

This Holiday Season (and Everyday!) I Wish My Family and Friends Would... Notes From Adoptive Parents

By Arleta James, PCC

October through January is often the most difficult time of year for those adoptive families whose composition includes a previously traumatized child. The schedule changes, crowds, hustle and bustle to accomplish shopping, wrapping, baking, caroling, cleaning, cooking, traveling, visiting combine to overwhelm the child with a history of abuse, neglect, institutionalization and abandonment far more so than the holiday stress the majority of us may feel. It isn't that same frenzy that is yet exciting, while hectic. These adoptees are responding to missed birthfamily members, memories of the horrors of the abuse they experienced pre-adoption, worries about how siblings or orphanage mates—from whom they have been separated—are doing, and so on. In essence, the holidays trigger their feelings about their many losses. Thus, this "joyous" time of year becomes a grieving time of year for them.



Grieving children escalate behaviorally. This situation adds difficult layers to an already packed season. Further complicating this is the lack of meaningful support adoptive families receive from extended family and friends. While lack of support is a year-round phenomenon, Thanksgiving, Christmas and welcoming the New Year highlight the lack of help and understanding provided by those closest. In fact, the lack of empathy and caring causes some adoptive families to state,

"I look forward to celebrating the holidays with extended family and my traumatized child less than I look forward to a root canal!"

The purpose of this article, then, is to

- validate the genuine struggles that are a part of adoptive family life for adoptive moms, dads, brothers, sisters and adoptees.

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- provide something to be shared with friends and family in order that they listen, think and then act in accord with the “notes from adoptive parents” and the content that follows.

Could You Try to See What I See?

Many adoptive parents kindly took the time to contribute to this post. They are immensely thanked for taking the time to offer us their thoughts!

Below are some of those writings—the vast majority of which cry out for understanding. Instead of the popular Christmas carol words, *Do You Hear What I Hear?*, their verse is, *Could You Try to See What I See...*

“I wish my friends and family would understand that even though my daughter may not remember her 10½ months in an orphanage, there was significant impact on her emotionally during a critical period in the development of her brain—including her ability to accept the love and nurturing from us, her parents.”

“You telling us that he needs lots of love implies that we’re not giving it to him and that that’s why he’s not better.”

“My kids shouldn’t ‘be okay because they were adopted at such young ages.’ The developmental and neurological attachment issues are real even though you can’t see them, and even though everything looks so ‘normal.’ Your denial is easier than acknowledging the pain and suffering my children have gone through, but your denial is also damaging to my children.”

“Please, please, please do NOT tell me to read 1-2-3 Magic. I have read it, tried it, ripped it up and thrown it away. My child is not like your child, your neighbor’s child, your friend’s child. It will not work for my child—trust me.”

“I wish our family would take the time to read about the impact of institutionalization and its affect on attachment. This way they would not wonder if we think the issues we face are larger than they really are, or think that we are overly protective.”

“This holiday season I wish my friends and family would understand that my son did not lose his memory of the behaviors which he utilized to survive in his home country. Nor did he lose his fond memories of his birth grandfather and birth sister. I wish our family could understand that their feelings of kindness mix with his feelings of loss of his culture and his homeland.”

“I wish my family would give me support and know that I am doing the best I can for my daughter whom I love. Just because you don’t agree with my parenting practices, doesn’t mean that my parenting is wrong.”

“Please do not be upset when I have to frisk my child before leaving your home. We have a tendency to find items in our home that have never belonged to us, and we like to be able to give them to their rightful owners prior to returning home.”

“Yes, my child is delightful, charming and well-mannered—in front of you...”

“You may not see what I see and ‘Yes’ I know my daughter is wonderful (when she’s not acting crazy!)”

“Similarly to having a physical handicap, my daughter has a brain that has been developed under abusive conditions, which disables her decision making and emotional skills. She looks ‘normal’, but things work differently inside her head. I do love my child, but she is a challenge at times.”

"Please quit telling my daughter that she is 'so pretty' and that you wish you could 'take her home.' For a child of sexual abuse, these statements mean something entirely different from your intent."

"Please don't go on to tell me that you know what it's like because your kids do that too. It is the worst possible thing you could say!! It makes me feel like you don't believe that my children are mentally ill and you don't believe that we have severe issues. You might as well say you don't believe me! You might as well say that I just can't cope with being a mom. While we may seem fine, and our children seem 'normal' and you believe 'they'll be just fine'—this is the farthest thing from the truth! We are not fine. We are living in a constant state of chaos. It's very overwhelming! Please don't tell us 'He'll grow out of it.' Again, this makes us feel like you think we are just having a hard time coping with normal parenting problems. We have very real problems and just because you don't see them, it does not mean they are not there."

"Believe us! We don't make this stuff up. In our wildest dreams, I would never dream up the things we've lived through. Believe that we are not picking on him. Do you really think that's what we are about?!!!!!"

"Please don't share the parenting you use with your biological children, or compare our kids to your biological children. All it tells me is how little you understand, and then I feel shut off and shut out."

The depth of pain caused by feeling misunderstood, "shut out" and disbelieved is profoundly hurtful. It is especially anguishing when it is coming from those closest. When your own sister or father lacks faith in your parenting ability, or in your ability to recognize your child's mental health conditions, it leaves a throbbing emotional sore that re-opens with each negative encounter.



Really, if your sister, brother, niece, nephew, daughter or son was competent and truthful prior to the adoption, then they remain able and honest post-adoption. It is a fact that the effects of trauma are often "invisible." Unlike the child in a wheelchair, or a child undergoing chemotherapy, or a child with Cerebral Palsy, the traumatized child's broken heart is concealed. Yet, it does exist! ***Mental health issues are as real as are conditions like Sensory Processing Disorder or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. In many cases, mental health issues are as life threatening as serious medical conditions.*** Thus, common sense becomes the guide. A child can't be abandoned, moved to a new country, beaten, raped, placed in a new family, etc. without being impacted! If your son, daughter, brother or sister has changed since the adoptee arrived, it is because they too are infected with the new arrival's grief. Their heart breaks for the experiences of their child.

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Their heart also breaks because their child isn't "normal."

You Can't Always See My Pain

"If you can hear only one thing about parenting a child with mental health struggles, please know that I suffer deeply as his mother—whether I let you see that or not."

We have become a society that places great emphasis on academic success and participation in extracurricular activities. Either or both of these areas prove challenging to the child who previously experienced trauma. He may not be able to learn as well as his peers. She may not have the skills to participate in a group. He is often not invited to birthday parties or to play with the kids next door. He, his parents and his siblings miss many "normal" experiences. Can you even imagine what this must be like? Take a moment to think about what being "different" means. Then also think about the blame placed on parents when their child "isn't the same" as his peers. While the adoptive parents are responsible for doing their best to offset their child's problems, they aren't responsible for the trauma—that happened before they met the child.

It takes time—often years—to come to terms with the fact that you are the parent or a sibling to a child with special needs.

"Listen to us. Our family story is painful and we need to process it with those who love us the most. Tell us that you love us and that your heart breaks for us."



Overall, adoptive families need their brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, parents and friends to listen, rather than to offer unsolicited (and almost always inappropriate) parenting advice. They need you to inquire with genuine concern, rather than with curiosity and criticism. They need you to recognize that their children's behaviors occur frequently—on a daily basis—for years on end. Their son or daughter "won't grow out of it" or "be okay" without a lot of help from their parents and a vast assortment of professionals.

"By listening to me, you help my child more than by ignoring me and trying to help my child yourself."

"Don't judge me. I already judge myself."

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"Support me. I am the only one who can truly support my child."

"We have been to more therapy appointments, psychiatry appointments, and other professional appointments than you can count. Please accept that we do know something about what we are doing."

"The greatest gift you could give me for the holidays would be to listen to me for an hour without judging, without commenting. Validate my feelings, understand my views, and heal my heart."

If you don't "get it", start reading! My series of articles, "Why Love Isn't Enough" is a great place to start.

Celebrate My Success

The gains made by a child with a hard beginning are often small—minuscule. First impressions are also ingrained and maintained.

"We wish that other peoples' perception of our daughter would improve along with her improving behaviors. When the perception stays the same as how things 'used to be' and we know we might not be where we want to be, but we know we 'aren't where we used to be, it is very frustrating to watch others interact with the 'old' her and not the 'new' her."

"Celebrate our successes, even if they seem remarkably minor to you. And, encourage us when our family is experiencing painful regression."

Recently, I had a voicemail from an adoptive Dad who had just realized that his adopted son hadn't peed in his bedroom for several months! He was ecstatic! This was excellent progress for this 12-year-old. Yet, many wouldn't think to congratulate this father for a job well done. If anything, there would be questions about why he allowed his son to "act like this"! Think!—would anyone "allow" a child to urinate in the house if they could stop it? Control is often the adopted son or daughter's BFF. It is what he or she thinks helped him or her survive harsh conditions before becoming a member of a healthy family.

In adoptive families, the act of using the toilet is an accomplishment to be celebrated with the same zest as a child making the honor roll or the winning shot as the buzzer signals the game's end. If among your extended family is an adoptive parent, brother or sister, let them all know of your pride for their triumphs—large, small, seemingly odd or "normal." Everyone needs a pat on the back for the job they are doing to keep going!

"Send me some flowers, tell me you are proud of me and thank me for not giving up. It will give me the courage for at least another hour."



Be certain that you are reviewing your perceptions of the adoptee over time. There will be positive changes! After all, your son, daughter, brother, sister, niece or nephew is really a good parent! Doesn't it run in the family? 😊

This Holiday Season (and Everyday!) I Wish My Family and Friends Would... Notes From Adoptive Parents - Part Two

Welcome to Part Two of our holiday series about improving the quality of relationships among all members of the adoptive family—nuclear, extended and friends considered part of the family! As Part One pointed out, October through January can be the hardest time of year for those families parenting a child negatively impacted by his pre-adoptive trauma. The holidays are a reminder for the adoptee of the family he lost—forever. Rather than rejoicing in his new—forever-family, he grieves his many losses. The grief stricken child displays his feelings behaviorally. Carrying out celebratory tasks is complicated within this context.



While well-meaning, extended family members and friends often offer help and support that is unproductive, demeaning and/or hurtful. So, the purpose of this series is to highlight the issues involved and put forth ways to help everyone navigate the holiday season a bit more gleefully!

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We'll pick back up with comments sent in by parents pertaining to gift giving. Again, many adoptive parents made contributions to this post. Their "notes" are interwoven in the content below. We are grateful for their participation in this article!

Seeing the Reality of Gift Giving

"Please don't over-do it with gift giving. When I ask that you limit the gifts, I'm not only being kind, I'm actually being selfish. A truckload of wonderful gifts will only serve to over stimulate my child, and eventually become items to destroy, use as projectiles or weapons."

"Please focus on creating memories and don't attempt to distract or appease my child with an over abundance of gifts. Giving her more will not erase our struggles. It will teach her to seek external things for a quick 'feel good' to try to fill her empty heart—it will teach her to become an addict."

"I know that this will sound more harsh than it's intended, but when it comes to our son, your needs are not even on our radar."

"If you do want to give my child a gift this holiday season, please remember it was the 'giving of something' to my child that you wanted to do—not my child 'having what you gave her.' Don't get angry with me or offended if your gift to them is completely destroyed in a matter of hours. It doesn't matter what the gift was—we have found that nothing is indestructible. Oh, and please take into account how easily the gift you give can be used to perpetuate the destruction of something else."

"Ask me first—whatever it is that you want to do, give, try, etc. Just run it by me first. I love my child more than you can imagine. If it was within my power and/or ability, I would give him the world on a string if he could manage it—but he can't. So, whatever you are thinking, dreaming, planning, projecting, etc. will make this a wonderful experience for my child—please run it by me first."

The simple gesture of giving a gift becomes quite complicated as can be gleaned from the above notes from adoptive moms and dads. ***When it comes to understanding children who had hard starts in life, a key factor is "think younger."*** To put it another way, ***trauma interrupts the child's development.*** The child is one age chronologically, and another socially and emotionally. The 12-year-old may really function like a 4-year-old. Thus, a toy all tweens might enjoy does not captivate the delayed adopted son or daughter. Many children who have experienced neglect or the insult of pre-natal drug and/or alcohol abuse are prone to Sensory Processing Disorder. They become over stimulated by noise, flashing lights, too many pieces, things that spin, etc.



Adoptive parents who ask you to limit gifts or be selective when choosing a gift have good reasons for their request. They are working to ensure that your holiday, their holiday and their children's holiday is an enjoyable experience! Heeding their advice is appropriate and demonstrates that you are listening and being supportive. Isn't this what friends and family are supposed to do?

Also, please note the following

"Know that we have broken the bank financially and will continue to do so until we trust that our son has a foundation of healing. We are not able to spend lots of money on entertainment, travel and/or visits—and likely won't be for a long, long time."

A gift card to a restaurant that delivers, a landscaping service, a spa, or a coupon good for a casserole may be a wonderful gift! How about chipping in as a family and putting some money on account for therapy. Mental health services, occupational therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy plus the lost work time and the gas it takes to get to all these services is expensive! Think outside of the box and shiny wrapping paper this year! When totally in doubt about what to give—hug the parent! It has probably been a long time since anyone has done that!

See Your Way to Spend Time with My Child (and Me!)

How about the gift of time?

"If you really want to help us, offer to baby-sit for a few hours, a day, or an evening, so that we can get some holiday things done. Shopping, gift wrapping, and baking— every year it's such a struggle to get done. What would really be wonderful—maybe we just want to go out for dinner and a movie. We have not done this without the kids in six years!"

"I think one of the best things that a relative or friend can do is to invite the child over or take them somewhere alone. I never really did this with my older biological children. But now, my mother has helped me out recently by taking my adopted daughter, age 8. This has begun to foster a closer relationship between her and my mom. I am hoping that as we come on tougher times in the future—during the teen years—that my daughter will feel she has a place to go instead of running away to someplace that presents a danger to her, or something even more serious."

"This holiday season I wish my family would spend time with my adopted daughter. I want my family to give examples of family behavior—good and bad. I want my family to have conversations with her about choices parents make and about rules they set to keep their children safe and teach them consequences. None of my relatives give her much time anymore. It has become easier to ignore her."

"This holiday season I wish my friends and relatives would understand how emotionally difficult holidays can be for my adopted son—and give him a little extra TLC during family gatherings when he withdraws. Don't expect him to act like the rest of the cousins."

These comments are self-explanatory. The child formerly in foster care or a foreign orphanage missed tremendous amounts of time and nurture. The "it takes a village" approach is truly a fabulous metaphor for what it takes to alleviate their early wounds.



Parents and other siblings need your gift of time, too. Perhaps you could sit for untraumatized children while parents go to therapy. Maybe you could take one of them to practice or scouts when timing conflicts with their sibling's appointment.

Yes, you may expect some negative behavior over time. Yes, this niece or nephew by adoption may not play well with typical kids. However, if he had Juvenile Diabetes or Cystic Fibrosis, likely you wouldn't mind making a recipe that met his dietary restrictions or administering medication. Why is it that we think so differently of medical conditions than we do mental health issues? Just as the child with Spina Bifida can't help it, neither can the child with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Reactive Attachment Disorder or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, etc. Our troubled transplants didn't ask to be abused, neglected or abandoned.

Keep in mind that "time" is also essential in other ways,

"Remind us to foster our marriage. It's easy to drift apart when our child's needs are so sever. Help us to be healthy. I don't need a chocolate cake when I'm hurting (and the shame that follows a binge.) I need you to initiate taking a walk with me."

Please See What This is All Doing to Our Other Children

The adoptee isn't the only child in the adoptive family!

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This comment comes from an adolescent brother,

"What I did not realize going into the adoption process was what a profound affect my soon-to-be sister would have on my extended family. They are not prepared to deal with her, and do not understand the magnitude of her problems, nor do they appreciate her ability to destroy a perfectly enjoyable family gathering. This isolation is the reality of life with a child with mental health issues."

This is a note from an adolescent sister—herself an adoptee. She is reporting on a therapy session,

"We had a therapy session where my extended family—aunts, uncles, grandma, grandpa—came. We talked about how our family couldn't handle it all the time and that we needed help from them. They were like, 'Yeah, you guys need help. We'll call and take the kids out to lunch.'

"But then a couple of my family members said, 'Why don't you just give the kids back? You shouldn't even have them because they're horrible for your family. We don't want you to live with this.' It made me feel like, 'I'm adopted. Do you want to give me back?' I think that every child should have a chance to be with a family. It hurt—'just give them back.' There was no thought of them at all.

The conclusion of this experience was that my extended family never does anything. They don't call unless we call them. Nothing ever gets done. They don't want to come to holidays. Basically, when they call all they talk about is, 'Are you going to give the kids back?'

This teen and her parents were devastated by the outcome of this meeting. They simply could not believe that their own family would assume they would just give their children away. The subsequent lack of action demonstrated by their relatives was shocking.



Friends and family need to pay particular attention to these typical children living amongst them. They need your time, your attention and your support too! Do you really want to be separated from your nieces, nephews, grandparents, granddaughters, etc.? What memories do you want them to have when they grow up? What are you showing them about the meaning of family?

In conclusion, this mom's note captures the essence of the true spirit of the holidays,

"I wish during this holiday season that my friends and family would realize how important it is for my children to have, build and enjoy traditions. So many of our friends and family have the 'they'll grow up fine' or 'they'll move past it' attitude. When emotionally disturbed children do not have significant reparations made, they grow up to be emotionally

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disturbed adults. My Christian faith, love and hope is for the true reasons for the season to infect my family, my friends, my church family, those in our therapeutic world that "don't get it" and my children's biological family extraordinarily, to the point of their demonstrating their care and not just paying the typical, required modicum of attention to my three wounded sweethearts. Jesus calls on us to put Him above all worldly things, and place others above ourselves and in that way we will achieve JOY (Jesus, Others and Yourself.)

"I cannot explain the degree to which I believe most people live a very selfish existence. This is not why we were created nor is it how we were made to behave. If selfishness were somehow minimized—at least during these holidays—my three children (and thousands, perhaps millions of others) would not have to be searching for love, warmth, real meaning and healing in their young lives. We all need help to 'grow up fine' and our children need help to 'move past' the trauma and issues of their early development.

"It is my fervent wish this holiday season that everyone will reach out in support and encouragement of all those they encounter and make warm, wonderful memories . . . for themselves and those around them! I know when a child smiles in my life it makes my heart sing! Thanksgiving should stir up a grateful heart within each of us and carry us through to a very Merry Christmas and an amazingly Happy New Year!"