



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 8

ENTITLEMENT AND CLAIMING

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

ADOPTION AND SOCIETY

In her acclaimed book, *Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother*, Jana Wolf describes feeling “...slightly defective by society’s standards” while she was waiting for her adopted son to be born. This is not an uncommon sentiment experienced by many new adoptive parents. Because most children are raised by their biological parents, some adoptive parents confront the challenge of thinking of themselves as “second best.” Especially when adoption is preceded by the painful experience of infertility, prospective parents can lose confidence in their right to parent.

We should note that there is also an other side to this notion of being second best, especially for those who adopt from foster care or who adopt children with disabilities. These adoptive families can be held up as heroes or angels for adopting, while their children’s birth parents can be portrayed very negatively. Adoptive parents should push back against these narratives because they are bad for kids. What child wants to hear that someone must be a hero or saint to parent them? Or that someone they are biologically connected with is horrible? Such narratives may also make the adoptive parents feel more inadequate if they are struggling, again, leading to a sense of not being good enough.

WHAT DOES ENTITLEMENT MEAN IN ADOPTION?

Entitlement, in the context of adoption, means that adoptive parents must have—and feel—all the responsibilities and risks of parenthood. They are a parent, not “just an adoptive parent.” Lois Melina, in *Raising Adopted Children*, discusses the importance of adoptive parents being able to develop “a keen 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.”

When parents have an intense sense of entitlement, they can confidently and competently meet the child’s needs for nurturance, protection, security, and limits. The child is neither neglected nor overly protected, and parents can discipline them consistently, with developmentally appropriate expectations and methods. If a parent finds that something is interfering with their comfort with either discipline or separation from their child, the parent should consider whether their problem relates to some difficulty with their sense of truly being the child’s parent. Parents should also be aware, however, that if they are raising a child who has experienced trauma, they should be using trauma-responsive discipline. Techniques that might work for the average child may need to be adjusted for children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or other trauma.

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Entitlement can be impaired by several factors including:

- Over identification with or overly empathic response to birth parents' loss ("I took her child" or "I must be a perfect parent and never get angry.")
- Unresolved issues related to infertility (for example, 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 (for example, a grandparent shows preference for biological grandchildren)
- Unrealistic fears or expectations (for example, that a child will feel rejected again or reject the parent if they impose consequences for misbehavior)
- Oversensitivity to societal myths and perceptions of adoption ("I must be perfect and prove to everyone else that I love my child as much as I would a biological child.")
- Attachment issues, including the adoptive parents' difficulty appropriately understanding and responding to child's attachment to and interest in birth or foster family members
- Challenges in relationship with birth family in open adoptions (overreaction to birth family's interest in the child or the child's interest in the family)

Another factor might be the adoptive parents' own inability to examine their own feelings. In *Shared Fate*, David Kirk notes how critically important it is for adoptive parents to come to terms with all the losses related to adoptive parenting, including the loss of a biological connection. 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 status as adopted nor tries to ignore it or keep it secret. Successful completion of this task will greatly impact a parent's relationship with their adopted child.

WHAT IS CLAIMING?

Melina 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 or personality characteristics. Parents can also highlight things both they and their children love or activities the family loves to do together. This is part of "claiming" a child as one's own. Examples include:

- "You have Dad's sense of humor."
- "You are artistic like your Aunt Carol!"
- "I love that we are a family of sports fans!"
- "I like ordering takeout with you. We're the only two who like pineapple on our pizza!"

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. ("Aunt Carol, Jose is artistic just like you!")

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Another way to claim each other is for parents to be careful to name them as their children. Parents should not introduce some children as biological, and others as adopted unless the context makes it necessary. They would say: “I have six children” rather than “I have two birth children and four adopted children.” If a parent were speaking at an adoption conference where it was relevant, they could say: “I have six children, two by birth and four through adoption.” It is critical to talk about adoption in the family but not to label some children as birth children and others as adopted.

RESOURCES

Parents who want to learn more may want to join adoptive parent support groups, which typically provide a safe, understanding environment to explore family connections. Parents who have concerns about their feelings of entitlement or difficulty with claiming may want to work with an adoption-competent professional.

These books have more information about entitlement and claiming in adoption:

- *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