

Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

November/December 2024

N F A P A

'I KNOW I'LL ALWAYS BE SECOND.': ADOPTIVE MOM SHARES GRIEF AND LOSS BEHIND KIDS' INTERNATIONAL, FOSTER CARE ADOPTIONS

Published by Elizabeth Grow

Adopting Internationally

"I always imagined I would adopt children someday. As a little girl, my baby dolls were all the Crayola shades. And as a young nurse working in a large children's hospital, I gravitated toward the kids with the complicated stories of foster care, orphanages, or kinship placements.

When my husband and I discussed our future dreams, we both agreed DNA doesn't make a family, kids need homes, and we were capable of loving a child who wasn't genetically connected to us. After almost dying of eclampsia with my first daughter, then having a critically ill newborn with my second, growing our family further through adoption was more than just an idea... it was a clear path forward.

Although it was unprompted, we weren't surprised when an inquiry packet for an adoption agency arrived in the mail one day. Taking it as a 'sign,' Ryan and I eagerly completed our first home study, with candles burning, freshly baked cookies on the counter, and a reference list a mile long. We attended the classes. Did the fundraisers. All the while, our hearts were

growing in love for children we hadn't yet seen or met.

I can remember telling a friend we wanted to do international adoption because I didn't want to 'share' my children with their birth family; that was my primary reason for taking the international route. At the time, we also honestly believed kids

in orphanages didn't have living family members to care for them. But I didn't know what I didn't know.

At the time, there weren't social media posts to shine a light on the loss each adopted child experiences. No one was tweeting about trauma in children from hard places. My idea of adoption was centered around, honestly, an image of a happy couple rescuing their children from the horrors of an orphanage. So when we were matched with our two sons from Rwanda, I really believed my love was all they needed.

The day we met our two sons behind a bright blue gate of an orphanage at the bottom of a dusty red

road in Rwanda was the day my life and my purpose shifted. Their blank eyes as my husband and I held them and cried and smiled happy smiles at the cameras should have caught my attention, but my rose colored glasses were just too thick.

After a few weeks of fighting the bureaucracy of embassies and lawyers and international laws, we wearily and joyfully



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Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association

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Attention Foster Parents!
Earn Your In-Service Hours While
Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a \$10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to Corinne@nfapa.org, send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Nov-Dec2024 We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!

- 1. TRUE OR FALSE. There are those moments when a child from foster care may feel guilty for experiencing joy and laughter with their foster family, they may feel that they are not only letting their birth mother or father down, they might even be betraying their birth parents and member of their biological family, causing even more grief, guilt, and anxiety within the child during this season of holiday joy.
2. FILL IN THE BLANKS. Allow him space to _____, if he needs to, and be prepared if he _____ to some behavior difficulties he had when he first arrived into your home.
3. FILL IN THE BLANKS. And so this is what it means to choose to parent another woman's child. I know I will always be _____. I know I walk a _____ having the honor of helping my child carry their grief, navigate love, and learn to hold space in between both.
4. TRUE OR FALSE. Trauma behaviors are hard, and kids who have chronic neglect, abuse, and loss know what love or trust or felt safety look like.
5. FILL IN THE BLANK. _____ is helped by true connections. If people are willing to put in the fight and go through the bad days, the reward on the other side is so much better.
6. FILL IN THE BLANK. My parents asked me if I wanted to be adopted. I think that's what I enjoyed the most—that they wanted to be clear that it was _____ of our decisions.
7. TRUE OR FALSE. "These kids' previous histories don't just end when you step into the picture. The birth family is part of who your child is."
8. FILL IN THE BLANKS. _____ is a developmental trauma that happens when a deep psychological wound develops after an infant is separated from its mother.
9. TRUE OR FALSE. Adoption loss is the only trauma in the world where the victims are expected by the whole of society to be grateful.
10. List 6 activities you can do with your children over holiday break.
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Phone #: _____

(Continued from page 1)

exited the plane to a crowd of welcome signs, eager embraces, warm casseroles, and everything in between.

Understanding Adoption Grief & Trauma

Those first years with our sons are a blur. Calling a friend to lament, I said, 'I thought we would all fall in love.' Her response still echoes in my mind. 'Kara, don't you remember? All two-year-olds are hard. Boys are difficult. It's no big deal.'

Our ignorance was as wide as the ocean between our boys' first home and their forever home. Trauma behaviors are hard, and kids who have chronic neglect, abuse, and loss don't know what love or trust or felt safety look like. My sons didn't know how to be loved and we didn't know how to parent beyond the traditional model, built on foundations of safety and trust.

The naughty kid in your child's class? That was ours. The mom who always looked like she'd just walked out of a fight club? Me, all day. The boys had lost their first mom and I was the next closest thing. I was the safe person to take out their fears, their anger, their exhaustion at — constantly trying to hold it all together.

Their beginning years — time without a consistent caregiver; without someone to kiss their ouchies, wipe their tears, feed and diaper them, and show up when they cried — that impacted them in ways most of the world is still far from understanding. And so we began to understand that as much as this was about helping our boys learn we were theirs forever, it was also about us meeting them where they were.

We learned as a family; taking all the classes, reframing our expectations, understanding grief and trauma, and aligning with other families navigating atypical parenting. Therapy, rehabilitation, and all the resources saved us. After a decade of hard work, it felt like the scaffolding of healing and trust had finally built a firm foundation for our sons.



Embracing Foster Care

We began welcoming teens from hard places, making room and knowing our home was equipped for the kids who hurt most. It wasn't unusual to have extra kids around. Our home became a soft landing for teens who may not have had anywhere to go. Our first children, our biological son and daughter, gained empathy and insight beyond anything their peers would ever possess. We all began to see difficult people as hurt people. And we were no longer weary or overwhelmed by them.

Then Covid-19 hit. As the rest of the world shut down, Ryan suggested we needed to open our home up to more. After years of teaching in a public school, he felt strongly there weren't enough foster families in our community, that our home was capable of helping and healing some of the hard behaviors that can accompany hurt kids.

We had also become passionate about creating spaces for healing, and working on the issues that lead to children losing their first families. Officially fostering seemed like a good fit. In our state, the expectation is that foster families come alongside a child's birth family; serving as a resource to them as much as a caregiver to the child.

Our first placement was a 6-month-old little girl. Our case worker called at 4 p.m. on a Friday, saying, 'Are you able to take a baby? Great, I will be there in 20.' A few moments later, with enough time for me to send an SOS text to round up some diapers, formula, and a couple of outfits, she pulled up with our Birdie. Unbuckling the sleeping baby, she quickly jotted down a couple of names and phone numbers on a sticky note, then said something about being in touch after the weekend.

This baby was not up for adoption. The goal from day one was for reunification. Our job was to help mom become a mom. To provide text updates, pictures, and examples of how a baby's schedule, routines, and daily cares should look. To invite her to join me for well-baby checks, nutrition evaluations, PT and OT appointments.

As amazing as that sounds on paper, the reality is that a broken family doesn't usually just shatter. A broken family has fractures. Hairline cracks that spread. Breaks that eventually run into one another until it's too much and the whole thing breaks.

The skills a parent needs to nurture, provide, and raise up a child to thrive in their world around them... it's not there. Or it's there, but it's damaged in ways that only make the work of loving and caring for tiny humans unstable and unsafe. The hope is that with the right resources, teaching, and support, children can safely return to their first family.

As much as we tried to do our part so that our Baby Bird could return to her first family, it wasn't working. Birdie would take some steps toward healthy behaviors, and then she would have a visit and we would be back to square one. Eating, sleeping, and soothing were all almost impossible for

her. Biological family options were extremely limited, and as weeks turned into months and months into a year, it became obvious Birdie was already forever home with us.

Continued Healing

I grieved for her first mom. It felt like a failure that we could not empower this woman to be able to experience the joy raising Birdie was. I grieved that the world had failed this woman too. She was once a hurt kid without the adults around her to ensure she didn't fall through the cracks, that she didn't become a statistic, that the cycle could end with her.

But something else amazing was happening in our home as we all worked to help Birdie feel safe, learn to trust, and learn to be loved. My sweet sons, the ones who never totally melted into my hugs, who weren't able to be real with me about their fears and worries and joys, the ones still unsure if they would have enough to eat, who lived in a state of hyper-vigilance for the world around them, those boys began to exhale.

As they learned to make bottles, find the right burping technique, learn about diaper rashes, and get the best giggles out of their Baby Bird, they also came full circle, finally, back to me.

One early spring day, when Birdie was about 20 months old, she became inconsolable. We had just survived another week of supervised, but stressful visits. I knew she wasn't hungry and she had already napped. She wanted me to hold her, but as I did, she did her best to push herself away from me.

After an hour of me trying to hold Birdie in this awkward position, while watching the rain fall, swaying back and forth, my son brought me a cup of hot tea. He said, 'Mom, I know how she feels. She wants you but she doesn't. Just be still and let her feel this.' After a few moments next to us, he gently took her out of my arms, wrapped them both in a blanket, and walked out in the rain.

I stood watching them walk together, her leaning on her brother and grieving a loss she knew in her soul, but couldn't yet understand. I watched as my son, who I fought to love for what felt like a lifetime, created a safe space for someone else, like I had tried to do so many times for him.

That same day, my other amazing Rwandan son asked me if I thought Birdie's mom would ever be able to parent. He went on to tell me this journey of trying to teach and support her had made him think about his own birth mom in ways he'd never done. He could express gratitude at the selflessness she had to let go of him. And that it was okay to never feel totally okay about that broken bond.

Adopting Birdie

A few months later, after I had grieved for Birdie's mom and the world that failed her, we filled the courthouse with all the familiar faces that had showed up for our Birdie. Parents from the bleachers of our sons' ballgames, neighbors we hadn't previously known, caseworkers, teammates, and family too,

all sat beside, behind, and around us as the state declared our Baby Bird to be forever home. Of course, her sister and brothers were right by her side.

And so this is what it means to choose to parent another woman's child. I know I will always be second. I know I walk a sacred path, having the honor of helping my child carry their grief, navigate love, and learn to hold space in between both. I don't believe everyone should foster or adopt. I wish it wasn't an option to grow families. I pray for a world where every baby is safe and supported and loved and cherished with their first moms. But until that day comes, I will continue to honor the juxtaposition of being the second mom to these precious kids."

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<https://www.lovethefamily.com/international-foster-care-adoption-grief-trauma/>



I WAS ADOPTED INTO THE PERFECT FAMILY FOR ME

Written by AdoptUSKids

When Victor Sims was an infant, he was placed into Florida's foster care system, where he stayed until he was adopted at the age of 12. Now an adult, Victor has been a successful advocate for children and youth.

Victor—who is very close with his adoptive family—shared his experience in foster care and adoption with AdoptUSKids.

What was your experience in foster care like?

I entered foster care when I was a baby. I don't know how many foster homes I was in, but I can remember 11.

I actually enjoyed going from home to home for a period of time because I got to know what I wanted to choose in a family based on those homes. For example, I experienced so many different traditions and holidays. One minute, I was celebrating Hanukkah. The next, I was going to Christmas! So it was a cool experience when it came to exposure to many things.

"When you're with the right family—when you connect with the right people—it's everything."

But while I enjoyed so many of those weird nuances that happened because I wasn't in a traditional home, the hardest part was the actual rejection when you hear the words that you're not going to be adopted. I remember when I was nine, about to turn ten, I thought to myself, "I'm about to hit double digits. I'm not ever getting adopted now." I really believed that.

And then, I came to my forever family in 2005! I had just turned ten. It was Christmas Eve. They called me their early Christmas present.

How were you given a voice in the adoption process?

My parents asked me if I wanted to be adopted. I think that's what I enjoyed the most—that they wanted to be clear that it was both of our decisions.

And my worker was very good at that, too. Even when I was younger, like seven or eight, she'd say, "The family doesn't just choose you, you also choose them."

I think that's why it doesn't feel like so much trauma. I would go back after being in a foster home and go, "You know, they weren't really a good fit anyways. I didn't like this thing about living there."

And because of how my worker talked to me about the process, I started making specific requests on homes.

What were your early memories with your adoptive family?

When they said they were going to adopt me—and others had said this before—it actually sounded believable. My biological sister was already living there. And they were the first people I called mom and dad. Even prior to being adopted, I never called them Mr. and Mrs. anything. It was just always "mom" and "dad."

And then, right before my 12th birthday, I ended up getting adopted.

What was it like being adopted into a family with your sibling?

My sister's name is Victoria. I changed my name after being adopted but wanted to remember where I came from, so I named myself after my sister. Victor and Victoria!

Beyond the name, being adopted with Victoria helped me stay connected to my biological family. Initially, I didn't want to connect with any of my family. We have a lot of siblings and I wasn't trying to find any of them.

The nice part is that Victoria really wanted to connect. She and my mom went on this whole scavenger hunt to find every one of our family members. The benefit is that when I got older, I was connected with all those other people that she connected with when I wasn't ready to. And next year, we're having a family reunion with our bio mom's side of the family.

In what other ways did your adoptive family help you stay connected with your bio family?

My sister and I have a whole other set of sibling groups, and my mom was good at continuing sibling connections. She'd say things like, "I'll take you over there to see them" and "Do you want them to come on vacations with us?"



She was always about those connections. That made it clear to us as kids that it was never a competition for her. She didn't make us feel like we needed to forget our bio family. She'd say, "Hey, that's part of who you are."

I love her so much for all of that.

What else makes your mom a great parent?

Before trauma-informed care was a thing people had a name for or talked about, she was living it. She just understood everything. Punishments weren't real punishments. She was very conscious about everything.

What I've learned from her is that when you're with the right family—when you connect with the right people—it's everything. I see my mom as the world.

Looking back now, what do you think about your experience in foster care?

In all, I don't regret the experience personally. I always look back at it and think, "Yes, it was long, but it was probably one of the most powerful and right experiences for me."

I was adopted into the perfect family for me. Looking back, this made all that worth it, because I found my family.

From your experience, is there anything that you want foster and adoptive parents to know?

Trauma is helped by true connections. If people are willing to put in the fight and go through the bad days, the reward on the other side is so much better.

If you want to help a young person, continue to connect.

Now you're a child welfare advocate. What drives you and what brings you hope?

What brings me hope is that, as time continues to go on, people in the field are intentional in making sure trauma is reduced year after year inside the foster care system.

I believe people who come into it really do have a good heart that just gets worn down. When I've gotten to work alongside other child welfare professionals, I've said things like, "Hey, I understand you're having a bad day but you remind me of this caseworker I had that I loved."

I also teach the practice I wish was available to every child. For example, I truly heard the voices of every one of the children who were under my care and influence. I was going to do whatever was necessary to make sure they were completely heard, seen, viewed, and valued.

And is your adoptive family still close?

We are the closest people you'll meet. I talk to my mom for probably an hour a day. My parents adopted seven kids and I'm always impressed that my mom can be everywhere at once.

But yes, all of us are really close. We have a family group chat. When Covid-19 first started, we got on the phone all the time. We even did a lip sync battle...which was a hard experience because of the lag time!

There's never a quiet moment!

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<https://blog.adoptuskids.org/i-was-adopted-into-the-perfect-family-for-me/>

SHOULD MY CHILDREN FEEL LUCKY THEY WERE ADOPTED?

Written by Alexandra Christensen

Adoption is trauma and an interview with my nine-year-old son.

I have three children who have adoption trauma. I also had to place my twin boys with another family at birth in an adoption. They likely experienced adoption trauma as well.

Adoption loss is the only trauma in the world where the victims are expected by the whole of society to be grateful.

— **Reverend Keith C. Griffith**

As early as the second trimester, an unborn baby is capable of recognizing its mother's voice. It can also pick up on signs of rejection while still in utero. When the baby is taken away from its first mother, even if placed in a loving family, it experiences trauma.



Stages of Adoption Trauma

There are different stages of adoption trauma that an adoptee experiences, whether adopted at birth or removed from their home and placed in foster care.

Relinquishment Trauma

Frequently it is ignored by mental health professionals, relinquishment trauma is a developmental trauma that happens when a deep psychological wound develops after an infant is separated from its mother.

I liken this to the first picture I had taken of myself and my youngest son when he was given to me at six months. I had a look of pure love and joy on my face. He had a look of utter horror and shock.

My heart goes out to him for all he must have been experiencing.

Scientific research shows that even newborns placed with an adoptive family straight from birth experience traumatic



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stress. By the time of birth, they are familiar with the sound of their mother's heartbeat, her language, sounds that typically accompany her life, different smells, the way she walks, and how active she is. Suddenly all that is familiar is wiped away from the newborn within a matter of minutes, and, for most, they are never to hear what has been familiar to them for 40 weeks now, again.

And with children who have gone through foster care and multiple placements, the trauma is only compounded even more.

It should be clear to note here that it is not the adoption that produces the trauma. It is the relinquishment and loss of what has been familiar to the child in his or her short life.

A child born to another woman calls me mommy. The magnitude of that tragedy and the depth of that privilege are not lost on me. — Jody Landers

Late Discovery Adoption

This refers to a person who was adopted but did not find out until they were an adult. Most adoptees who were not told they were adopted until later in life feel a deep sense of shock, denial, depression, anxiety, and betrayal. It can push them into an identity crisis and affect their family and intimate relationships. Late discovery adoption impacts the adoptee's psychological well-being. And for some, it can be earth-shattering.

Racial Differences

Initially, a black child raised by a white family will not think of him or herself as different while young. But as that child grows, they will start to notice the differences, which will most likely profoundly affect their development and sense of value.

I have a black son who, though his skin color is only slightly darker than mine or his younger brother's, still feels like he's missing out on something. His hair is much more coarse than mine or my youngest son's, so he cannot style it the same way. But I think the most significant factor is that he has an older adopted brother, who is white. He has milky white skin, freckles splashed on his cheeks and nose, and sandy blond hair that flows to the side in the typical fashion of all the surfers in our community. And my son wants to look like that, too.

When relinquishment happens before the child turns three, the memories of loss are stored in an unconscious part of the brain as implicit memories. Implicit memories are not coherent thoughts and sentences but fragments of feelings and emotions, images, sounds, and physical sensations stored within the body. This tends to leave the adopted child feeling like something is missing or that they have a hole inside that cannot be filled.

After reading more about the trauma adoptees experience, I sat down and talked to my middle son, who will be nine years old in two days. I told him that people need to know what it's like for adopted kids, so I wanted him to be honest

because what he said to me could help another adoptive parent understand their adopted child better. Then, I asked him the following questions.

Do You Feel Different Because you are Adopted?

Yes. Well, I feel like, why would my first mother drink alcohol? I wish she loved God and just tried to stop. I just wish someone would have told her about God so she would stop drinking and doing bad things. She would know God, and she would stop, and she would always trust Him.

My son doesn't seem to feel different because he was adopted, but because of the effects the alcohol and drug consumption had on him when he was growing inside his mother's womb. There is some brain damage due to alcohol consumption while pregnant, which makes life more challenging for him.



Do You Feel Angry That I Adopted You?

No.

I think that, at times, he is very angry that he was put in this situation in the first place. I have seen his anger, and it feels more like confusion and grief expressed as anger. But I also do not think he blames me for adopting him.

This isn't the case with my oldest son, though. I do feel like he holds me responsible for the loss of his first family, even though he didn't enter foster care until he was ten.

Do You Ever Think About Your First Family But

You're Afraid to Tell Me?

Yes. Sometimes when I'm in my room, I think about them. I want to know more about my first mom, but I'm just scared to tell you what to say when I want to know something. So I just don't say anything. (His exact words)

I was glad I asked this question. We had discussed his first mom before, as he brought her up. But then he seems to draw a line, and the conversation ends. I let him know that I would always answer his questions, but I had been waiting for him to ask me because I didn't know if he wanted to know more or not. I told him it's normal to want to know about his first family, and whenever he wanted to talk about them, I would answer anything I could. Then I asked if he wanted to see the only picture I had of his first mom, and he said yes. So I showed him the picture I found online.

Do You Feel Like it Was Your Fault You Were Taken Away?

No.

He really doesn't seem to act this way. He seems more affected by the fact that he was taken from his first family, who he has no memory of, but he doesn't feel like he did something to cause his removal as some kids do.

Do You Feel Like I will leave You One Day or Give You Away?

I do feel like that. Like I could be taken away. Like, whenever we go to a store, I feel like someone's gonna rob me. Like when they walk fast in the store, I panic. I did it today, too, when we were over by the balloons. There was a guy behind me, and it looked like he was speeding, and so I was, uh, a little bit running to get behind Jacob.

I believe this type of trauma response is more from having been moved from placement to placement before coming to his final home and our family. This is a typical fear experienced by kids who have gone into foster care or were removed from their first family.

Do You Feel Like You Are Too Much to Handle?

Yeah. I feel like when I'm like, when I grow up a little bit, like, I talk to myself and say it doesn't look like I'm special. I know I'm special at doing flips and skateboarding, but I don't feel special — in the world.

This makes me sad.

If you adopted your children, parents, please listen to them. Let them talk about their fears and their loss. And let them grieve.

I know this is a challenge, especially if they were removed from their first family due to abuse and neglect. It is so hard for me to give my sons age-appropriate information that will satisfy their need for answers because the information I have will likely cause more trauma when they learn the whole story.

Adoption is trauma. This fact is not dependent on your ability to recognize it. — author unknown

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<https://medium.com/la-parent-is-born/should-my-children-feel-lucky-they-were-adopted-d85ac18ea945>

MAINTAINING CONTACT BETWEEN BIRTH AND ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Written by AdoptUSKids

It is really important for adoptive families to maintain contact with birth families. Research, including one report from Child Welfare Information Gateway, shows that this benefits children in many ways. We've also heard about the importance of maintaining contact from adults who were adopted as children and teenagers.

To help adoptive parents understand the benefits, Courtney McIntyre lends her experience as an adoption social worker in this article. She has come across many birth and adoptive families in North Carolina who have successfully formed connections.

Benefits to the child

Your child will experience the benefits of having some form of contact with their birth family, even if contact is not consistent or routine. These benefits include the following:

- **Lowers anxiety by having access to information:** "One thing that I've noticed is that kids never stop thinking about their birth families," Courtney explains. Children and youth will have questions. When they have information, this lessens their anxiety and feelings of hopelessness.
- **Allows your child to understand their history:** The birth family is part of a child's history. In addition to emotional belonging, there are many ways that knowing a child's history is helpful, such as in accessing their medical background.
- **Leads to higher self-esteem:** When birth families aren't in the picture and aren't talked about, children often wonder what is wrong with their birth parents. From there, it's easy to jump to thoughts like, "Is there something wrong with me, too?" Maintaining contact can prevent such feelings and thoughts.

Addressing potential concerns from parents

Having established these benefits, you may still have questions. During her career, Courtney has heard concerns from adoptive parents about forming relationships with birth families. She discusses these below.

- **I want to maintain authority:** You may feel intimidated

by the relationship your child would have with their birth parents. But, Courtney assures you, you'll remain the parental figure.

- ***I'm concerned that the birth parents may not be in a stable place:*** You can determine whether a birth parent is experiencing instability by keeping in contact. There are, in the vast majority of cases, periods of stability for everyone. As Courtney explains, "There are always positives: strive to find them and maximize them."
- ***We are unable to have in-person visits. Should we stop there?:*** It's best to maintain some kind of contact, such as through emails, letters, and social networks.
- ***My child is young, and I'm planning not to tell them they are adopted.*** So, maintaining contact isn't possible: "Studies have shown kids do better whenever they know the truth," Courtney explains. .

Strategies for maintaining contact

"You can be creative. The biggest part is just making that effort to have some kind of positive connection," Courtney says.

Consider creating an agreement to meet quarterly or yearly, depending on what is possible in terms of travel and other logistics. Try to plan visits around a child's birthday or a holiday. You can do activities that the child enjoys, like going to the park or the zoo.

There are ways to keep contact in addition to in-person visits:

- Connect over social media, in group chats, or through email.
- Put pictures of the birth parents in a child's room and in their life book.
- Create a blog where you add updates and the birth family can post pictures and updates as well.

Finally, some states have post-adoption social workers who can actually help you maintain contact!

Final thoughts

Maintaining contact with birth families is important to a child's sense of belonging and well-being. And there are a lot of approaches that can work, depending on your family's circumstances. The important thing is to try. As Courtney says, "This is such an important piece of adoption, especially from foster care." She adds, "These kids' previous histories don't just end when you step into the picture. The birth family is part of who your child is."

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EFFECTIVE PARENTING: EMBRACING DISCIPLINE OVER PUNISHMENT

Children can learn to self-regulate, handle their emotions, and be in control of themselves, which ultimately leads to self-discipline. Offering punishment, rather than taking the time to teach a child right from wrong, is doing them a disservice in numerous ways.

Many adults mistakenly equate punishment and discipline, assuming they are interchangeable terms. However, a closer examination reveals that they hold distinct meanings and approaches.

Children are inherently prone to making mistakes, testing boundaries, and occasionally defying instructions. These behaviors are entirely normal aspects of childhood development. It is essential for adults to recognize that young children do not possess an innate sense of right and wrong. This moral compass is cultivated through a series of complex cognitive skills that evolve over time, and its development is greatly influenced by role modeling and positive reinforcement.

As responsible adults and loving care providers, we bear the crucial task of guiding children toward a sense of morality and ethical behavior as they evolve into the best versions of themselves.

Punishment

Punishing a child for doing something wrong is never the answer. Some may argue there are forms of positive punishment, but I would simply call this discipline. Punishment means to make the child suffer. Examples of punishment include

scolding, spanking, enforcing even more household rules, and demanding an immense amount of labor from a child. Each of these examples has one main theme in common; they hurt instead of teach the child. Punishments hurt children... physically, yes, but also mentally and emotionally.

Children can learn to self-regulate, handle their emotions, and be in control of themselves, which ultimately leads to self-discipline. Offering punishment, rather than taking the time to teach a child right from wrong, is doing them a disservice in numerous ways.

SnuggleBuddies® Help Big Emotions & Meltdowns

Children are growing at such a fast pace, and we cannot expect them to remember all the many things they are learning. They are learning new things at school, from their friends, from their extracurricular activities, and from their families. We often assume a child is being willful in their acting out, while many times, children are simply feeling overwhelmed and dysregulated, unable to access the new social-emotional skills they are still learning.

As adults, we are still learning as well. Give yourself some grace if you slip up and resort to punishment rather than discipline with your child. Instead, stay curious about your own parenting triggers, and remember that learning how to use discipline instead of punishment in your parenting is a journey, especially if these skills were not modeled for you when you were a child.

Discipline

Discipline, which originates from the root word “disciple” focuses on teaching right from wrong by leading and guiding by example. By teaching rather than punishing, adults can turn challenging moments into teaching moments, with the added benefit of strengthening a child’s sense of trust, safety, and connection. For example, going with an upset child to a calming corner when he/she is overwhelmed or having a tantrum in order to help calm their body is an affirming way for children to learn how to manage frustration, disappointment, and ultimately, to form the neuro pathways they will need to be capable of self-regulation in the future.

Creating a space for children to practice calming down during a heated moment is the perfect example of positive discipline. The Calming Corner Bundle is a helpful set of guided resources for caregivers who are new to these concepts and could benefit from step-by-step support in shifting from punishment to positive discipline methods.

Communication is another key life skill children benefit from having modeled for them when they receive discipline rather than punishment. Once a child has calmed their body, it is crucial to talk to them about their feelings. Keeping this communication simple, concrete, and affirming is most conducive to their formative learning. For this reason, having a feelings chart and/or other tangible tools is ideal, assisting children as they practice putting words to their feelings, as well

as the many thoughts and needs that often live underneath big feelings.

Discipline and consistency go hand-in-hand, therefore using familiar tools with young children again and again as you grow their capacity to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions is ideal, and opens up the space for children to both think and talk about what they want to do differently next time. Once calm and regulated, children can be guided through self-reflection for the learning and the growth the moment has to bring.

When we respond to the source of children’s “mis” or unwanted behaviors, rather than react to the behavior (aka the symptom) alone, children naturally stop repeating the same challenging behaviors over and over.

With positive discipline, young children learn the life skills they need to grow into compassionate and resilient adults, rather than being punished for not having been born with a mastery of them.

Adult Behavior Determines Child Behavior

Children are going to do wrong from time to time, but having the idea of making them “pay” for what they have done wrong is not okay. This can result in a negative observation of themselves, being frightened of others, or never truly learning how to actually behave. Truthfully, it teaches the child it is okay to inflict pain, embarrassment, and suffering. If a child sees their parents spank their sibling, they are going to be extremely confused when they get in trouble for hitting their sibling. Adults must behave toward the child in the same way they want the child to behave. This is one of the exact reasons

NFAPA SUPPORT GROUPS

Foster parenting is hard. You face challenges as you parent children and youth with a trauma history that your friends and family do not understand. Please join us in one of our support groups where you can find mutual support and opportunities to discuss parenting joys, challenges and strategies as you navigate the life of a foster parent.

Faces: Online Foster Parent Support Group Chat on Facebook

- Meets Tuesday nights at 9:00 (CT).
- Contact Robbi at 402-853-1091. You must have a Facebook account.

Parenting Across Color Lines

- Fourth Tuesday of the month – for multi-racial families.
- 6:15pm at Connection Point, Lincoln. Pot Luck Supper prior to meeting.
- RSVP required – Contact Felicia, (402) 476-2273 or Jessica at <mailto:jessica@nfapa.org>

Adoptive Mom Support Group in Lincoln

- Second Friday of the month, for adoptive moms.
- 7:00-9:00 pm
- RSVP required, Felicia, (402) 476-2273

it is important to focus on positive parenting, rather than punitive parenting.

UNICEF has an interesting article called *How to Discipline Your Child the Smart and Healthy Way*. In this article, the author goes into great detail regarding the ins and outs of discipline and punishment. It states, “The evidence is clear: shouting and hitting simply do not work and can do more harm than good in the long run. Repeated shouting and hitting can even adversely impact a child’s entire life. The continued “toxic stress” it creates can lead to a host of negative outcomes like higher chances of school dropout, depression, drug use, suicide, and heart disease.”

The evidence is clear: when adults display aggressive behavior toward children, it inevitably has a detrimental impact on them. However, we possess the power to break this cycle. Instead of resorting to the punitive methods, such as corporal punishment, that many previous generations employed, we can choose more effective approaches. Raising a well-rounded child hinges on providing proper discipline, guidance..... and love.

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https://genmindful.com/blogs/mindful-moments/discipline-versus-punishment?fbclid=IwAR1e9loqp_8Xl0bO5KoBov9uscs8-Bscew1V9k0r5OhVvkuf3uwCXTU0xw/lk



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT IN PARENTING AND WHY IT MATTERS

Written by Kerry Flatley, Certified Parent Educator

Encouragement is more effective than praise in guiding kids’ mindset and behavior. Here’s why:

We want our children to feel how proud we are of them because, after all, we’re proud when they do their best or achieve a goal.

But how can we communicate our admiration in a way that expresses our true sentiments and inspires our kids to want to do better in the future?

On the surface, it may seem like simply showing our delight in our children’s accomplishments is enough. And there’s no doubt our children appreciate it when we acknowledge their achievements.

But often the message we intend to convey to our kids – through praise – is interpreted in unintended ways by our kids. What we really want to do is use words of encouragement to our children to help them continue to grow and succeed.

What’s the difference between praise and encouragement?

On the surface, praise and encouragement seem to be nearly identical reactions to an accomplishment. But there are, in fact, subtle differences.

And most importantly, there’s a big difference in the way our children internalize them.

When kids are praised more than encouraged, they tend to develop a mindset that seeks external motivation (think = rewards, grades, compliments). Someone with this mindset is unlikely to step up and take initiative unless something will be given to them in return.

Whereas, when a child is primarily encouraged, research shows kids develop internal motivation (they’re led from within to accomplish a goal free of any incentives). This mindset serves kids well as they don’t need anything from other people to find motivation.

This chart illustrates the main contrasting differences between praise and encouragement:

Praise	Encouragement
Focuses on the end result or accomplishment	Focuses on the effort or persistence

A judgment that typically includes a subjective opinion	An observation or question
Non-specific and tends to obviously exaggerate	Specific and does not exaggerate
Can cause kids to lose sight of what they want to achieve	Causes kids to reflect internally about their accomplishments, progress, and goals
Kids begin to feel they need praise from others to be successful	Kids do not need encouragement to feel successful, but they do feel supported
Diminishes self-esteem and self-confidence	Boosts self-esteem and self-confidence

The first row is perhaps what distinguishes praise and encouragement the most. Praise focuses solely on what was achieved, whereas encouragement focuses on effort.

By placing the focus on effort, we are inviting kids to consider what led them to success so they can hopefully replicate it in the future. It also shows that we are noticing their hard work and that we consider this to be more important than the outcome.

If we only focus on the outcome, kids may do whatever it takes, including cheating or lying, to get to the intended goal.

What are examples of praise vs. encouragement?

What does praise and encouragement look like in real life? Here are a few contrasting statements that show the difference:

Praise	Encouragement
“I’m proud of you for making a goal!”	“All that hard work during practices appears to have paid off. It must have felt good to have scored a goal.”
“What a beautiful drawing!”	“The way you blended the green and blue colors is very unique. What do you like most about this drawing?”
“You’re so smart!”	“I’ve seen you practicing your Spanish vocabulary a lot over the past few weeks. Do you think that helped you do well on the test?”
“Good girl!”	“Putting your dishes away really helps when it comes time to clean the kitchen. Thank you.”
“Good job!”	“You figured it out all by yourself.”

“I’m so proud of you!”	“You should be proud of yourself.”
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What are the drawbacks of praise?

Many parents don’t understand why praising their children has drawbacks.

After all, their children often glow with satisfaction when they hear their parents say “good job.”

Kids do enjoy getting praise. Who wouldn’t? It feels good to receive validation.



The problem with praise is that it creates dependency. It’s natural for kids to seek the acceptance and approval of their parents – the most important adults in their lives.

But too much praise can cause children to feel that their parents only approve of them – or love them – when they accomplish a goal or task.

So they seek out opportunities to achieve simply so they can receive more praise and thus their parents’ approval. Take the praise or reward away, and the child may feel they have let down their parents, making the accomplishment no longer desirable.

Praise can also create competition. Siblings may unconsciously strive to receive more praise and recognition than their sister or brother with the goal of obtaining more of

their parents' love and acceptance.

But what if I find it hard to stop praising my kids?

Let's be real for a minute...it can be difficult to stop using phrases like "Good job!" or "I love it!" when our child achieves a goal or shows us something they've created.

After years of conditioning, it's like our minds are programmed with these responses.

Most likely, these are phrases our own parents, teachers, and coaches used with us as a way to express their delight in our achievements.

So the words just spill out.

But don't worry. If we slip and find ourselves responding with these trite statements, it's not the end of the world!

Especially if we follow them up with words of encouragement – focusing on the specifics of our daughter's drawing, for example, or the work our son put into building a boxcar.

The important thing is to turn our attention from the goal they've achieved to the process they followed to get there, helping our children reflect on their perseverance and effort.

The more we invite our children to do this, the more they will begin doing it themselves.

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https://selfsufficientkids.com/difference-between-praise-and-encouragement/?fbclid=IwAR1H68Dq3IQf1Re8JLzH97nBSScZpSbgJ_MzMbcEPIjLNgqjVNxVB27yRY



FOSTER CARE & THE HOLIDAYS

Written by Dr. John N. DeGarmo, Ed.D.

Encore article because it's a Great one.

The stockings are hung, by the chimney with care, in hopes that...In hopes of what? For many children who have been placed into the foster care system, they have come from homes where there was no Christmas, there was no hope. They have come from families that did not celebrate a holiday. They have come from environments where there were no presents, no tree. They have come from homes where there was not holiday joy or love.

The Holiday season is upon us. Christmas, Hanukah, New Years, Kwanzaa; these are times that can be extremely difficult for many foster children. During this time of Holiday Cheer, many foster children are faced with the realization that they will not be "home for the holidays," so to speak, with their biological family members. When they wake up Christmas morning, and are surrounded by people who just may be strangers to them, strangers who are laughing and having fun, it can be a very difficult time for them, indeed. To be sure, it is a day that is a stark reminder to these children that they are not with their own family. It is during the holidays when families are supposed to be together, yet these children in care are not. They are not with their families, and they may not know when they will see them next.

Along with this, foster children also struggle with trying to remain loyal to their birth parents while enjoying the holiday season with their foster family. There are those moments when a child from foster care may feel guilty for experiencing joy and laughter with their foster family, they may feel that they are not only letting their birth mother or father down, they might even be betraying their birth parents and member of their biological family, causing even more grief, guilt, and anxiety within the child during this season of holiday joy. Indeed, this can be a very emotionally stressful time for all involved.

As one who has fostered many children, myself, during the holiday time, I have found that it is important to address these issues beforehand. Before Thanksgiving, before Christmas, before Hanukah; even before family members and friends come to visit, foster parents need to prepare their foster child ahead of time.

To begin with, foster parents can best help their foster child by spending some time and talking about the holiday. Perhaps the holiday being celebrated in their new home is one that their birth family never celebrated, or is a holiday that is unfamiliar with them. Let the foster child know how your family celebrates the holiday, what traditions your family celebrate, and include the child in it.

Ask your foster child about some of the traditions that his

family had, and try to include some of them into your own home during the holiday. This will help him not only feel more comfortable in your own home during this time, but also remind him that he is important, and that his birth family is important, as well. Even if his traditions are ones that you do not celebrate in your own home, try to include some of his into your own holiday celebration, in some way and some fashion.

Far too many children have come to my own home and have never celebrated their birthday, have never sung a Christmas carol, have never opened up a present. Perhaps you have had similar experiences, as well. Sadly, this is not uncommon for children in foster care. It is important to keep in mind that many foster children may come from a home where they did not celebrate a particular season, nor have any traditions in their own home. What might be common in your own home may be completely new and even strange to your foster child. This often includes religious meanings for the holiday you celebrate. Again, take time to discuss the meaning about your beliefs to your foster child beforehand.

More than likely, your foster child will have feelings of sadness and grief, as he is separated from his own family during this time of family celebration.

After all, he is separated from his family during a time that is supposed to be centered AROUND family. However much you provide for him, however much love you give to him, you are still not his family.

Like so many children in foster care, they want to go home, to live with their family members, despite the abuse and trauma they may have suffered from them, and despite all that you can and do offer and provide for him. Therefore, this time of holiday joy is especially difficult.

You can help him by allowing him to talk about his feelings during the holidays. Ask him how he is doing, and recognize that he may not be happy, nor enjoy this special time.

Look for signs of depression, sadness, and other emotions related to these. Allow him space to privately grieve, if he needs to, and be prepared if he reverts back to some behavior difficulties he had when he first arrived into your home. You may find that he becomes upset, rebellious, or complains a lot. Along with this, he may simply act younger than he is during this time. After all, he is trying to cope with not being with his own family during this time when families get together. These feelings and these actions are normal, and should be expected. You can also help your foster child by sending some cards and/or small gifts and presents to their own parents and birth family members. A card or small gift to his family members can provide hope and healing for both child and parent, and help spread some of the holiday cheer that is supposed to be shared with all.

Each family has that crazy old Aunt Ethel, loud and obnoxious Uncle Fred, and the ever hard of hearing and over whelming Grandma Lucy.

Your family is used to these relatives and their personalities,

your child in foster care is not.

If you have family members visit your home, prepare your foster child for this beforehand. Let him know that the normal routine in your home may become a little “crazy” during this time, that it may become loud, and describe some of the “characters” from your own family that may be coming over to visit. Remind him of the importance of using good behavior and manners throughout this period. Along with this, remind your own family members that your foster child is a member of your family, and should be treated as such.

Remind them that he is to be treated as a member of the family, and not to judge him or his biological family members, or fire questions at him. This also includes gift giving. If your own children should be receiving gifts from some of your family members, your foster child should, as well. Otherwise, your foster child is going to feel left out, and his sadness and grief will only increase.

Be prepared, though, for some in your family not to have presents and gifts for him. Have some extra ones already wrapped, and hidden away somewhere, ready to be brought out, just in case.

With a little preparation beforehand from you, this season of joy can be a wonderful time for your foster child, one that may last in his memory for a life time, as well as in your memory, too. After all, the gift of love is one that can be shared, not only during the holidays, but all year long.

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