



“I Don’t Care If He Goes To Harvard, But . . .

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Everyone who decides to embark on the journey of parenthood goes down the road with fantasies of what parenthood will be like, and more importantly, dreams about what their child will become as he grows up. Will she love soccer like I do? Will he excel at science? Will we have wonderful summer vacations at the beach, like we did when I was a kid?

As adoptive parents, we have the same dreams that all parents have, although we usually embark on our trip to parenthood with less information about the biological road maps of our children. Although many of our friends find that their children by birth are surprisingly different than they expected them to be, it is true that we take a fork in the road when it comes to perceived certainty about the future. Whether we adopt because of infertility or not, we are told we must set aside our “fantasy child” in order to be emotionally prepared to love and attach to one who brings her own set of genes, family history, and talents. Logic tells us that she may look and be very different from what we hoped or expected our biological child would be like.

Many adoptive parents find this inability to predict actually frees them from the pressure of producing a Gerber baby who will be the star of the spelling bee. They look forward to learning about who their child is and what special traits he will contribute to the family. For example, a child who is discovered to be artistically talented in a family where no such gift exists is a pleasing, wonderful surprise.

But what happens when the surprises are considered negative or undesirable, or the child’s personality seems mismatched for the adoptive family? What if the child’s accomplishments are disappointing? Does adoption complicate how parents handle their expectations, dreams, or plans...especially when they are not going to be realized?

Expectations and the Idealized Child

I wonder if this whole adoption thing was a massive mistake. I think I’ve ruined my life. I wonder if I’m trying to make good out of bad genes. I think about returning him. I wonder if my birth child would have thrown the spaghetti at me. (Jana Wolff, Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother, 1997.)

The truth is, no children—adopted, foster, birth, or step—ever really meet any parent’s ideal, and all parents experience some disappointment in their children. Adoptive parents may have an especially hard time with the loss of the fantasy child because it is easy to assume the fantasy would have been realized in the biological child. By observing families created by birth, it is possible to see this probably would not have happened.

The loss of the idealized child becomes a problem for ALL parents, notes Elinor Rosenberg, author of *The Adoption Life Cycle* (1992), if that child is not recognized and is “unconsciously imposed on the existing child—adopted or biological—who can never be seen and appreciated for who he or she is. Under these circumstances, parents live in a state of constant disappointment, and children, sensing their disappointment, feel they are not the person they are supposed to be, thus fostering feelings of inferiority.”

While adoptive parents may face disappointment, as all parents do, many of us worry that admitting it will mean we are rejecting our children. Just about the last thing adoptive parents want to do is to appear to be pushing their children away.

Plans and dreams for our children can also become a problem if they are just making up for what we missed. That scenario can be so problematical that Carl Jung once said, “The worst thing that can happen to children is the un-lived lives of the parents.”

Expectations and the Idealized Family

Three-year-old Sam is jumping about in the pool’s locker room, finding dozens



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of reasons why his mother should not be permitted to put on his clothes after swimming. Exhausted after trying three separate and innovate forms of bribery and meeting only failure, his mother looks at the ceiling and exclaims loudly, “Good Heavens! Why did I decide to have this child?!!”

Now imagine the implications of hearing an adoptive parent, in the same situation, cry out, “Good Heavens! Why did I decide to ADOPT this child?” Most of us would never say anything like that out loud. Yet, it is normal for parents to feel ambivalent about children. All parents struggle with the notion that they should love their children unconditionally and that mothers in particular should love their children all of the time. In *The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life* (1999), Harriet Lerner notes that parents “must accept the obvious: that when it comes to love, the other person’s behavior always matters, even when that person is an infant or small child.” It’s very typical for children to do things we wish they wouldn’t, and that influences our feelings, just as they are influenced by things they wish we wouldn’t do.

For some adoptive parents, it is especially hard to acknowledge normal ambivalence about their children. Most of us do not feel we have the luxury to be uncertain about them. We worked hard to adopt them, sometimes needing to convince family and friends that it was the right thing to do. We do not want to hear, “I told you so. Adoptive families ARE different.”

There are times when it seems the rest of the world is looking to confirm the suspicion that adoptive bonds are weaker, our children “second best.” It’s a nuisance that needs to be dealt with, particularly because we must model for our children how to handle this extra challenge, as they will also face it from time to time. Ironically, the pressures felt by some adoptive parents because of society’s *expectations of what a family should be* are not unlike the pressures we place on our children by holding onto preconceived notions of what they should be like.

Because ambivalence is normal and it is helpful to express such feelings, adoptive parents often enjoy sharing these thoughts with a group of friends who also adopted their children. The chances are higher that they will be able to understand our concerns without questioning our commitment and love for our children. Friends who are not adoptive parents, but who know us well, are also more likely to understand.

Although most of these feelings are quite normal, they can become dangerous if parents blame their disappointments and frustrations on the fact that the children are adopted. This scapegoating can create breaks in family bonds by separating or disowning the child (and his problems). Professional guidance can help to prevent this situation.

Children’s Expectations

I think I was adopted because I was an ugly baby.

I must not be as good as the kids whose parents kept them.

It is not unusual for children who were adopted to use their own age-appropriate, but limited, logic to understand their adoption story. They may expect or fear that their adoptive parents will “give them away” as well. Sometimes their expectations impact ours. It is well known that school-age children may exhibit testing behavior in order to see if they can elicit rejection from their adoptive parents or others because they imagine their negative behavior may have been the reason their birth parents placed them for adoption. Rosenberg describes it this way: “The child is asking, ‘Will you still keep me, even when you can’t stand me?’ This prompts the parents to ask themselves the same question.” Sometimes it causes parents to revisit the fantasy child again.

Parents aren’t the only ones with fantasies. All school-age children, by birth or adopted, may experience what is known as the “romance fantasy.” For biological children it is the belief that they must have been “adopted” - that out there exists another set of their real parents who would be much more like them, would better understand them, and surely not make them do horrid things like clean their room or eat their broccoli. But adopted children really do have another set of parents, so handling this common childhood notion can be much more



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complicated. Adopted children’s perceptions of the ways they are different from their adoptive parents can pose difficult challenges all on their own, aside from what the parents communicate about those differences. Holly van Gulden, in *Real Parents, Real Children* (1999) points out that “a child may lack a sense of belonging even if the parents have a strong sense of claiming (helping the child to see how he is similar to his adoptive family - traits, talents, appearance, etc.), if he feels his uniqueness sets him too far apart from the rest of the family.”

If we recognize our expectations and how they affect our children, we can work to put them in perspective. We can choose to handle our ambivalence in ways that affirm our love for our kids. One of the unique challenges of adoptive parenting is to understand that our expectations exist side-by-side with those of our children, whose dreams and worries about the future are affected by adoption and their need to come to terms with what might have been. Success lies in shaping our family’s future together, drawing the map of our journey as we go.



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