



FAMILY TIMES



FOR ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

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Helping Children Recover from Grief: Support Is Essential

from Winter 2014 *Adoptalk* by Christen Shepherd and Lisa Highfield

<http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/thepromise.html>

Christen Shepherd and her husband Trevor adopted four children from foster care. Lisa Highfield is a child and youth counselor, and became the Shepherd family's support worker. In 2013, Christen and Lisa published a book about their experiences—The Promise: The Story of an Adoptive Mother and a Support Worker—which is available at www.lulu.com.

Christen:

When our two biological sons were 12 and 16, my husband and I chose to expand our family through adoption. In 2010 we welcomed a sibling set of four—Olivia, Samantha, Serena, and Zach, ages 3, 5, 7 and 9—into our lives and hearts. Despite hearing that families often faced challenges in the early stages of placement, I was unprepared for the reality—that it would be the greatest challenge of my life, and that it would kick my feet out from underneath me. I felt as though I was drowning in trauma and a safe shore was far too distant. All six of my children, both biological and adopted,

were drowning too and I couldn't even save myself, let alone everyone else.

My children tested us from day one. It took every bit of emotional strength, willpower, creativity, and resourcefulness to make it through that first year together. We learned parenting adopted children can be drastically different than parenting biological children. Almost immediately, our Children's Aid Society put me in touch with Lisa, a child and youth counselor who helped make sense of behavior, core adoption issues, and trauma. Her support was critical to our staying the course.

Given what our children had been through in their short lives, I now know it is ridiculous that I thought they should have settled in quickly or easily. Our children had moved many times in foster care (we were the fourth home for our youngest who was only three years old) and the

kids had experienced instability and abuse. They had a variety of issues that would make it hard for them to cope, such as intellectual disabilities, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and anxiety. They'd also had an adoption disruption, spending more than a year in a "forever" home only to be sent back. Obviously the children were in need of some very deep healing.

As soon as they moved in, the children unleashed unbridled rage. Small things set them off, like not getting a preferred cup at dinner. They destroyed rooms, flipping furniture and breaking things. With four traumatized children, it was not uncommon to have temper tantrums all day long, every single day, both at home and in public. They bit and scratched their own arms and faces, and pulled out their hair. They often attacked me, biting and punching while shouting swear

words and threats. Our youngest was only four when she bent a metal lock hurling her tiny body at a door to get to me. During tantrums, their primal screams were unlike anything I'd ever heard before. Lisa assured me the rages were normal, even healthy, and that they would eventually subside.

Fear and anxiety were key elements of our days. Our oldest daughter, Serena had panic attacks; during the day she was jumpy and nervous. A touch on the shoulder could make her leap to the ceiling. She questioned everything and had a deep worry she would die. Zach was afraid to step foot outside because of bees or storms. The only way Zach eliminated his fear of insects was by carrying around a "therapy chicken." He'd earned a new pet and he loved the beautiful, white Silkie hen. By spending time with his chicken outside, Zach gradually learned insects largely ignored him and he was safe. We spent a large amount of our parental energy figuring out ways to overcome challenging behavior. Sometimes we discovered it by asking

Continued from Page 1

others, like Lisa, sometimes we found it in books, and as with the pet chicken, occasionally we stumbled upon ways to help by sheer dumb luck.

Attachment concerns were intertwined with anxiety. Olivia was terrified to let me out of her sight in case she lost me forever. It was nearly impossible to get her on the school bus, or for me to leave her to go out. Some techniques got her to school for only a morning (like giving her a bracelet I wanted back) and sometimes for a whole week (like promising a pink cake on the weekend). She was so panicked about losing me that she threw herself in front of moving vehicles to prevent me from leaving. It was heart-wrenching! Despite smaller strategies, in the end, it was by forcing both of us to endure the torment of my leaving and returning that her faith in me was built, and she understood that we'd never be separated for good.

The kids really struggled to sleep—they stayed up late, woke early, and ransacked the kitchen. Months passed and the original four members of our family became as traumatized as the adopted children. We were so afraid to wake the children (who were light sleepers) that we didn't turn on a TV, play music, or get snacks from the kitchen. We were worn out and couldn't stand more screaming. My husband and I sat in the living room each night, and stared at each other in shock and dismay. This was not what we'd signed up for. It was difficult not to question our decision to adopt. I often wondered if I would be able to help my children, if anyone could, or if they had been too wounded, too unloved to be able to function and attach like "regular" kids. It became necessary to work through my own trauma. I saw a wonderful

counselor who told me the feelings of failure were normal, but not actually true. He confirmed what Lisa said, that my children trusted me enough to show their darkest selves and that I was showing them what true love and acceptance were.

We are now three years into our adoption journey and the children have healed. When I reflect on our first year it seems a dream. Our bonds are solid, the children are secure. The incredible anger has been purged, the crippling anxieties dissolved. They stand on stage at school concerts waving at me, and run into my arms with joy just like other kids. They trust I will always be there. We can be apart, the children always confident we will be reunited. The rages, the running away, the self-harm, and attacks—it's all gone. With the trauma vented and explored, my true children have been revealed—loving, affectionate, trusting, and happy children who are free to grow up in a loving home.

Of course there are still some behavioral issues, and some days I am challenged to remain calm and supportive. There is no doubt the children's histories have left lasting scars—adoption can't wave a magic wand to make that different. The disabilities incurred by in utero exposure to drugs and alcohol and from long-term abuse and neglect won't go away.

Our biological sons handled the upheaval of their lives with grace, although the incredible stress was not what they'd hoped for. As we

work toward becoming a fully functional family, all six of our children have bonded. Parenting traumatized children is not an easy path to walk, and Trevor and I stumble as we go along, but we continue to regain our footing and do our best, knowing our commitment to our children has given them their best chance at a productive, happy future.

Lisa:

Parenting a child who has had significant trauma takes strength, and most parents will experience challenges. Support and help is essential. When the Shepherds found themselves dealing with severe behavioral issues, their agency didn't overreact and assume the children couldn't be helped, and instead, put them in contact with me. Because parenting traumatized, adopted children can be radically different than parenting biological children, I was able to offer some insight and encouragement.

Parents often want strategies to deal with behavior. The hardest part about parenting is that one set of rules doesn't apply; the same strategies don't work for every child, or they work for a short time but then a parent must come up with something new. Parents must be creative, always looking for new ways to handle behavior. Often it helps to have support from an experienced adoption worker or another adoptive parent who has been through it.

One tactic I love is reward systems. Children always learn more from positive rewards than by punishment. The Shepherds implemented a certificate program, and actively watched for good behavior and rewarded it. Even small things, like saying

Continued from Page 2

“please” warranted praise. Having printed certificates handy was a quick way to give feedback to a child. The Shepherd children proudly displayed them in their bedrooms. High-fives and hugs also affirm behavior and most kids will seek more.

You can't punish trauma or loss. In the early months, Olivia, the Shepherds' youngest, would cry at night and keep everyone up. While most biological kids don't sleep because they want attention, Olivia was in deep mourning. I explained to Christen that grief can't be punished. Unfortunately, holding Olivia and letting her cry, no matter how many times a night she required this, was the only route to healing. Again, positive rewards went a long way, and when Olivia slept she earned treats. All children have needs that must be met, and they will seek to meet them. Zach would cry after he wrecked his room. Punishing him wouldn't have worked because he needed to vent his despair. Although cuddling him after unwanted behavior seems counter intuitive, for Zach, being cradled filled an early developmental need. He benefited from expressing his anger (although the Shepherds would have preferred another way), but because of that and the cuddling, Zach healed, and the room destruction and need for being babied waned.

The key is to know what a child's needs are before they act out. Some kids scream in order to feel heard. If you can message to your child that you hear them, that validation can result in less screaming.

Although no one wants to hear this, anger cannot be controlled. Offering pillows to punch may help, but kids need to unleash their long-standing sorrow and confusion about their lives. We don't allow children to hurt people or other living creatures, and they need to

be put in separate rooms when anger erupts. We can offer consequences when children misbehave, but the truth is most kids need to vent. They don't have the ability to work verbally or openly through all their memories and grief, and anger is the result. It is really hard to believe a child destroying a room is a positive step in healing, but with each explosion, healing occurs.

Sadly, it is the primary caregiver who often takes the brunt of rage. Olivia and Zach lost their tempers with Christen, physically attacking her. It's never okay to abuse a parent and kids must be stopped, but they trusted Christen to see them at their worst. She was their safe place to fall, but also their safe place to unleash. After a few months, this behavior stopped. Now they are affectionate and loving with their mother and would never think of hurting her. Parents must believe the turnaround will happen, and that there is nothing wrong with an angry child.

Not only do kids need to vent years of sadness, they also need to test parents. Often the Shepherd kids exploded and then asked if they would be sent back. They claimed they hated their new home and family. Constantly affirming that a child is loved and accepted no matter what is what it takes to prove a “forever family.” Kids will try and outlast a parent, and adoption can resemble a strange version of Survivor. Parents must stay strong. Eventually, most children shed their protective armor and attachment results, although the length of time that takes can vary.

Anxiety often eases as children attach and feel secure. Serena re-

quired toys piled on her at night to feel safe. (Parents can also buy weighted blankets for this.) She learned to recite positive thoughts and practice deep breathing to calm herself down. Her fear of abandonment subsided as trust was gained, as she watched her siblings explode while continuing to be loved, and in time the panic attacks and fear went away. On the other hand, Zach suffers from clinical anxiety, and because of his intellectual disability it is harder for him to find ways to relax. Unconsciously, Zach uses sensory seeking behaviors to regulate himself, whether it is rolling on the floor or spinning a toy in front of his eyes. His sensory processing issues likely won't go away, but the Shepherds have enlisted professional help, and Zach can gain tools that might help him meet his sensory needs in an appropriate way.

Vicarious trauma is something caregivers must watch for. Anyone spending time with a traumatized child can find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer pain the child experiences, and it is common for us to take it on as our own. When a parent feels inadequate or overwhelmed, resents their child, or thinks the adoption isn't working, they need support. Parents need breaks, advice, and encouragement. Connecting to counselors or support groups can help.

Parents must not give up. If they look for the positives, have faith in themselves, continue to role-model healthy coping strategies to their children, and find support for themselves while they meet the challenges of parenting an adopted child, loving families are the result. Love, acceptance, and consistency are the main components of healing, and children can attach, despite the odds. The Shepherds are a great example of this.



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Adoption Support Group

Every 2nd Thursday of the month

6:30pm-7:30pm

First Baptist Church

8200 W. 96th St.

Overland Park, KS

All families welcome (families interested in adopting, families who have adopted recently or many years ago, families in the process of adopting).

Childcare will be provided. Please email gnessner@kvc.org or call 913-956-5333 to reserve child care or with any questions.

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