

How Can I Help My Adopted Child Cope with Loss and Trauma?

Helping our adopted children cope with loss and trauma is an essential part of adoption.

Caroline Bailey | September 13, 2019

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“Where does my mom live?” I heard this softly whispered question coming from that small voice in the back seat of my van. “I’m not sure,” I said. “Oh,” my child whispered. “If I knew for sure, I would tell you,” I said, trying to reassure my child that it is okay to ask. Silence. Nothing else was said.

This isn’t the first time my child has asked questions. I knew what “mom” meant. I knew it meant “biological mother.” I’ve listened to my child grieve for a biological parent that has never even been a part of my child’s life. I’ve seen the tears. I’ve heard the statements of confusion and not being sure why or how adoption occurred. I’ve seen it hit my child’s self-esteem. I’ve also been on the receiving end of angst about all of it. Each day, depending on what happens, can bring up strong emotions about adoption. And, each day, we do our best to address them and comfort our kids. It isn’t easy, though.

Loss, grief, and trauma are unavoidable parts of adoption. It is unwise to believe that an adoptive family can escape any aspect of loss or never have to deal with some level of trauma. I’ve taught foster parenting and adoption classes and am often shocked by the number of families who understand there is loss with foster care but have a hard time grasping the concept of it as it relates to adoption.

During training, when it comes to question/answer time or small group activities, participants usually have a lot to say during discussions about the losses and various trauma that foster children and foster parents can face. However, when adoption is brought up, participants usually seem a bit at a loss for words. Sure, there are typically one or two participants who have experienced adoption loss and they do well to speak up, but for the most part, the notion that adoption carries a big measure of loss seems to take most people by surprise.

Adoption is often thought of as a mostly beautiful experience. Childless parents meet parentless children—matches made in heaven kind of stuff. On the contrary, though, while adoption is filled with precious, life-changing moments, it is also filled with loss, grief, and trauma that is compounded by known and unknown circumstances that precluded adoption.

All is not lost, though. There are ways for adoptive families to help their kids cope with loss and trauma from it. The first step is to recognize and confront your own misconceptions about adoption. It is about more than keeping an open mind (although, that is always helpful). It is about heading straight into your own judgments, biases, and personal narratives about how wonderful adoption is (for you).

As parents through adoption, we can get caught in a trap of only seeing it from our perspective. Our journey to our kids may have been wrought with trials, infertility, a healthy dose of patience and confusion; yet, our experience is a supporting actor in the story. Our kids' experience(s) needs to take the lead role.

I've heard people say, "If we get a child that is young enough, especially a newborn, the impact of adoption won't be as hard." While it seems logical and there may be some truths to this, it is vital for families to understand that children adopted at a very early age can still grieve (<https://adoption.com/how-infants-grieve-a-guide-for-new-adoptive-parents>). Trauma in the womb via prenatal drug usage, chaotic lifestyle, domestic violence, poor nutrition, or difficult delivery can affect the developing brain. This has been scientifically proven.

A proactive approach for current or soon-to-be adoptive parents is to not shy away from training regarding trauma and how it affects the developing child. One powerful and research-based approach is Trust-Based Relational Intervention or TBRI (<https://adoption.com/the-4-best-things-we-learned-from-karyn-purvis>). Led by the late Dr. Karyn Purvis, this approach to parenting kids from hard places has absolutely changed the trajectory of a lot of adoptive families' lives. It is about connection before correction. It is also about learning and understanding how traumatic experiences and losses have a physiological effect on children.

One aspect of TBRI is this—instead of thinking, "This child is giving me a hard time," parents should consider, "This child is having a hard time." See the difference? It is subtle but powerful. TBRI is not about giving in and letting children get away with behavioral issues because of the loss and trauma they carry with them. It is about nurturing, connecting, and correcting BECAUSE of the trauma and loss children have experienced.

If you or someone you know is an adoptive parent and struggling with the loss and trauma their children are experiencing, it is strongly recommended that you or your friend attend an Empowered to Connect conference or TBRI training. For this momma through adoption, it was life-changing.

The TBRI approach is a fantastic guide to parenting children through loss, grief, and trauma. However, as parents, we are not perfect and don't always hit the mark like the experts in the field teach us to. So, before you throw in the towel or think you could never be as good as those who teach trauma-informed care, consider these basic aspects of helping your adopted child cope with loss and trauma.

- 1)** When children are adopted, they lose a vital part of their histories. In many ways, adoptive parents are keepers of our children's' stories. Any details you know about how or why your child needed adoption and characteristics of biological parents are essential. Write it all down. Share it with your child when the opportunity presents itself—even if you feel that you are not ready to. History is important.
- 2)** Adopted children may question their own identity or place in the family. Our kids may wonder where their blue eyes came from or why their skin is a different color. Questioning identity, or even doubting identity, can lead to poor self-esteem. This can be especially true in transracial adoptions. Helping our children connect with their heritage (<https://adoption.com/10-things-you-should-know-before-adopting-transracially>) can produce a more positive sense of self.
- 3)** Remember that loss and trauma often look like anger, hyperactivity, and defiance. Although diagnoses like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder have a chemical foundation, some symptoms of this disorder and similar ones are a result of strong emotions coming from children. Depression can look like a "not caring" attitude. Anger can look like defiance or disrespect. Hyperactivity can look like not listening or being too preoccupied with other things. All these symptoms may be rooted in grief. Grieving children can make adults quite uncomfortable. We want to fix it and do so quickly, but often miss the mark. When loss begins to show itself with significant behavioral changes, it is smart to act quickly and incorporate someone else who is skilled in assisting children with processing grief—i.e. therapy and groups for children who have experienced loss.
- 4)** Another aspect of helping your adopted child deal with loss and trauma is recognizing that it is not a one-stop, quick-fix kind of thing. As our children age and reach developmental milestones or important events (dating, driving, marriage, pregnancy), they may have moments of crises that seem to hit them out of nowhere. Even as adults (<https://adoption.com/forums/thread/92170/adoptee-039-s-discovering-unresolved-grief-loss-issues-in-later-years/>), our children may question and wrestle with adoption and their own experiences of it. As parents through adoption, we must understand that adoption is a life-long process. In many ways, it is evolutionary. I've often told people that the hardest part of adoption was not the time before the gavel fell and my kids were declared legally mine. Instead, it has been every year since then.

5) Don't take it personally. Ouch, right? When our children are showing us their worst behaviors, we need to show them the best of us. It is hard to not take their actions personally but remember, our children may be grieving the loss of their biological families or reliving past trauma. These difficult times need to be met with compassion and selflessness. Their actions may be aimed at us but not (always) because of us. As adults, we need to show them safe and appropriate ways to handle hard emotions. Our actions must reflect the way we want our children to act. In many ways, we are raising future adults whose lives have already been interrupted by significant loss. So, don't take it personally.

6) Remember that there are stages of grief—shock/denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We all go through these stages when experiencing a sudden or known loss. However, we may tend to waver between the stages, alternate back and forth between them, and move through them at a different pace than others. Grief is not set in stone. It is not black and white. We all experience it differently, but we can look at these stages and see the commonalities. With children, the stages of grief may look different but are applicable (<https://adoption.com/how-grieving-process-applies-to-adoption>).

7) The thought of “children are resilient” can lead us to dismiss the true depth of loss and trauma in adopted children's lives. Sure, children can be quite brave and pliable to their situations but if they experience a sudden loss or significant trauma and their needs are not met with immediacy, safety, and nurturance, the effect could be lifelong. Troubled relationships, impulsive and risky behaviors, and instability might plague their futures. As adoptive parents, we must build resilience in our children through appropriately and lovingly addressing their trauma and loss.

Families formed through adoption are unique—each has its own stories that brought them to each other. Yet, if you get a group of adoptive families together and listen to them talk about their experiences, there are many similarities. Each of us (adoptive families) have measures of loss and trauma woven into each of our tapestries of life. For some of us, our children have experienced things that we will never understand. For many of us, we often feel inadequate in meeting their needs.

An important thing to consider when helping our adopted children cope with loss and trauma is that we must be willing to adapt to meet the needs of our children. The way we were parented might not work with our kids. How we wish we could parent might not work with our children. The way we see others parenting their children may not work with our children. Dwelling on the differences can create frustration. However, embracing the uniqueness of our parenting experiences and doing so intentionally can bring us incredible moments with our children.

Parenting (adopted) children who have experienced loss and trauma is complex. We find ourselves being the advocates, spokespersons, and loss managers for our children. We often miss out on things our friends may be experiencing with their children simply because our children are not quite able to achieve things or be in social situations.

In some respects, there can be a bit of isolation when parenting children who come from hard places. However, again, we must come face-to-face with the truth that what we are experiencing may pale in comparison to what our kids are going through.

When we make a lifetime commitment to children through adoption, we must truly mean it. Through thick and thin. Through layers of loss and the warm fuzzies of joy. Through moments of significant trauma. Through the times when we question if we are equipped for this. Through it all.

Helping our adopted children cope with loss and trauma is an essential part of this life experience called adoption. It is often misunderstood by others. Yet, those of us walking it day-to-day, know how vital it is to not ignore the real feelings our kids are having about their own life stories. If anything, we would be doing them a disservice to act like things are always okay, wouldn't we?

Though it may hurt at times, for my children (all adopted), I pray that I will always find ways to help them understand their losses, where they came from, and who they are in this world. Friend, I pray this for you and your children as well.

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Caroline Bailey

Caroline is a mother of three children through adoption and a strong advocate for the needs of children and families involved in the child welfare system in the United States. At the age of eleven (1983), she underwent an emergency hysterectomy in order to save her life. Caroline is the youngest person to have a hysterectomy. Her life has been profoundly affected by infertility. In 2006, Caroline and her husband, Bruce, became licensed foster parents. They were blessed to adopt two of their children through foster care in 2008 and 2010. Their youngest child is a relative of Caroline, and they celebrated his adoption in 2013. Caroline works for a Christian child welfare agency in Missouri. She has been a guest speaker at churches and conferences regarding adoption and is currently working on a memoir about the impact of illness, faith, foster care, and adoption