

Myths & Realities

ADOPTING OLDER CHILDREN AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

This is Chapter Eight taken from *The Adoption Option Complete Handbook: 2000-2001* by Christine Adamec (Prima Publishing 1999). She gave permission to Peggy Soule, who wrote:

Editor's Note: It's important to understand that "special needs" are really in the eyes of the beholder. Families, public (government) agencies and private agencies, the laws, and the courts may all have very different ideas of what constitutes "special needs." Thus, a family needs to define its own limits but also find out how agency or social worker defines special needs. Some physicians and some social workers consider all children in foster care to have special needs. Keep in mind that medical special needs are very different from social/emotional/behavioral special needs. Many families find medical problems far less daunting than emotional problems.

An experienced adoptive mother and advocate for children with special needs, Peggy Soule provides a realistic view of adopting children from her thirty-three years of experience.

MYTHS AND REALITIES OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS Peggy Soule

This article is written with the help of Michele, Marge, Jim, Jackie, Judie, Carl, Judith, Dave, Josie, Linda, Paul, Lynda, John, Carolyn and all the other adoptive parents who hung in there with us, laughed with us and supported us as we raised our children. Together as adoptive parents we learned from one another, leaned on one another and cared for each other. We grew together, became close friends and forever have a bond that connects us. We still need each other and will always be there for one another.

There are many myths about adopting children with special needs and there are also important realities to be aware of. In this essay, I discuss the primary myths and realities that you need to know about, if you are considering adopting any child.

The Biggest Myth: "Love Is Enough"

The greatest myth in adoption is that "Love is enough!" I used to believe that if only I loved the child deeply enough, then all would be well. But nothing could be further from the truth. Unfortunately, parental love and total commitment cannot solve all problems. This is true whether the child was born to you or adopted by you. There are many reasons why "Love is not enough." The child you've adopted may have loved and lost before on his or her journey through the child welfare system and learned to erect barriers. Some of the child's problems may be rooted in his or her genetic make-up and no more easily changed than the color of his or her eyes. The child may equate intimacy with the sexual abuse he or she has experienced. Some troubled children believe

their adoptive parents to be just plain “nuts” for having taken them in, and they behave accordingly.

Reality: No Child Is Perfect

At some point, all children present some sort of parenting challenge and all children have some sort of special need in their lives. Yet some children appear to move easily through life, successfully meeting their own special needs. They make a parent feel good. You begin to believe that they are succeeding thanks to your parenting skills. Others are difficult to parent from the beginning and do not respond to those techniques that you know are right. You think you are a terrible parent and begin to question yourself. Whether your children come to you as infants, toddlers or teenagers, there is never enough information. An infant labeled healthy can become a child with attention deficit disorder (ADD), alcohol-related problems or severe mental health problems. Caring parents start to wonder what they did wrong and shoulder the blame themselves, certain that if they had done it right they would have had the perfect child. One parent said to me, “If we only had Tim and John I would think we were great parents. If we only had Mary and Sam I would believe we were terrible parents. I now know we have very little to do with their behaviors, and we must not judge ourselves. We are not responsible for their successes or their failures.”

What is really important is how you deal with the child over the years and how you accept and respond to their needs and problems. You begin to understand that the genes children are born with have an incredible effect on them; you understand that any child separated from his or her birth family suffers loss; you learn that you have no idea whether the birthmother ever used drugs or alcohol during pregnancy and if there was any effect on the fetus.

You realize how good it is that a child has a parent or two who cares and is there to help. You learn to reach out to others and not blame yourself. You get all sorts of advice and support from other parents; the ones with similar problems are the most comforting to you, and you and your family do go on.

Remember that many families parenting birth children also experience pain. They, too, are raising children with disabilities, children who will die, children who are unable to learn from experience. They are struggling to make it work just as adoptive families are.

Myth: Bonding Is Always Automatic

Children don't automatically bond to you when you adopt them, and parents cannot automatically plug into a loving relationship either. This can lead to confusion, fear, and self-doubt. Babies are usually easy to love because they smile in response to your caring and are so dependent on you. It is fortunate that this happens because when they grow to become terrible twos, driving you crazy, you know you still love them.

Love may not come easily when the two-year-old who is placed in your home is feeling both sad and angry. I remember how easy it was to connect when we adopted infants two weeks and younger, but I have worked with people adopting an eight-month-old who could not bond.

Children may reject a new family because they were already attached to the previous family or may have trouble attaching to anyone. I adopted a two-year-old and did not feel that instant love I had experienced with infants. I thought something was wrong with me

until I shared with my neighbor, who had also adopted a two-year-old at about the same time, that I didn't love my child. She confessed to me that she didn't love her son either. We both knew then that it wasn't us. These two-year-olds both traveled rough roads en route to becoming responsible thirty-year-olds, but there is now no question of our mutual love.

Adopting a child is comparable to involvement in an arranged marriage---you want to love this new person you never knew before. But it is not easy to love a stranger, especially a belligerent teenager who comes to live with you. The warm loving feeling you seek comes slowly when there is no reciprocity. Some children never attach. Your love may never get beyond the basic love of commitment, but that is okay. While not warm and fuzzy, it is still a powerful force.

When my husband and I adopted an eleven-year-old child and then a nine-year-old child, I no longer expected instant bonding, and wasn't upset when it did not happen. In fact, the nine-year-old was so difficult that, as much as we were committed to him, no one in our family really liked him for the first two years. However, once his ADD was diagnosed and he was treated with Ritalin, it was possible for him to change from the kid in school who was always in trouble, and who hung out with other low-achievers, to the kid who took pride in making the honor roll. Six years after he was adopted he died in an accident while he was an exchange student in Spain. I will never forget the reaction of our entire family. None of us realized how much we had bonded to him until he died.

Myth: You Can Mold Your Child

Too many parents believe in the myth that if they have great expectations and high standards, then the kids will live up to them. Instead, you need to be ready to tailor expectations, changing goals as special needs develop or become apparent. You need to be open and flexible. This does not mean you let the child run wild, doing whatever he or she wants, because he or she was abused before. You use love and limits to help the child achieve his or her own best potential.

Reality: Sometimes the Special Need Isn't What You Expected

Some adoptive parents seek children with clearly identified special needs such as ADD, cerebral palsy, a speech defect or Down syndrome. In this situation, there is an opportunity to learn about the condition and meet others who have similar children. If you decide you can parent such a child your expectations for your child are likely to be realistic. You learn that a child with mental retardation may never be totally self sufficient; you learn that a child with fetal alcohol syndrome will have trouble learning cause and effect and may end up in the juvenile justice system.

But beware of the misleading sense of security such information can foster. The problems you encounter may include some that are totally different from your expectations. I always remember one father saying to me, "I thought we were getting a 'healthy' dying child with AIDS. I never expected the worst case of ADD, which is what is challenging our family to the limit and driving me crazy." The family expected that the child would die; they didn't expect the extreme attention deficit behavior he exhibited. This comment was said very "tongue-in-cheek" to another adoptive parent whom he knew would understand the humor that he used to cover his pain.

Special needs are varied, unpredictable and often change with time. The visible ones are perhaps easier to identify and prepare for. You learn what to expect. It is the behavioral issues, the defiance and the lack of caring that get to you. A child who has been sexually abused and who then becomes a perpetrator within your home can undo the whole family.

Educate yourself on the significance of what has happened to the child so you can understand what might happen. Never believe that all the important information is available or has been revealed. Many of the older children being placed today have been sexually abused. That does not mean they all will become perpetrators, but the social worker needs to discuss this possibility, recommending appropriate precautions. Knowledge, preparation and education are vital in the placement of waiting children. Keep the healthy people healthy within your home. Protect and help your children cope with the disabilities of others.

Myth: Racism Doesn't Exist Anymore

Love alone cannot prepare you to parent a child of a different race. If you are white and adopting a child of another race you soon learn race matters in America. As a white mother who adopted an African American infant I was sure I would not be aware of his color. How wrong I was. His beautiful skin is part of who he is and I see it clearly every time I hug him – even today at 30 years of age. It is also what the police see when he is driving a car.

Unfortunately, racism is alive and well. It was the African American adoptive parents in our parent group who embraced the white parents adopting children of other races and said, “We will be the bridge for you. You will need our help as you parent your children to cope with racism in America.” If you are white and adopting a child of another race, it is wise to connect with that child’s community before the child comes to your home. We chose to live in the city, making sure our children attended schools with a diverse population.

Reality: Adoption (and Life) Are Risks

The reality is that adoption is a risk, as is life. You can make an incredible difference in the life of a son or daughter through their adult lives. The difference you make may not be what you planned. Possibly you may never know the difference you make. One family recalled, “We had to continually rethink our expectations and let the children be part of setting them. I always remember those holiday letters where people bragged about how well their kids were doing in college or in their careers. I celebrated when my kid who struggled all through high school got into the local community college.”

One mother said: “When my eighteen-year-old was pregnant and unmarried I was very upset. It was the doctor who looked at me and said, ‘She is a success, not a failure.’” The girl was the first of her birth family to graduate from high school; she had waited until eighteen to have a child; the father was someone she had dated for four years; she was not using drugs. The mother began to look at her daughter in a different way, realizing that the adoptive family had made a difference. Today this woman has two children, lives with the father of the children and is an excellent parent. She has health care for the children although not for herself. She needs help from public assistance at times when the

father is out of work, but she is making it. Today the adoptive mom knows that this is how success is measured.

Maybe you had hoped to get a child with developmental delays through high school, and were initially disappointed when his achievement stopped at the fifth grade level, but he can live independently. Perhaps a teenager gets pregnant and has a child, but you realize that without the support of your family she might have had three children. A boy gets into trouble with the law and spends time in prison. With a family for support he has someone to advocate for him in the justice system, someone to come home to and someone to help him find an apartment and a job so he can make it on his own.

Myth: Adopted Children Are Always Grateful

Some people have the image of "saving" a child. They assume that the child will come to realize how fortunate he or she was to have been adopted. Experienced adoptive parents, however, don't expect this. They realize that before adoption comes the loss of the birth family.

Rewards come at odd times, and they may not be what you expected. Sometimes the small victories in life are what sustain us. Redefining success becomes an on-going process. A child in special education makes an apron for you and hands it to you when you are in the bathroom, her first gift after a year in your home. A twenty-year-old who had sent you a Mother's Day card when growing up with "my" crossed out (Happy Mother's Day to my Mother) doesn't send cards any more but is always there for you when the family is in crisis.

One mom told me that even her children who had been most damaged and had had a hard time connecting to the family came through when their dad fell off a ladder. They were all at the hospital within four hours.

Don't expect instant gratification. Rewards may be delayed for years. For a while, your reward may be simply knowing that you tried to make a difference. It is amazing to hear the couples who have parented very difficult children talk about the kids when they are in their thirties. Some families have waited that long to form a close relationship; others have accepted whatever relationship they have as okay.

My husband and I have found that the greatest rewards in our lives have stemmed from our willingness to take risks and to open our lives and our family to others. Even heartbreak has taught us about love. We have never found a door closing without another one opening, and if we walked through it, family, friends, and strangers comforted us, and we learned more about life and love.

Reality: Sometimes You Need Outside Help

An absolute truth is that you will need support. Don't even start to think that you can do this alone. As one friend said, "Don't make the mistake of thinking you are not like those other adoptive families. This is who you are, this is who you need."

Other families who understand will sustain you and care for you. Some professionals understand the issues, but many do not. Those who have adopted themselves and may have experienced what you are going through are such a comfort to work with. Others may try to blame you for your children's problems. The bias of some professionals is to blame the family, especially the mother. One mom kept this magnet on her refrigerator, "If it's not bacterial or viral, it must be maternal."

I am always amazed when I talk with families who are their wits end with their children's behavior. So often they are afraid to tell that their daughter has flunked out of school or that their son is into drugs. When I share with a family what our children have done or what other families have experienced, they seem surprised that they are not alone. Often I will mail them a copy of the tape, To Hell and Back, a recording of a workshop done at a North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) conference by a panel of experienced adoptive parents. The stories these families relate make listeners laugh and cry. Other parents in pain immediately connect to these families and realize they are not alone.

Adoption support should begin with the adoption home study. Adoption advocates across the country are pushing for services for families and children. It is so sad to see families trying to cope alone, receiving no support and blaming themselves or the child welfare system. Remember that there is no quick fix.

As Dee Paddock, adoptive parent and family psychotherapist says, "We need families who can manage, not fix." Many of us have parented children with very special needs, and what we needed was help in getting through it. You need someone you can tell anything to, even "I hate her today, I've had it! I'm not sure if I can survive. My marriage is in trouble."

Have someone to go to lunch or a movie with, someone to share a joke or a good laugh. We used to have a contest in our parent group to decide who would get the reward of the week for having the kid who did the worst thing. I won the week that four of my kids slipped out at night, with both parents home and in bed, to steal a car. As my husband said, "The family that steals together stays together." Another friend, after having been called back from a trip to Russia because one of her children had been arrested for attempted murder, said to me, "Do I win this week?" Adoptive parent humor is unique. One friend's advice to adoptive parents is, "Be real, be humble." You are always learning. Someone always has a better story. Share with others. It is amazing how many of us have healed as we have helped others in pain. Often a situation is put in perspective by sharing.

Many families rely on their faith and belief in a higher being throughout this adoption journey. They find strength and comfort from their place of worship or their own spiritual beliefs. They choose to take on troubled children because they want to give something back to others. It is their faith that helps them go forward in times of stress and trouble. Don't shoulder all the trouble. Let it go. I remember when my fifteen-year-old son had died, one son was in treatment for alcoholism, another one was being evaluated for alcoholism, and one daughter was on the street. I went to a meeting of parents whose children were being evaluated for drug abuse and we were all expressing how we were doing. I remember saying, "I'm doing okay. I can't cope with all of this. I have to let it fall off my shoulders and take care of myself." So often the families who had children in drug treatment began to heal because the parents went to Alanon where they learned how to take care of themselves. Many of us began to live by the serenity prayer so well known to the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) community: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

The love your child truly needs is the commitment and the willingness to stick with him or her, through thick and thin. Sometimes this means getting outside help, sending them

to residential treatment centers, putting them out of the home temporarily. Rather than rejecting them, it means you are trying to get them the help they need. Some of the most committed families I have ever known had to put their children in other places to keep them from hurting themselves and others in the home. The pain was incredible; the commitment was always there.

You will not survive if you do not take good care of yourself. Family after family has told me this. Get yourself lots of love; know what you can do and what you cannot do. Know when you need a break, and figure out how to make it happen. Take time to be with your spouse, significant other or good friend. Nurture your adult relationships. "Have good sex," emphasizes one adoptive parent.

One of the families I knew scheduled a date once a week without the kids. If they couldn't go out they fed the kids early and shared a special meal in the dining room with no kids allowed. They had two rules: no talk about the kids and no talk about money. It was hard at first but soon they discovered they could discuss books, movies, ideas and even dreams. It can be so hard to give ourselves permission to be good to ourselves, but it is so important. Families adopting children with special needs must take care of themselves or they will have nothing left to give to others.

A sense of humor helps immeasurably. The ability to laugh, to see things in perspective and not take yourself too seriously has brought many a family through a crisis.

Reality: Sometimes Adoption "Grows" on You!

Many families who adopt children with special needs go back for more. There must be something to this stuff if families who take on these challenges go back again and again for other children. Somehow the parenting of children with special needs brings out the best and sometimes the worst in us. We are forever learning, forever changing and forever hoping.

It's been said that adoption may be the only cure known to modern medicine for some of the children and their needs. I believe this is true. To be cared for, nurtured, listened to, cuddled – all are necessary for healing to take place. I believe families are the best therapists if they can be supported and helped as they take on the task of parenting the abused, the neglected and the disabled in body and soul. Adoption is the only cure for thousands of children who wait.

Family is what our country is built on – family not just for children but for adults, too. It always haunts me to think about what will happen to the children who never find families. Where will they spend holidays as adults, whose weddings will they attend, whose funerals? Who will be the grandparents to their children? Where will they turn as adults when they need help and support?

Children with special needs are a joy, a pain, a heartache, a challenge and a trip into the unknown. Adoption is not for the faint hearted or careful, cautious people afraid to take a risk to make a difference. For lots of families adoption was the way they were made, the way they changed and the way they grew. Try it, but connect with those who have gone before you. They will help you, guide you, laugh with you and welcome you into the wonderful world of adoption.

Peggy Soule and her husband Dave adopted six children, four of whom were considered children with special needs. All of them, including the "healthy white infants," have

presented challenges. Together, as parents, Peggy and Dave have dealt with the death of a child, drugs in the home, unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse and jail. Today the five living children are responsible adults who bring joy, happiness, and love into our lives, the lives of their spouses and significant others and the lives of their children.

Peggy is the former Executive Director of Children Awaiting Parents, Inc. Dave is a pediatrician and has cared for many adopted children with special needs.