

Caring for Your Adoptee: A Baker's Dozen of Articles

By Arleta James, PCC

Adoptive families and professionals are at a wonderful advantage in today's information age. Articles, books, websites, on-online education classes, etc. abound. However, the fast pace of life can often make it difficult to sift through the Internet, library, catalogs, etc. to find just the right book, movie, article or website. So, occasionally I take the time to locate resources for newly formed and experienced adoptive families and professionals connected with adoptive families. You can spend more time being a mom, a dad, or a social worker!



Mental Health

Adoptees often arrive after suffering traumatic experiences. Abuse, neglect, institutionalization, abandonment, pre-natal drug exposure, etc., colors the adoptee's perception of adults, leaves him or her with developmental delays and an array of behavioral difficulties. Many times mental health services are necessary to alleviate such issues. [Do We Need a Therapist: How to Decide and How to Find One](#) offers advice for determining when to seek help and how to find an adoption-competent professional to guide the family down the path of healthy relationships. Even if the therapist familiar with adoption issues is a drive, it is likely worth the extra time. This is the professional that understands that the adoptive family didn't cause the child's problems. Rather, the adoptive family is the healing resource.

The adoption-competent therapist is experienced in alleviating the type of conflict and anger that occurs in adoptive families when a child with a history of complex history joins the family. A child who has experienced trauma alters the emotional climate of the home on a frequent or a long-term basis. *Negative behaviors are the main way in which these children communicate.* There are several reasons for this.

- The child who has been beaten, raped, abandoned, institutionalized, separated from siblings and/or moved from foster home to foster home has internalized intense feelings as a result of these traumas. Inside, she feels rage, sorrow, hopelessness, helplessness, profound sadness, frustration, loneliness and lost. Who wouldn't?

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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)

- Adoptees' traumatic experiences often occur when they have little or no language development. Their traumas are also so extensive that it is difficult for them to find words to describe their sufferings. Overall, there is an inability to verbalize the events and the emotions.
- Their world is riddled with cognitive dissonance. They look around and feel out-of-sync. For example, the international adoptee arrives at the airport. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings are holding signs and balloons. They are excited, smiling and crying tears of joy. The adoptee, on the other hand, is scared, sad and lonely. He is thinking; "Where am I? Who are these people? They don't smell or sound familiar. What happened to all of the other babies I was living with? What is this place called home?" His experience does not match with those around him. The adoptee is in a situation that is inconsistent with his thoughts and emotions. Yet, he is not sure how to convey these feelings, because those around him are not demonstrating that they understand his perspective.

If your family is suffering from such a negative emotional environment [Inducement: Adoption Language we Must Understand](#) describes this phenomenon in detail.

Once in mental health services, medication is frequently suggested as a means to help alleviate such problems as depression, anxiety, impulsivity, focus and attention difficulties, and so on. Placing a child on medication is a big decision for parents.

Medication: Should I Medicate my Son or Daughter?

Fortunately, the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#) understands this and offers a three-part series to help decide if medication is a means to enhance the adoptee's ability to function across all environments: Psychiatric Medication for Children and Adolescents: [Part I – How Medications are Used](#), [Part II – Types of Medications](#) and [Part III – Questions to Ask](#).

Talking to Adoptees about Their Pre-Adoptive History

Are you struggling to decide what to tell your adopted son or daughter about his or her pre-adoptive history? Consider [Affirming the Hurt Adoptee's Reality](#) by [Gregory C. Keck](#) and the [Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons](#) by the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#). These articles make clear the grief and loss with which adoptees struggle. The articles make a compelling case for telling the child the truth, even if painful. Children who are not provided opportunities to grieve are at risk for:

- Decreased social, emotional and cognitive developmental growth
- Regression to earlier stages of development for an extended period of time
- Inability to concentrate—impaired academic progress
- Physical difficulties—fatigue, stomach aches, appetite changes, headaches, low energy, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Withdrawal from friends or extra curricula activities.

Child Development

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Again, trauma interrupts development. No matter how young the adoptee arrived, it is important to avoid the myths, “He or she will catch up” or “He or she will grow out of it.” Rather, subscribe to “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” The child who arrives as an infant, toddler, grade schooler or adolescent has missed many opportunities essential to achieve “normal” developmental tasks. Your adoptee will likely be “younger” than her chronological age.

Educate yourself to child development so you can recognize the types of developmental repair essential to the well-being of your adopted child. Read [The Power of Play: Learning through Play from Birth to Age Three](#) and [Getting in Tune: The Powerful Influence of Music on Young Children’s Development](#). These eye-opening articles make clear the importance of creating opportunities to interact with your child in creative and melodic activities.

Transcultural/Transcultural Adoption

Have you facilitated your child’s cultural development today? If not, take some time to incorporate the suggestions in [Transracial Adoption: Love is Just the Beginning](#) and [What are You Willing to Do?](#) into your daily routine. Intercountry and domestic adoptees need cultural awareness to develop a positive identity. Support groups are a great way to expand knowledge in this area as is explained in [Parent Group Development](#).