

# Lessons in Gratitude

Children adopted at older ages frequently have more difficulty with building and maintaining relationships, even with people who should feel “safe” to them, like their adoptive parents. For those who have children that were adopted at older ages (caveat here: while there isn’t agreement in the adoption community about the age at which a child is identified as “older”, for the purposes of this article, “older” refers to any child out of infancy and beginning to acquire verbal skills), many would agree that there can be unique and unexpected challenges with parenting. During consultation with these families, I have often heard parents lament:

- “This isn’t what we signed up for, so what are we going to do? We can’t live like this!”
- “After everything we went through to make this adoption happen, how can it turn out like this? Our family is falling apart!”
- “Our child came from abuse/poverty/neglect... Our home is a better and safer place for her to grow up. Why can’t she just appreciate it?”
- “I have given so much love to our son, and things are so much better for him with us. How could he not be grateful? He has everything... a new room, clothes, food to eat, a good school...”

While I can understand these questions from the parents’ perspective, what it leaves to be desired is an understanding of the *child’s* lens for relationships, love, and family.

The way we (including our children) view life is through the “lenses” provided to us in our first relationships; the experiences that shade or tint the lenses of our children often lead them to “see” differently than we do. Their sense of trust has often been fractured so early and profoundly that they can be haunted with fear of loss and abandonment in every subsequent relationship. Love and family are things to be feared, because prior experience has taught these children that they will be hurt, abandoned, or rejected in these contexts. Breaches of trust like these, during critical windows of development, cause high levels of stress in the child on an on-going basis. This heightened stress can result in challenging behavior that parents and caregivers may experience as disturbing, including: withdrawal, poor self-esteem, cutting/head-banging/rocking, aggression toward others (family members, teachers, peers, siblings, etc), disrespect, defiance...the list goes on and on.

When these behaviors are present, in the height of their frustration, parents ask: “Why, after everything, can’t he/she just be *grateful*?”

Three-year-old Katie lived in an institution overseas for the first two years of her life. The ratio of nannies to children was less than ideal (though typical), so it’d be wise for her parents to assume no matter how much

growth and improvement that they see, that Katie has at least two years ahead of her where she'll need to learn about this *new* kind of relationship. She'll need time to learn that "family" means "forever" and parents are consistent, stable, and nurturing. Because the neural pathways in every human brain that make healthy connections about relationships are "use dependent" (meaning that they have to be used over and over to make strong connections), Katie will need lots of time and repetition for her brain to pave new pathways for relationship. Not only will her parents have to provide enough repetition in relationship to begin to combat the old pathways, but they'll have to provide enough to begin to pave new ones as well! A good rule of thumb for parents is to expect that for every year a child spends under stress, enduring abuse, neglect, or change, he/she will need a corresponding year of nurturing and consistency to heal. (Many children respond to the environments provided by their parents much more quickly than this little formula, but it helps us to prepare for the work involved and adjust our expectations appropriately.)

Ten-year-old Ty, who has lived in a chaotic home with his birth family, all gang members and substance abusers or dealers, will struggle to accept a new construct for "Mom" and "Dad" when he is finally placed in an adoptive home. See, after years of violence, neglect, and intimidation, Ty's family was investigated by DHS for the first time after his younger sister made a passing comment about her father and a firearm to her teacher. When Ty was removed following the investigation, the caseworker couldn't find a family willing to take a sibling group of five, so all the children were split. And after all, since older children can be "more challenging to place" (as "the System" so gently puts it), Ty will have had a handful of foster care placements before he's done being bounced around. And even then – he will likely struggle to believe that there is any security with this new "family"... he will have no construct of experience to identify "family" as "forever". On top of that, he will be grieving not just the loss of his parents and extended family, but separation from his birth siblings as well, even if efforts are made to maintain their relationship by their respective adoptive parents.

Katie won't feel grateful for finally getting the things *every child is supposed to get from the beginning*. Her little system is at a disadvantage for responding to new relationships in the ways that adults would deem normal or appropriate, because there are too many gaps to fill in before she's able to function in ways that are easier for her parents to understand.

Ty has ten years with his birth family, and no matter how much he may be relieved by the safety and predictability of his new home, he will struggle to understand the way that this family works. He's used to his parents having strangers coming and going at all hours of the night, chaos, violence, and general unpredictability. The new "family" is not one he can understand – yet. And his confusion will be easy to see if we try to look at the world through Ty's lenses, instead of our own.

***If you have an older adopted child, you must understand:*** Especially for older children, the actual process of adoption can be experienced by the child as something else in their lives beyond their control... and in some ways, it can be similar to the abuse, neglect, and trauma they have experienced – which was also beyond their control. Somehow, they are expected to adjust, assimilate, and accept, without anyone seeking to understand them first. The day that you gain a new member of your family is also a day of tremendous loss and change for them.

As adults, we may know that children thrive in environments where they are nutritionally nourished, psychologically stimulated, and relationally valued. But just because this is best for children doesn't make the transition into this kind of life easy for them. In fact, the expectation that the child should transition seamlessly and "appreciate" what they are being given in and adoptive family makes the sting of those parental expectations even bigger. Why should a child have to be grateful for something that every human being should be afforded? How can we be angry when kids display behaviors consistent with their upbringing until the time that they come into our homes? They are only responding to the world in the ways that their brains have been shaped to respond. A process of re-wiring so that the child is *able* to respond differently must be intentional, compassionate, and patient. The years, months, days, hours, minutes, or seconds of abuse and neglect is a lifetime for a child. And this trauma is not always easily undone after a few months - or even years - in a nurturing environment. Just because our children may not have received attuned, loving, safe parents from the beginning does not translate to their need to be grateful when they finally do receive it through you.

And so, we circle back again – why don't they feel grateful? Because they shouldn't have to appreciate the respect, love, compassion, and security afforded that should be afforded to every youngster. If anyone should experience gratitude, it is us... If these children open up to us even a little, after the terrors they have survived, it's they who are taking another chance on adults. We may invest more than we ever expected in trying to build that relationship, but they bear the brunt of the risk associated with accepting it because of the days before us. When a child is able, after such difficulties and profound pain, to take another chance on humanity, *we* should feel grateful - because we receive something from them that the other "big people" in their lives haven't earned.

*Written by Jennifer Winkelmann, MA, LPC, NCC, Founder and Clinical Director of Inward Bound, LLC.*

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