



Successful Adoptive Families

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Characteristics of Successful Adoptive Families

The adoption journey is resplendent with unforeseen detours, mountaintop experiences, formidable challenges—and magnificent views of God’s grace all along the way. Without preparation, this journey can be more than challenging. With awareness and planning, the journey can be one that promotes growth, blessings, and healing for all involved. Here are a few things you will need for a successful adoption journey.

The adoption journey begins with a *commitment for life*. Similar to the vows taken in marriage, the adoption process demands commitment in sickness and in health, and for richer or for poorer. Adoptive parents must begin their journey faithfully and fearlessly. As the apostle James exhorts: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). As adoptive parents stay the course and complete the journey, they experience the blessings that God promises.

The adoption journey is a *walk by faith* and must be approached with the same faithful attitudes and fearless abandon that God requires of every aspect of your Christian walk. Faith is imperative. In Exodus 14:13-14, soon after the people of Israel escaped from Egypt, they questioned Moses and God as they faced the fear of their imminent death in the desert. “Do not be afraid,” Moses answered them, “Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:13-14). You, too, may experience difficult times when you wonder why God has brought you on this journey. From the very beginning, adoptive parents must acknowledge their fears, embrace a fearless love, and stand firm and still, trusting God.

What does it take to embrace a *fearless love*? You began your journey of adoption with a heart of love, of course, focused on the child who was to come into your home. You prepared your home, your family, and your finances—but perhaps without looking at your own heart first. Yet this internal journey is a crucial part of the process that cannot be overlooked.

Real love allows you as the adoptive parent to examine your own fears. Only in your confrontation of these fears can a fearless love be grown. It takes courage to ask those difficult questions about the fears that reside deep within your spirit. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

As we lay our fears at the feet of Jesus, He is able to love us with His perfect love, and out of that overflow we can love our children unconditionally.

Your faith, of course, is what gives you this foundation of love and commitment, coupled with the model of selflessness that parenting demands. We know from Scripture that “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). For many, perhaps even you, adoption—looking after orphans—is a direct expression of personal faith and obedience to God.



Without this foundational faith as part of the journey, you may end up on a detour as you attempt to implement the world's wisdom. With a heart of faith you can find the wisdom that God desires to give you as a parent to your particular child.

You may encounter unplanned and unexpected obstacles in your journey as your child exhibits manipulation, defiance, aggression, depression and other challenging behaviors. Unconditional love provides the highway for this journey. You need faith in a loving Father so that you can love your adopted children in their healing journey.

Faith is staying power when love wanes. It enables you to see your children's needs from God's perspective and—despite various stressors and distractions—successfully stay in the journey for the long haul.

The Ability to Cope with Stress is Essential

It is through the expression, processing, and understanding of our own fears that we can calm our stress. Both parents and children experience stress, so it is imperative that we understand the role stress plays in our relationships, particularly the unique stresses for adopted children.

Stress is triggered through a sensory event, and when this trigger is activated, the amygdala responds with a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. This alarm reaction activates the central nervous system. Without the subsequent release of cortisol, the child may become hypervigilant toward all situations, perceiving every event as a threat. This arousal can be mitigated through positive repetition in the environment and in relationships.

As well, parents must be aware of their own amygdala responses to stressors. Without this self-awareness, we react to others out of fear, rather than responding from a place of love. Self-awareness and an understanding of the dynamics of your family, both past and present, help to circumvent potential challenges once a child enters your home. Insight and mindful awareness allows the adoptive parent to become what the child needs during the adoptive experience.

For example, a child adopted at age five goes to a department store with his mother, walks through the cologne section en route to the clothing department, and then immediately becomes agitated and starts crying and yelling. The mother, unaware of what is going on, finds herself angry, scared, and frustrated and easily displays a negative behavioral reaction to her son. She may respond by yelling at him or grabbing him roughly and leaving the store.

A mother who understands that trauma occurred in her son's first three years of his life demonstrates emotional flexibility, not rigidity. The first step she could do, whether she understood the trigger or not, would be to sit on the floor in the store and say to her son, "I'm not going anywhere, you are safe." The child calms after a few minutes because the mother is calm. She doesn't react to his behavior with her own stress, but attempts to discern that his behavior has a reason behind it. Many adopted children cannot express their pain or prior trauma through their words, so they use their behavior.



This mother may later discover that her child was around an angry man, the boyfriend of her mother, who wore the cologne he smelled. This smell acted as a trigger to his stored trauma memory and caused him pain, which manifested in his behavior. But whether she ever understands the reason, she has calmed his deeper fear with her reaction. Your own stress regulation during these acting out episodes is vital. You are calming the child as he expresses his pain.

Also important to consider is that adoptive children will trigger any unresolved issues adoptive parents may have. These issues may include child abuse, family death, uncontrollable anger, a parent's absence, failed marriage, relative incest, alcohol dependence, generational trauma, financial difficulties, spiritual warfare, emotional depression, or unresolved infertility. Because these traumatic events may be stored unconsciously in the state level of memoryⁱ, they rear up as ugly monsters when triggered.

Trauma must be expressed and processed to be understood. Once understood, the trauma may be integrated into our lives, without holding us captive to its power. While most of us strive for resolution because we want our lives to be neat and tidy, the focus must be on *integration* rather than resolution. If these traumatic events of the past are not processed, parents will continue to be triggered by their child's behaviors.

The best gift an adoptive parent can give her adopted child is to be regulated and to create a regulated environment. To be regulated means the ability to experience and maintain stress within one's window of tolerance. In contrast, if one member of the family is dysregulated, the entire family system experiences the ramifications. When a stressor event is prolonged, overwhelming or unpredictable, or if the events continue on unexpressed, unprocessed, and misunderstood, additional stress occursⁱⁱ. Only when these traumatic events are processed in the context of a loving, regulated relationship can the adoptive parent be free to parent from a place of love, not fear. Then she can truly respond, not react to her child's behaviors.

This beginning leg of the journey requires flexibility in expectations about the child coupled with the ability to change your expectations to match the capabilities of the child you adopt. When we are flexible and adaptive, we can demonstrate a true acceptance of the child, her differences and her needs. In the book, *Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You*, James Friesen states that "wounded people heal in relationships . . . Growth, repair, maturity, and faith development are all intimately tied to relationships. People do need to achieve wholeness in a fractured world."ⁱⁱⁱ

When a child is removed from his birth mother, he experiences trauma. This trauma can be mitigated through an authentic relationship with the adopted parent. You must be aware of the trauma first and then understand the power of relationship—how it must be a lifelong commitment with flexibility and acceptance during the journey. You may adopt a child who is older and did not have a nurturing home environment the first years of his life. These children may take longer to heal, however, all healing takes place in the context of relationship.



This healing is parallel to the healing Jesus promises when He says to us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29).

Build Up Support All Along the Way

Journeys take on different dimensions when we are accompanied by others. Adoptive parents who develop informal networks of consistent and positive support from family, friends, other adoptive parents, and neighbors successfully reach their destination—perhaps stretched, but strong.

Your entire adoptive family benefits from the emotional, financial, spiritual, and social support that your formal and informal networks provide. Professional resources provide insight and assistance to your child and family. Friends and family minister to your adoptive family by praying for your family, providing meals, giving respite, offering friendship, and promising acceptance.

Never underestimate your need for support, and never expect that you have to make it on your own to be successful. The most successful adoptive families are those who know they need support and know how to draw upon every resource available.

Required luggage for this trip is a *sense of humor*. Humor helps everyone keep things in perspective. It also helps you not take things too personally.

When humor is coupled with patience, adoptive parents can remain calm and empathetic. As previously explained, a calm, regulated relationship promotes attachment and bonding. When parents are stressed, the child reflects this stress and amplifies it. In response, parents often become more stressed, making them unable to bond to their child, and interrupting their child’s attachment. Finding the funny side of a difficult issue or having a good laugh go a long way to reducing stress.

If you are married, *you and your spouse* must keep your marriage relationship and journey as even more important than your adoption journey. You may be tempted to pour all your energy into your child and let your relationship with one another run on battery. Doing so will only prove dangerous to your marriage and to your child. Without the strength of a marriage cemented by a commitment to God and one another, parenting will prove to be more difficult and less effective.

The pressure of meeting the unrelenting needs of your child, especially an adopted child, can reveal the weakness of each parent and the flaws found within the marriage. Take these issues seriously. Admit your tendency to blame or blow up or pull away, and seek to let God change you. Reaffirm your love to each other and keep your mutual destination—as a couple and as parents—clearly in mind.



Aim for Success Over the Long Haul

As an adoptive parent, always have faith that you are doing the right thing. You may have to make choices that are best for your child in the face of what seemingly everyone else is telling you. Making these choices takes *courage*.

For example, suppose you bring home a baby you just adopted. Everyone wants to see, cuddle, and touch your new adopted child. But one of the best things you can do for your child is to spend time with her with plenty of skin-on-skin cuddling in a calm and quiet environment with minimal distractions. These first days and weeks are paramount to the bonding that needs to occur. When the child's internal state of fear and stress is soothed, the child has an opportunity for healing.^{iv}

Friends and family can visit after you've invested this time with your child; you need not be overly concerned with what they think. Be brave enough to tell others what is best for you and your child. Discouragement is the opposite of courage—and courage will combat any discouragement you may face along the way.

Galatians 6:9 provides further direction, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Hebrews 12:1 also encourages us to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Still, many things can distract adoptive parents from success both short-term and over the long haul. The biggest distraction to many adoptive parents is their sense of isolation during the journey, perhaps due in part to the lack of understanding of the needs of the adopting family. Additionally, financial pressures or concerns may be distracting. Lack of progress toward goals or expectations may also prove to be challenging interruptions to the journey. Parents may become discouraged or off-track if their focus deviates from the planned journey.

To prevent losing sight of the journey's goal, a map is helpful. The *adoption journey's roadmap* is composed of training, agency support, tangible physical help and ongoing education. Make sure you consult your roadmap often. Don't be afraid to ask for help when needed and don't be frozen in your fears of what others will think or say.

With a realistic road map, families can be flexible in their roles and responses and not take behaviors personally. These informed parents will listen to the child's behaviors because the behaviors will lead to the solution.

For example, traumatized children often cannot formulate the words to express their feelings and pain; their actions, however, scream out loudly. With this in mind, adoptive parents understand that children are not always purposefully trying to manipulate and be difficult. Indeed, these children's brains have been changed due to neglect, abuse, or even attachment challenges. As a result, they must be parented lovingly and tenderly. Knowing this, focus on responsibility, not blame, in your interactions with your children. As children



heal, you will be able to teach and guide them more effectively in the crucial areas of character and responsibility.

A realistic roadmap allows you to pack vital knowledge and understanding; particularly of a child's developmental stages and tasks. At whatever age the child experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect, his development may be arrested. Some adoptive parents will bring their child into their family shortly after birth while others will adopt an older child, perhaps one with special needs. Awareness of the child's life before adoption helps the adoptive parents be prepared for the adoption journey.

For example, if a child experienced domestic violence in utero, that child may be hyper-vigilant to loud noises, touch, or other sensory stimuli. Armed with this information, the adoptive parents can choose parenting responses that allow the child to express and process those difficult feelings and memories in an environment and relationship that is safe, loving, and accepting, not one of fear.

The best journeys include *opportunities for rest and relaxation*. The journey of adoption requires more than the usual amount of self-care, something easily overlooked in the process of taking care of a child's vital needs. Even if you are thrilled to spend your best time and energy focused on the child and her needs, you still must make an effort to rejuvenate your own mind, body, and spirit. Only when you are growing in health and strengthened in spirit, can you provide the restorative relationship so desperately needed by your children.

Through this restorative relationship, you will find the Lord healing you as well. The journey, while arduous, provides blessings, hope, and healing beyond measure to both you and your child. Remember, "love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8).

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ⁱ Heather T. Forbes and B. Bryan Post, *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control* (Orlando, FL: Beyond Consequences Institute, LLC, 2006), 4.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Friesen, *Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You* (Pasadena, CA: Shepherds House Inc, 1999), 13.

^{iv} Heather T. Forbes and B. Bryan Post, *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control* (Orlando: Beyond Consequences Institute, LLC, 2006).