

Having Fun in Adoptive Families: Not an Oxymoron!

By Arleta James, PCC

Having fun isn't always easy after the adoption of a child with a history of trauma. The adoptee struggles with enjoyable outings. Triggered are the emotions surrounding the pre-adoptive losses of the birth parents, birth siblings, previous foster families, etc. After the special event, behaviors escalate and parents, brothers and sisters question if any fun gained was actually worth it.



Further, traumatized children lag developmentally behind their chronological age or struggle with sensory issues. Recently, a 12-year-old birth daughter stated, "I wish he had never come into the family. We can't go bowling anymore. I miss it!" The brother to whom she was referring cannot tolerate the noise of a bowling alley. Loud sounds and lots of stimulation dysregulates him and before too long he is having a temper tantrum. At eight-years-old his outburst resembles a child age two; the public display of screaming, kicking and crying is embarrassing and so, the family stopped bowling.

Bowling is about much more than lost fun. Bowling signifies the loss of the family as it was and the loss of the brother this young girl had eagerly awaited.

Increasing recreation in adoptive families is a challenging task, yet it is worth any effort it may require. Chuckles and giggles enhance attachment allowing cohesion among family members. Strong connections enhance the overall emotional well-being of each member of the adoptive family.

An ideal way to facilitate greater enjoyment among adoptive family members is to improve the social skills of the child who entered the family after experiencing abuse, neglect and abandonment. The child who was consumed with surviving abuse or raised in a neglectful environment did not have access to a playful parent, blocks, dolls, stacking toys, dump trucks, crayons and so on. He wasn't free to explore his surroundings and develop interests. This child arrives in the adoptive family lacking the skills to play-alone, with siblings, or peers-in an age-appropriate manner.

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In such instances, we need to estimate the child's "social and emotional age"-the age at which the child is actually functioning. A starting place for identifying the troubled child's actual social and emotional age is to read a good book or browse a website on "normal" child development- [Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five](#), or [Ages and Stages: A Parent's Guide to Normal Child Development](#), <http://www.zerotothree.org/> or www.childdevelopmentinfo.com.

Compare the skills for children ages **infant on up** to the traumatized child's chronological age. Identify the areas she has mastered and those which are underdeveloped. The child can also be observed in social situations. Visit the park or playground and observe the adoptee with peers.

Once you have all of your information gathered, identify the earliest skills the child is missing-this is the social and emotional age. Then, provide the toys and opportunities needed for the child with a history of trauma to catch up!

Let the typical kids help out by **assigning ways to be helpful**. For example, a sister may work with an adoptee several times per week, for a few minutes each day, teaching a card game or a board game. A brother may help out teaching the skills of building with Legos®, basketball or catch. Siblings want to "teach" and be helpful. With parental support and direction, the typical kids can move the social skills of their troubled brother or sister forward. The whole family benefits-in innumerable ways-when each member works toward a common goal.