This article is posted on the "Attachment COALITION of Michigan" website with permission from Heritage Communications in Asheville, North Carolina, and Older Child Adoption Online Magazine, http://www.hannahandhermama.com. Older Child Adoption Online Magazine provides resources for older child adoptive families and prospective families. The website's premise is that older child adoption is great...and challenging.

Grief and Loss Throughout the Lives of Adopted Children

by Susan M. Ward

All families are periodically confronted with issues of grief and trauma: moving, loss of jobs, illness of friends, and death of relatives. Adoptive families, however, face additional issues of grief through their children: adoption questions, abandonment issues, identity searches, cultural challenges, racial differences, and more.

Grief and the subsequent symptoms, emotions, and challenges vary from family to family. In some adoptive families, there are merely small hills of grief to climb. In other families, where the children have suffered and been effected more severely by their past trauma, the climb may be up and over a mountain. And some families, when confronted by deep or multiple issues of grief and loss, may find themselves trudging over seemingly endless mountain ranges.

As adoptive parents, our children's adjustment and confidence in their world depends upon our ability to identify their grief, assist them through their grief issues, and help them grow from that grief. This parenting responsibility begins when we adopt, and continues as we guide our children into adulthood.

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As parents, adoption agencies, and social workers, we view adoption as happy, joyful. A child without a family now has one. A family yearning to share its love can now open its heart.

The topic of grief is not a topic generally discussed when considering adoption. It's not a regular topic in adoptive parenting classes. And books and websites seldom discuss an adopted child's possible feelings of loss, trauma, and grief.

Intellectually, we understand that babies and children experience feelings of discomfort, loss, and confusion during the first weeks and months after being adopted. Practically, though, do we allow and even create opportunities for newly adopted children to grieve their losses and their past? And throughout our children's lives, do we acknowledge and assist them with their grief?

If we adopt babies, we may mistakenly assume that our child's life begins with us. If we adopt an older child, we may wrongly assume that their past is now their past. Adopted children, however, bring multiple issues of loss with them into their adopted families, no matter what age they were adopted.

When we first adopt, we need to remember that our emotions may not match our child's feelings. Lisa, single adoptive mom to three says, "I think one of the most difficult times for adoptive parents to deal with grief and loss is when the child is first placed with them. I remember Eli (adopted at 3 1/2) crying and crying for his foster parents, and wanting so much to be with them. I had waited over three years for a child to be placed with me, and I was SOOOO happy that day. But he was so sad. I felt so angry at the other family because they decided not to keep him, and he wanted to be with them so much. I really had to work hard to stuff down my elation and be with him in his grief. I'm not sure I did a very good job of it."

Childhood grief is often based on different issues than those that impact adults. Donna O'Toole, grief counselor and author of *Helping Children Grieve and Grow*, writes, "Especially for children a loss may be based on safety, comfort, and familiarity, rather than on what adults speak of as love or affection." *Helping Children Grieve and Grow* lists six categories of childhood loss: relationship loss (usually people and animals); loss of objects that give comfort (toys, blankets, clothing); loss of a secure, familiar environment; loss of self (ways of being and doing that define us uniquely); loss of skills, abilities, and competencies; and loss of familiar habits and routine.

Adopted and foster children, no matter what their age, embark upon their newly changed lives facing most of these categories of loss. They've lost their caregivers, their clothes and bedding, their familiar smells, tastes, and sounds; the way they do things; their ability to feel comfortable with their lives and language, and their daily routines.

Theresa Anderson, family counselor specializing in issues of adoption, attachment, and grief says, "Grief is THE core issue that adopted children deal with…grief and terror. Think about international adoption…
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You can't take a child from home, put them into an airplane, cross the world, surround them with 1000's of people at the airport, have them met by strange people, smells, textures, foods, and voices, and not expect them to be traumatized."
As adoptive and foster parents, we cannot overlook our children's grief because it is not easily seen or identified. In *Helping Children Grieve and Grow* Ms. O'Toole writes, "Children usually don't tell you they are grieving. You can tell by what they say and do." Examples of possible reactions of grieving children include anger, sadness, hyperactivity, changes in appetite, hoarding food, inappropriate emotional response, headaches, difficulty making decisions, regressive behaviors, and clinginess.
Children's responses to grief, though, my not fall within a list of observable reactions. Ms. O'Toole writes, "When children feel overwhelmed by intense feelings they may naturally make their world safe by distancing themselves physically or emotionally, by pretending or by denying the reality of the loss."
Ms. Anderson comments that trauma and loss can, and often does, interfere with a child's general development. She adds, "Children often cover trauma and grief with being perfect, with controlling others, or with being mad."
In *Our Own: Adopting and Parenting the Older Child,* Ms. Maskew writes, "Experienced parents recommend that you take the initiative in talking with your child about losses and grief. You cannot go *around* the pain and loss, you must go *through* it." Also, she reminds parents of the need to teach children about emotion words and expressions. "Kids who have been traumatized or abused or who simply did not have a stable early life may never have learned how to identify their feelings and their effects."
Even if we acknowledge and assist our children with grief and loss in the early years they live with us, that doesn't mean their grieving is over and done. The issues of loss, grief, and trauma that our children face upon adoption, do not disappear once they have adjusted to their new lives. Adoption-related grief issues are re-visited throughout their lives. Ed Entmacher, a North Carolina psychiatrist who works with children and families says, "Grieving over adoption issues doesn't happen easily or neatly. It has to be revisited over and over into adolescence and adulthood."
Rustey and Dale Clausen-Meyer adopted their son in 1991 at 26 1/2 months. Today, he's 13 and an all-A student. Ms. Clausen-Meyer describes an incident of her son's grief, nearly 10 years after he was adopted. "At age 12, our "Gotcha Day" Celebration was a complete flat line. Our son, who always enjoyed reading our diary and other papers from Romania, was sad, wanted pictures of his birth parents, wished we had adopted and brought over more children, and even wished he wasn't adopted. By evening, he broke out crying. We could only reassure him of his security in our love and family. We could only offer him our own wishes that we had pictures as well. And we held him."

This grief and loss our children feel is closely intertwined with the trauma and loss they experienced before we adopted them. Some of our children suffered from abuse, neglect, starvation, inattention, lack of affection, and more, all of which contribute to later issues of grief.
One adoptive mom from Texas talks about the "hole" of grief in her 11-year-old daughter that cannot be filled. Her daughter, adopted at age three and a half, suffered many losses before her adoption: death of a parent, hospitalizations, and more. This Texas mom says that therapy has been critical in helping her daughter understand and move past her issues brought about by these pre-verbal losses.
Nine-year old Hannah was adopted more than three years ago. She is healing from reactive attachment disorder and post traumatic stress disorder. She says, "The hardest part of grieving is learning to say good-by. We have to say good-by to things that are in our hearts but sometimes these things in our heart gave us bad habits...habits that we can't let go of easily."
As our children grow, the grief in their lives may not originate from adoption-related issues but from other changes and losses: new children in the family, change of schools, feelings of not fitting in, moving to new homes, death of family members, and more.
The Texas mom talks about how her son was impacted when she adopted a second child. "He was acting up quite a bit and very anxious about our upcoming move. I finally sat down with him and asked him what the problem was. He asked 'where am I going to live when you and Nyasha move to the new house?' To him, when somebody moves, you get left behind."
"I think for many adopted kids," adds the Texas mom, "transitions are much harder than with non-adopted kids. My son struggles with leaving his old teacher/class each year and starting with a new one in the fall. He feels abandoned. His issues are magnified by his RAD, but I see the same in my daughter, who is not RAD."
While grief and loss are acknowledged as appropriate and necessary emotions, some children exhibit them in only in limited ways. Renu Mody's daughter, now age eight, was adopted from Ethiopia at

eighteen months old. Ms. Mody describes her daughter as, "The happiest child I have ever seen. She expresses no grief and sense of loss. I used to wait for her to come to me with issues, but she never would, so I occasionally ask or bring things up. I wonder if she is repressing any sense of loss…? I noticed that she would never cry 'at the sad part' of any book or movie, and wondered about her. Now she finally, she seems to (rarely) get a bit emotional, but she will quickly and discretely wipe a tear. The most I have gotten her to concede is that 'yes, the past is sad, but it's over, and let's play.'" Ms. Mody surmises that perhaps her daughter's adjustment and lack of grieving is related to the positive aspects of her past. "In Ethiopia, the children do seem to be held and loved a lot. My daughter was pretty good-sized for an Ethiopian orphan, which leads us to believe that she was also well nourished. "

Grief, sadness, and despair may be the noticeable or not-so-noticeable reactions from our children to the losses and traumas in their lives. But other members of the family may also struggle with grief, loss, and trauma related to adoption.

Julia Mowers shares that they've disrupted the adoption of their daughter who was diagnosed with RAD (reactive attachment disorder), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and Fetal Alcohol exposure. Ms. Mowers says, " We have four other adopted children. All have special needs also. The decision to surrender was not a simple and easy task. The entire family is dealing with grief and issues of loss."

Another family has struggled with challenging issues that they feel may stem from their daughter's issues grief and loss. The daughter was adopted nearly two years ago from Russia at age 7. In many aspects of her life, she's doing well. In other areas, however, she is not. The family is suffering. Therapy has not helped and the parents are struggling with their own questions and issues of grief.

By becoming foster and adoptive parents, we walk into the world of children's grief and loss. Our children arrive with issues and emotions that are sometimes not easy to identify. Throughout their lives, our children will continue to deal with not only adoption-related grief, but general life losses. In addition to our children's grief, we too, often face grief, loss, and trauma. "Grieving is necessary," says Ms. Anderson. "It gives meaning to the feelings that any of us have after suffering losses, no matter what our age."

Tips for Helping Your Child Grieve and Grow

Whether your child is newly home, or has been home for years, here are some tips to help them acknowledge, accept, and grow from their grief:

-Talk about your own and other people's losses and grief

-Read books to your child about loss and grief and show how others have lived through their losses. Give them opportunities to project their feelings onto the characters in the story.

-Suggest that they keep a journal where they draw or write about their feelings.

-Find ways for your child to commemorate their past. Light candles, create a special section in their lifebook, frame a particular drawing pertaining to their loss.

-Help them express their feelings positively: physical activities, praying, crying.

-Help your child learn to cry. Many of our children were taught not to cry. Help them understand how healing crying is. Let them see you cry.

-Help your child create a timeline where their losses are included. Note dates when their birthparents died, or they were moved to the orphanage, or they left their foster family, or they moved into their forever family.

-Create puppet shows, clay figures, or animal skits where the theme is loss and grief.

-Find a therapist to help your child. Look for someone knowledgeable about adoption, foster parenting, grief, and trauma.