

5 Tips to Help Adoptive Families Have Fun This Summer

By Arleta James

Nothing facilitates attachment between family members like laughing, joking, teasing and playing with one another. Yet, in families in which there is an adopted child with a history of trauma, giggles and chuckles don't always come easily. This is disappointing to parents who want to provide their children a fun childhood full of rich experiences, and the typically-developing children who expected that their new sibling would be a playmate.



A trip to the zoo, a vacation to Florida, going next door to play with the neighbors, family game night, birthday parties and holidays are all events that can present challenges when a family includes a child with mental health issues. Often, the adoptee struggles to handle such situations. The child with a history of trauma views himself as “bad.” He thinks, “I don’t deserve fun and special presents.” He may enjoy the company of his family during outings. Subsequently, the family becomes the brunt of poor behavior since he is scared of connecting and feels he must go into rejection mode. Family fun may trigger the lack of pleasure in his birth family or his few good memories of his birth family or orphanage mates. His grief surfaces. Unable to express his emotions, the feelings are manifested through negative behaviors.

In response to the adoptee's reaction to fun, families often scale down or cease having fun. Instead, let's look at some options to enhance the outcomes of family fun times.

Practice Can Be Helpful

Traumatized children may need you to practice—review—what will be happening at the upcoming birthday party, bar-b-q or other special event. How many kids and adults are coming? What games will be played? What will the food be like? How long will the party be? If gifts are involved, who will get the gifts? How will this make the child feel if the gifts are not for her or him? Children given an idea of what to expect, can often make it through an event on a more even keel. Draw out the event—picture by picture—like a cartoon strip (Gray, 2007), or review your family photos of fun events. Remember, traumatized children need visual as well as verbal explanations.

Parenting at the Social and Emotional Age

Parenting at the child's actual social and emotional age—instead of their chronological age—is another consideration. What would you expect of a 3-, 4- or 5-year-old at a museum? In Disney World? At holiday gatherings? If your 13-year-old is really socially and emotionally 4, expect that he may become overwhelmed when there is a flurry of activity. Expect the child with Sensory Dysfunction Disorder to become over-stimulated at sporting events. Build in breaks just as you would with a younger child. One parent may have to sit on a bench with the adoptee, while the other family members move on to the lion and tiger display. Have an ice cream while you are resting—this isn't a punishment. Later, you can meet back up at the rain forest and proceed on your way.

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

Set the Timer

Patty and Rich, ages 7 and 8, are a birth child and a child who is adopted. They were able to play well for only about fifteen minutes. After that, shouting, bickering and a cry of “Mom, he won’t play fair!” ruin the fun.

Joyce, their mom, eventually decided to set a timer for fifteen minutes. At that point, she would casually call one of the children to the kitchen to help her “for a minute” or she would arrive in the play area with a candy kiss. She provided enough of an interruption to offset the argument that was certain to occur imminently. Patty and Rich continued playing for another fifteen minutes. By that time, dinner was ready.

Joyce gives us a nice way to promote a positive ending to a situation that could easily conclude in an ugly manner. Families can also use this idea when the family sits down to play a card or board game. Announce at the start, “I have fifteen minutes; let’s play Trouble.” When time is up, the parent concludes, “Wow! That was fun! I have to go do the laundry.” This style of play also offsets having a winner and a loser. You are playing for fifteen or twenty minutes rather than until the game is over. Traumatized children may be “poor losers.” So, playing for fun, instead of playing until there is a winner, can end a game on a positive note. Isn’t this the way it’s supposed to be anyway?

No Batteries Needed

Family fun may also mean re-thinking electronic devices. Computer games, hand held video games, game systems and television promote interacting with machines. If you want to improve relationships in your family and help your adopted son or daughter participate in family outings, then you actually need to interact! Certainly, there are times when a hand held video game makes a long trip in the car more pleasant, or gives a parent at the end of her rope a break. In these situations, do what is necessary. On a regular basis, however, turn off the television and put away the game system. Everyone will benefit!

This suggestion regarding restoring family fun requires re-thinking family fun a bit. Children whose social skills have been interrupted by their trauma are “little”—little children only play for short bits of time. So, until the adoptee is able to play for a longer period of time, family game night may consist of one short game. Or family fun may require returning to a “no batteries needed” approach. A few minutes of collecting lightening bugs or blowing bubbles, or playing hide and seek, musical chairs, ring-around-the-rosie or other such “old-fashioned” games keeps fun shorter and less complicated. These types of activities are great for the child who has problems with attention, impulsivity, planning and decision-making.

Stop reading for a few minutes and think about this. What short activities can you think of that your whole family might like? What did you play as a child that was enjoyable? Which of these activities can you incorporate for a few minutes, a couple of days per week, to increase the level of fun in your family?

Parents are In Charge of Family Fun

Frequently, the child with difficulties winds up in charge of the family fun (Keck and Kupecky, 2002.) It goes like this. The parent says to the adopted son or daughter (or to any of their children), “If you are good all week, Saturday we’ll go to the mall.” Faithfully, by Friday evening some rule violation has occurred and the trip to the mall is taken away. Or, because punitive consequences have piled up all week, the family decides to stay home so Billy can wash the kitchen floor, rake the leaves, vacuum and carry out all kinds of other chores. The troubled child has determined the family’s weekend plans.

Who does this benefit? A now angry family is stuck at home together. Or, the typical kids go off to their friends’ homes. The family is separated. If you want to go to the county fair on Saturday then go! Chores can wait. “Good” isn’t likely going to happen for a long time. “Good” won’t happen if parents and brothers and sisters are always angry with their sibling. Fun is the best way to navigate new relationships.

In conclusion, when asked, "What type of parent do you want to be?" most moms and dads list "fun" as part of their answer. What are you waiting for? Go and be merry! You are allowed to be the parent you want to be rather than the parent you think you have to be.

3 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)