

The Leap of Faith: Claiming and Bonding in Adoption

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Introduction

Jason (age 8), Michaela (10), and Aaron (11) have been with their adoptive parents for three months. Jason wets the bed and/or wakes up with terrible nightmares almost every night, depriving both himself and his parents of sleep. Michaela is masturbating openly in school and Sunday School, something she never did in foster care. Aaron- the parentified child, the one who took very seriously his responsibilities as caretaker and role model- apparently trusts his new parents to do the parenting, because he's fighting in school and throwing temper tantrums at home that would do any two-year-old proud.

Exhausted, the parents tell the social worker, "We heard everything you said. We read all the books. We just didn't know it would be so hard."

It's true. Parents of older adopted children have a hard job. Because older children almost always come from backgrounds of abuse, neglect, and abandonment, they bring with them special needs for nurturing, limit-setting, and healing. In addition to the myriad and complex roles expected of any parent under any circumstances, adoptive parents of older children are also expected to provide reparenting, or at least additive parenting, to fill in gaps.

But in one vital way we seem to expect significantly less of the adoptive parents of older children than of other parents. This is in the area of claiming, that process by which a parent declares, once and for all, "This is MY child."

Certainly, the majority of adoptive parents keep their kids. But too many give them back or trade them in like defective products. Certainly, biological parents relinquish their children, but not nearly so frequently or easily as do adoptive parents.

Despite our best efforts, too many of our older adopted kids grow up without ever having experienced the unconditional love that is every child's birthright. Too many adoptive families create an environment in which the decision whether or not to keep a child is contingent upon behavior. Too many workers settle families who will "try hard to make it work," when what every child needs and deserves is a family to belong to, plain and simple, forever.

The day before Wendy's adoption was to be finalized, the worker met with the family to review their year together. Seven-year-old Wendy had come to this family with the reputation of being a real hell-raiser; but the placement had been remarkably smooth. The worker praised the parents' understanding of children, their tolerance and flexibility, but they gave most of the credit to Wendy: "If she'd done some of the things I've heard of other adopted kids doing, I seriously doubt she'd be here." Much of the worker's pleasure in this happy new family vanished; Wendy had not been claimed.



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Adoption disruption, occurring before finalization, and dissolution, the relinquishment of adopted children after finalizations, are traumatic for everyone. We all look hard for reasons; David's continual rebelliousness made his adoptive parents feel inadequate. Nathan wouldn't accept affection. The parents were just rigid, too busy to fit a troubled child into their lives. Maria's adoptive mother couldn't handle her own jealousy when Maria was sexually provocative toward her adoptive father. Johanna was cruel to the animals in the family; Robert's adoptive mother became pregnant shortly after he was placed and she was afraid he'd hurt the baby. Gary, in trouble with the law since the age of eleven, was finally placed out of the home; when he continued to be incorrigible, his adoptive parents ran out of emotional and financial resources and were forced to relinquish their parental rights.

Plausible reasons abound. Studies proliferate. Policies and procedures are modified. Adoption workers take greater care with matching of parents and children. Prospective adoptive parents worry over whether this child is right for them.

But all of this is really beside the point. At the core of every disruption or dissolution is one fundamental fact: the parents have not unconditionally claimed this child as their own.

If it's **your child**, you may acutely resent how his needs intrude upon and sometimes take over your life, you may even be badly negligent in meeting those needs – but you don't give him up. If it's **your child**, she may cause you to discover things you didn't like about yourself, but you don't give her up. If it's **your child**, he may be out of control or dangerous and have to live somewhere else for awhile, but you don't give him up.

A claimed child is not necessarily a well-cared-for child. A claimed child is not even always loved. But a claimed child is kept.

Claiming is not the same as bonding. Certainly, the two phenomena are interrelated, may spring from the same psycho-emotional bases, usually flow one from another. But in adoption it is useful theoretically, clinically, and experientially to conceptualize claiming and bonding as discrete processes.

Bonding – otherwise known in the jargon as attachment; referred to by most people simply as loving – happens slowly and gradually. It has to do with things like personality match (“chemistry”), shared interests and values, behavioral characteristics of the child, even appearance. Loving someone, anyone, takes time. Though it may begin as a flow of emotions in one direction, bonding becomes strongest when it is mutual, when the child you love dearly loves you back.

Most people have little conscious control over whether they love, whom they love, and to what extent. There appear to be degrees of attachment: you can love someone a lot or a little. Most of our children come to us with “attachment problems,” glitches in their willingness and/or ability to trust, to be emotionally vulnerable. Often children are labeled with Reactive Attachment Disorder, or even “unattached”; this latter term, happily not as popular as it used to be, is problematic, since we know that individuals who truly have no attachments at all do not survive.



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There is considerable support for the notion that most, if not all of us, have “attachment problems” to some degree. Erikson’s framework delineating psychological tasks to be accomplished at each chronological life stage emphasizes that there are always imperfections in, for instance, the infant’s development of trust, the young adult’s mastery of intimacy, etc., and that, therefore, few of us probably are able to love as easily or as fully as we’d like.

Children and parents alike, we all love (bond, attach) in the style, at the pace, and to the degree of which we are capable. We can learn to love more and better. We grow to love each other because of what happens between us.

In contrast, claiming is, as social worker Mary-Jo Colvin puts it, a conscious act of will. It does not seem to happen gradually; parents who cannot make an unconditional commitment to a child before placement are not likely to be able to do so later, because parental commitment is forever corrupted by a tentative approach. Claiming is not incremental; either you claim a child fully or you don’t at all. Claiming has nothing to do with any external factor; what a child looks like, whether she loves you, how he behaves – all are extraneous and irrelevant. A parent claims a child by fiat: “This is **my** child. From this moment on, I will no longer consider it a choice, and I will never again examine this decision.”

Barriers to Claiming in Older-Child Adoption

Sadly, many adoptive parents, especially of older children, seem unable or unwilling to claim their children unconditionally. Often a wait-and-see attitude persists throughout the placement, especially before finalization. No doubt many of the barriers that interfere with a parent’s ability to claim are intrapsychic. But some are sociocultural.

Our culture has strong mores that work against unconditional commitment to adopted children, particularly those children with experiences we did not share. It is commonly accepted that the younger the child the better, because parents can have more influence over personality development, value structure, and behavior. Developmentally, there is some validity to this point of view; it becomes problematic, however, when parents are encouraged to regard the older child as somehow alien, different, not part of me.

Down deep, our society does not really seem to believe that adoption, especially of older children, is an acceptable way to build a family. Much of the claiming that occurs in biological families probably comes from long-standing social tradition that prescribe how parents are to feel about their children, we do not have such a tradition for adoption.

About a year after joining his adoptive family, Sean was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Shocked and saddened for their son, his parents were further dismayed by the reactions of many friends and acquaintances, including the pediatrician: You didn’t know this when you took him. What are you going to do now? To Sean’s parents, the implication was clear: This is not the child you ordered. You didn’t sign on for this. You’d be perfectly justified in giving him back.



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Language impacts how we think as surely as thoughts affect the development of language. We encourage adoptive parents not to claim their children by the language we use about adoption. Sean's case described above might well be the basis for a "wrongful out;" this term, which would not use about biological families, underscores our assumption that adoptive families are held together by behavior, personality match, or anything other than pure, unconditional commitment.

When a placement is in trouble, we ask ourselves and each other, "Is this child going to make it in this family? Is this child adoptable?" —queries which put responsibility on the child, where it does not belong. When an adoption disrupts or dissolves, more often than not we blame the child's behavior, as in a summary written by an experienced worker of a particularly unpleasant disruption of an international adoption: "Due to X's inappropriate behavior in the Y home, he was sent back to Guatemala." X's outrageous behavior certainly was one of the factors that made this placement difficult, but it had nothing to do with his being sent back; he was sent back because he was not claimed.

The placement process itself encourages incomplete or conditional claiming. The common practice of setting up a "viewing" of the child or even allowing prospective parents to meet a child before making a commitment is damaging for a number of reasons, most significantly because it accepts that deciding to be a child's parents has something to do with how he looks, what his personality is, whether parents and child "hit it off," what she likes to do. A commitment based on such superficial factors tends to be shaky, so that when a child turns out to be different from the child the parents thought they had met or viewed, the emotional commitment can naturally be withdrawn on the basis of misrepresentation.

The six-to-twelve months between placement and finalization was established as a legal trial period. In terms of claiming, this was probably a mistake. A commitment which takes place only when parents have seen what a child is "really" like is by definition conditional. Child psychologist Anna Freud contends that adoptions should be final from the day of placement and that the adoption certificate issued that day should be as official and as irrevocable as a birth certificate.

Vicky's foster mother made it clear to her before she was placed for adoption at age five: "You better act right, the way I've taught you, or you'll blow this adoption." It took her a long time to believe her adoptive parents when they insisted: "There's nothing you could do to blow this adoption. We're stuck with each other forever!"

When eight-year-old Jamie cried because he missed his foster or birth parents, his adoptive parents would demand to know whether he wanted to stay with them. Tearfully, he would always say yes, and his adoptive parents were certain that this helped to strengthen his commitment to making the adoption work.

Preparing ten-year-old Sarah for adoption, her social worker told her, "Remember, you're also responsible for whether this adoption works. You new mom and dad can't do it themselves."



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No child should have to earn parents. No pre-adolescent (the issues are murkier when we're dealing with teenagers) can handle the power of knowing you can decide whether these will be your parents. Children require stability. As psychologist Mary Simon points out in an unpublished work on parenting, in the healthiest situations children take parenting for granted. Parents need to take it for granted too.

Most of the time, disruptions and dissolutions are far too easy. This is not to deny the real emotional pain adoptive parents experience under these circumstances. But perhaps we need to say "No" more often, legally and socially; "No. This is your child. You can't quit."

Assessing Capacities for Claiming and Bonding

In assessing an adoptive applicant's ability to parent an older child, social workers routinely look for evidence of the ability to bond. The Child Welfare League of America lists "the ability to give and receive love" as one of its "Criteria for Capacity to Adopt."

Prospective parents usually have some idea of their own capacity to attach to another human being. Perhaps they've thought about it already; certainly they must be asked to give it careful consideration during the home study.

Numerous behavioral and personality characteristics give us clues to our own or someone else's ability to give and receive love. Answers to questions like, "How do you know when someone loves you?" and "How do people know that you love them?" provide some insight.

Assessing the capacity to claim is far harder. Part of the problem stems from the profound difference between the type of claiming required in older-child adoption and that expected in any other relationship. It is not, like claiming a birth child, clearly tied to biophysical drives (although there may be some instinctual basis). It is not mutual or reciprocal like a marriage (although as suggested by the late social worker Carol Monaghan, there may be some similarities to arranged marriages and mail-order brides).

Some questions can begin the assessment of the ability to claim: "What do you do when a friend disappoints you? How do you usually end a relationship? What does a child owe parents? What do parents owe children? What would make you say, 'This is no longer my child?'"

One major obstacle to this sort of assessment is the fact that the vast majority of prospective adoptive parents really cannot conceive of any circumstances under which they would give up a child. Thus, in addition to the normal and usual reluctance to tell the social worker anything might be considered negative, a blind spot also operates here.

Sometimes the red flags are blatant:

In the intake interview, Fred and Caroline were shocked by the social worker's discussion of behavioral problems that might result from abuse and neglect. Fred especially refused to believe that he couldn't "turn around" any child. Caroline contended that "you never know until you try. After all, the adoption isn't final until it's final. That what that first year is for, isn't it?"



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Margie, a prospective single adoptive mother, insisted she wanted to interview several children before she made a choice. "I wouldn't be able to be a mother," she explained, "to a kid I didn't like."

Personality characteristics that should raise concerns about an adoptive applicant's capacity for claiming include:

- an over-concern with what other people think, with image, with fitting in;
- rigidity; a strong need to control people and/or events;
- expressed or demonstrated inflexibility regarding normal child or teenage behavior.

A positive indicator of the claiming capacity relates to the imagination. Because we have so little social framework to conceptualize older-child adoption, these adoptive parents must, in a very real sense, be able to experience a different kind of birth process when their children come into their lives. They must re-create imaginatively the definition of "family."

Assessing these subtleties is probably beyond our current abilities. We must continually work to refine the questions we ask ourselves and our clients and the observations we make.

Teaching a Parent to Claim and Bond

We know that parents can be taught to bond with a child. We know that adoptive parents of older children can learn ways of strengthening their own and their child's attachment.

Researchers at Denver's C. Henry Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, and elsewhere, have contributed valuable information via their work teaching mothers how to bond with newborns. More and more psychotherapists specialize in working with adoptive families. Parents and children supply day-to-day wisdom. From these sources and others we know that bonding can consciously be strengthened by:

- encouraging older kids to behave in developmentally regressive ways, such as being held and swaddled like babies, drinking from a bottle, wearing diapers. These highly symbolic behaviors can often reduce a child's need to regress in less pleasant ways, like tantruming. The child's babyish behavior can also encourage the parent's attachment to him, in much the same way an infant's behavior elicits attachment from the parent.
- physical contact of the sort that usually occurs within minutes of birth, such as baths, back rubs, foot massages, hair washing.

It is harder, if not impossible, to teach claiming. Perhaps claiming is not a skill that can be taught or learned. But some behaviors seem to encourage and develop it, if the innate capacity is there in the first place. We teach adoptive parents to deliberately do things that say to the child, "This is your forever home." These actions can help the adoptive parent believe it too:

- having a family portrait taken with the new child in it;
- making long-range plans about what you'll do as a family next summer, where the child will go to high school, etc.;

—involving the child in family plans that will take a long time to come to fruition, such as planting a garden.

If successful, such actions are risky, of course, because they can make a disruption or dissolution that much more heartbreaking and damaging for a child who really has begun to believe that this family is forever.

Conclusion

This is not a research study. This is a concept paper, intended to stimulate speculation and discussion about the phenomena of claiming and bonding in older-child adoptions.

The major points have been:

1. The single common underlying factor in all adoption disruptions or dissolutions is the parents' failure to claim the child unconditionally.
2. Claiming and bonding are discrete albeit related phenomena.
3. Bonding can be taught more easily than claiming. The ability to bond can be assessed more accurately than the ability to claim.

One final point needs to be made now, in summary and expansion. The critical challenge for adoption workers and adoptive parents, in the best interests of our children who deserve real and permanent families, is to learn how to tell who can claim and who cannot.

Adopted at age ten, by sixteen Greg has spent time in residential treatment and his stealing was still out of control. Four police contacts in as many months, the result of increasingly crazy acts of theft and burglary, make it likely he'll be committed to the Department of Institutions. Greg's parents are often asked if they regret adopting him. When he was admitted to the treatment facility, the intake worker inquired whether they were considering terminating their parental rights. An experienced adoption social worker of their acquaintance declared that they'd "gotten a lemon." Greg himself has become more and more withdrawn and rejecting of them. Greg's parents have experienced innumerable emotions – anger, grief, guilt. Through it all, it has never occurred to either of them that it would be possible for Greg not to be their son. "Our lives have been infinitely enriched," they say. "If he spends his life in prison, he'll be better off knowing he has a family who loves him than spending his life in prison without a family." Greg has been claimed.

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