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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 8

ENTITLEMENT AND CLAIMING

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Adoption and Society

In her acclaimed book, Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother, Jana Wolf, while waiting for her adoptive son to be born, describes feeling "...slightly defective by society's standards." This is not an uncommon sentiment experienced by many new adoptive parents. Because society places so much emphasis on biological parenting as the preferred, normal way to build families, adoptive parents must confront the challenge of thinking of themselves as "second best." Especially when adoption is preceded by the painful experience of infertility and then followed by the emotional challenges of the adoption process, including intense scrutiny by adoption professionals and possibly by birth parents, the potential damage to self-esteem is great. Prospective parents understandably can lose confidence in their ability and right to parent.

David Kirk in Shared Fate notes how critically important it is for adoptive parents to come to terms with all the losses related to adoptive parenting – the lack of a biological connection as well as the loss of "status." Recognizing the unique needs of adopted children, he notes that it is also necessary for parents to acknowledge the differences involved in adoptive parenting. Acknowledging the differences means that the adopted parent neither overemphasizes their child's adoptive status nor tries to completely ignore or keep it secret. Instead, the parent recognizes that their family, while like all families, will face special challenges related to adoption as they go through the life cycle. Successful completion of this task will have great impact on a parent's relationship with their adopted child.

What does Entitlement mean?

Entitlement incorporates all the responsibilities and risks of parenthood. Lois Melina in Raising Adopted Children discusses the importance of adoptive parents being able to develop:

a strong sense that it feels *right* for this child to be part of the family, and a firm belief that they have the *right/authority* to parent their child. The process of attaching to a child often parallels the process of developing a strong, firm sense of entitlement.



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When parents have a strong sense of entitlement, they are able to confidently and competently meet the child's needs for nurturance, protection, security and limits. The child is neither neglected nor overly protected, and parents are able to discipline their child consistently, with age-appropriate expectations and methods. If a parent finds that something seems to be interfering with their comfort with either discipline or separation from their child, the parent should consider whether or not their problem relates to some difficulty with a sense of entitlement.

Entitlement can be impaired by a number of factors including:

- ◆ Over identification/ overly empathic response to birth parents' loss (either – "I took **her** child" or "I must be a perfect parent – never get angry.")
- ◆ Unresolved issues related to infertility (e.g. loss of fantasy child, or "I can't handle being apart from my child, it makes me feel sad again.")
- ◆ Lack of support from extended family/friends (e.g. grandparent shows preference for biological grandchildren.)
- ◆ Unrealistic fears or expectations (e.g. child will feel rejected again and/or reject me if I impose consequences for misbehavior.)
- ◆ Oversensitivity to societal myths and perceptions of adoption ("I must be perfect and prove I love my child as much as I would a biological child.")
- ◆ Attachment issues: especially with older children – parents' difficulty appropriately understanding and responding to child's attachment to birth or foster family
- ◆ Challenges in relationship with birth family in open adoptions (overreaction to birth family's interest in child.)



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What is Claiming?

Lois Melina in Raising Adopted Children writes that adoptive parents can develop a sense that their child belongs with them by finding the similarities they share with their children in mannerisms, personality characteristics, or even in physical appearance. This is part of “claiming” a child as one’s own. (“You have Dad’s sense of humor.”) By recognizing and verbalizing these similarities, parents can help their children to not only connect to their immediate family members but also to extended family members. (“You are artistic, just like Aunt Carol.” They can also share this observation with Aunt Carol!)

RESOURCES

Parents who would like to explore the issue of entitlement and claiming in adoption may find these books to be useful:

Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Henig; The Family of Adoption by Joyce Maguire Pavao; Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting an Adopted Child by Holly Van Gulden., Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother by Jana Wolff, Raising Adopted Children by Lois Melina, Shared Fate by David Kirk; Making Room in Our Hearts by Micky Duxbury; The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption by Lori Holden with Cynthia Hass.

In addition, adoptive parent support groups are often safe, understanding environments to explore family connections. Concerns about those connections can best be addressed with an adoption-competent professional.