhD and Regina M. Kupecky, LSW

Toddler Adoption: The Weaver's Craft

By Mary Hopkins-Best

Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents

By Deborah Gray

Real Parents, Real Children

By Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb

Help for the Hopeless Child: A Guide for Families (Second Edition)

By Ronald S. Federici, PhD

Susan Ward's Older Child Adoption website:

www.olderchildadoption.com