

BABY-SHOCK

Depression and International Adoption

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The long wait is over: you are home from China, or Russia, or Guatemala with the baby of your dreams, a baby that you adore and that has managed to age you 10 years in 3 short weeks. The adoption process led you up to the joyous moment of being handed your child and may even have included balloons at the airport when you landed back in Detroit, but it absolutely did not include preparation for the overwhelming feeling of baby-shock that all new adoptive parents experience to some degree. Day-to-day life with a new child who is scared and perhaps angry or rejecting (and who has apparently lost the ability to sleep at night!) can make even the most self-confident parent lose their perky edge.

New parents need to realize that what they are experiencing is natural, and that their initial Mom or Dad expectations may have been partly fantasy: parenting a post-institutional 12 month old is NOT the same as parenting a sleepy newborn. The real rewards and joys of parenting internationally adopted children are huge, the real challenges can be draining, confusing and...depressing.

Loss is a catalyst for depression. Post Adoption Depression (PAD) is a response to demanding new experiences and many cumulative losses that aren't supposed to matter to a new adoptive parent-- from feelings of "post-party" let-down, to the hard work involved in meeting an adopted baby's special needs, to the physical strain of jet-lag, and to the emotional strain of not being prepared by anyone for any of the above!

Harriet McCarthy talks about the importance of preparation in her excellent, ground-breaking article "Post Adoption Depression: The Unacknowledged Hazard" (*Roots & Wings Magazine, August 2000*). As a Mom with previous parenting experience I thought I was prepared to meet my Chinese daughter's emotional requirements, but as the saying goes, I didn't even know what I didn't know! Education and preparation would have allowed me to plan ahead for my baby's needs, and for MY needs, and I could have avoided much of the shock that falls under the PAD umbrella. Ironically, many of the suggestions recommended by attachment experts to lessen a child's trauma as she transitions to her new family can also contribute to the new parent's feelings of isolation and depression. One key to fighting PAD is realizing that while your baby's needs must come first, there are different strategies that still allow you to participate in the communal new-family joys and celebrations. Keeping a balance, allowing yourself to seek support and maintaining communication with other adults are vital to a parent's emotional health. Modifying how you think about your new family and having a plan to enlist your friends and relatives may also help keep you from becoming immobilized. **Plan to:**

- **Let Others Do the Work:** Instead of overwhelming your new child with a large welcoming committee at the airport, have a smaller welcome home party pre-planned for when your baby is more secure. Let others do the "work" of entertaining for you while you remain totally available to your child while

visitors are there. Let friends and family know in advance that you are not allowing others to hold / care for your baby until she is securely attached to you. A letter to friends and family explaining an adopted baby's attachment needs and your deep appreciation for their love and support is an enlightening, team-building tool to send out as you leave for China.

- **Take Care of You:** Don't feel guilty about doing what any new bio-Mom would do-- when you are tired, nap, take your phone off the hook, and don't answer the door. Cancel your newspaper subscription. Refuse to feel guilty about cutting back on previous activities, volunteerism, or career. If you are in a financial position to do so, give yourself permission to quit your job. Nothing you will ever do will be as important as nurturing this child.
- **Take Control of Visitors:** Limit them to one or two at a time, and schedule them at *your* convenience. Take the initiative and call a friend to visit when it's good for you...don't go crazy alone. If you need adult interaction, pick up the phone, and don't hesitate to ask your friend to pick up some CarryOut on her way over.
- **Strategize:** If you have a partner, plan who is going to do which duties (child / house/ employment) and when, and how to give each other breaks. Review your agreements and allow for change! Talk about fatigue, and about taking care of each other. Discuss sex with your spouse- communicate your needs (both your interest or dis-interest) in a loving and undemanding fashion and a high-need baby can strain any relationship. If you can afford it, get housecleaning or yard help. Simplify your life so you can devote your unstressed attention to your baby and partner.
- **Shift Your Focus:** Re-define your family and include your baby in all of your outings. Only accept invitations that welcome your new child. Remember, this won't last forever, and it's important to your family. Gear yourselves to your baby's emotional and physical requirements and remain flexible to avoid disappointment and irritation (or as one wise Dad put it, "Rule # 1 of Parenting: Your Plans Don't Matter!").
- **Give Yourself a Break:** If you are adopting an older child, attachment professionals seriously advise keeping her out of school for 6 months in order to construct a parent-child relationship without replicating the institutional structure. Investigate temporary homeschooling and connect with other local homeschooler parents for advice, resource-pooling, and social interaction. Expect challenges and frustration and be prepared to enlist support: clue other playgroup moms into behaviors you are working on, and how they can help. Find a translator. Schedule an appointment with an attachment therapist to aid transition. Adopting an older child can be an intense experience; make a plan for your child that includes "respite care"—time alone for you. Everyone needs to recharge!
- **Expect the Unexpected:** Realize that parenting a baby or child that is coming to you from an orphanage or foster care will present you with issues that you aren't going to find covered in Dr. Spock or in "What to Expect the First Twelve

Months”. If your parenting style is not effective on your post-institutional child, then you need to adapt it to what works! Most of us were not taught, pre-adoption, about our child’s deep need for “control”, or clingy, anxious attachment, or what to do about lingering orphanage behaviors. Parenting a new child with adoption issues can be exhausting, overwhelming and bewildering. It is extremely depressing to feel like you are a failure at parenthood, but you are NOT! You may simply be working off the parenting role model you were raised with, and it doesn’t necessarily work with our post-institutional kids. Pick up Foster Cline’s “*Parenting with Love & Logic*” series (he also has tapes for Toddler parenting), read “*The Out-of-Sync Child*” by Carol Kranowitz, “ *Holding Time*” by Martha Welch, and Dr. Sear’s “*Parenting the Fussy Baby and the High-Need Child: Everything You Need to Know from Birth to Age Five*”. Prepare to facilitate parent-child attachment by reading “*Fostering Changes*” by Richard J. Delaney, and “*Adopting the Hurt Child*” by Gregory C. Keck. Understand where your child is emotionally and you will better understand her behaviors and how to deal with them.

- **Play,Play,Play!**: Look forward to a parent-child class like Gymboree or Kindermusik, when your child is ready to enjoy it with you. Active play will help lower frustration levels for both of you, and conversation with other adults on a regular basis is a necessity! Don’t expect your post-institutional child to behave/react like the other children initially, and don’t compare her milestones with those of non-adoptees. Teach her to be a kid—include your spouse and make a point to have “family fun” together on a regular basis.

Sound simplistic? Sometimes an attitude “paradigm-shift” is all it takes to make a difficult situation manageable...and sometimes PAD requires outside help. Don’t allow depression to make you unavailable to your baby, or ruin what should personally be a very exciting time in your life. If you are experiencing the post-adoption baby blues and it shows no sign of lifting, ask a family member or friend to help you make an appointment with a therapist or physician. We are lucky to have several nationally recognized attachment therapists in the Metro Detroit area; a consultation with a member of the Attachment Coalition of Michigan could be very beneficial, as the therapists have years of experience with international adoption and understand the parallel family issues. PAD can creep up on you slowly; the following are some questions that may help you identify whether you’re just having a bad Mom/Dad day, or whether your depression is larger and should be treated. If you answer “yes” to a number of these questions it is highly recommended that you should discuss your feelings with qualified personnel. If you answer “yes” to the last question, you must seek help immediately:

In the past 3-4 weeks have you noticed any of the following changes-

- Loss of interest in being around other people?
- Always on the verge of tears?
- Difficulty concentrating--unable to make decisions?
- General fatigue or loss of energy?
- Difficulty sleeping OR an increased need for sleep?
- Significant weight gain or loss?

- Excessive or inappropriate guilt?
- Feelings of worthlessness?
- Feelings of powerlessness?
- Feelings of hopelessness?
- Loss of enjoyment in things you like?
- Irritability?
- Recurring thoughts about death or suicide?

Parenting is such a tough job, and it forces so many of our own issues out in the open. If you are prepared for the “dark side” of life’s most wonderful experience then you will be empowered to meet your family’s parenting challenges head-on. As the mother of three daughters aged 11 years to 22 months, I would agree that to do this job right it helps if you’re just a little bit crazy...but you most certainly don’t want to be depressed. If you are a Waiting Family, educate yourself now about attachment and becoming a pro-active parent. Get your support systems prepared and in place before your child arrives. If you are an experienced parent, take your hard-won knowledge and compensate for what you might not have known about parenting an internationally adopted child when you first brought your baby home. Forget guilt, re-do what you can, and get creative with the next phase of your child’s development.

Parenthood jolts you into participating in one of life’s most profound joys. Finding innovative ways to get your own needs met, while giving necessary precedence to your child’s, is an intricate day-to-day balancing act that requires conscious thought and action. Being aware of Post Adoption Depression (and seeking help quickly) will mitigate the effect that baby-shock can have on you, and will give you the freedom to actively enjoy the child you’ve forever dreamed of parenting.

(Information for this article was provided by Doris Landry, M.S., L.L.P., of the Attachment Coalition of Michigan as well as the American Psychiatric Association.)

Resources

To obtain a copy of “Post-Adoption Depression: The Unacknowledged Hazard” contact Harriet McCarthy at Harriet@eeadopt.org

To find current information on adoptive parent-child attachment and bonding, recommended reading, or to find an attachment therapist near you, check online at

www.attach.org,
www.attach-china.org, and www.attachment.org

Adoption Book Catalog: Tapestry Books 800-765-2367 or www.tapestrybooks.com

“Parenting with Love and Logic” website: www.loveandlogic.com



