

Surviving and Thriving in a Difficult Adoption **Dave Ziegler, Ph.D.**

Dave Ziegler is the founder and executive director of Jasper Mountain, a nationally recognized treatment program for traumatized children. Dave is a psychologist and holds three professional licenses and has been a foster parent for many years. In addition to his work at Jasper Mountain, he speaks throughout the country to parents and professionals and is the author of Raising Children Who Refuse To Be Raised, Traumatic Experience and the Brain, Achieving Success With Impossible Children, and Beyond Healing: The Path To Personal Contentment.

Adoptions can be much like marriages: Too many dissolve with pain for everyone; others stay together but everyone is unhappy; some get by with everyone lowering his or her expectations; and too few are a wonderful experience of loving, learning, and growing for all concerned. To foster success, adoptions need as much care, thought, and skill training as marriages. Marriages and adoptions fail partly because those involved do not know what they are actually saying yes to and discover they don't have what it takes to handle the reality they find. The goal becomes not only how to survive the reality of the adoption but how to thrive with the challenges involved.

Maintaining More than Your Sanity

Maintaining a healthy adoption can be compared to maintaining an automobile. There are issues that need attention, and, as the ad goes, "You can pay me now or pay me later." Here are some comparisons:

Check the radiator	Keep it cool, don't overheat
Check the steering/brakes	Stay in control at all times
Keep the battery charged	Keep your energy
Tune up for performance	Maintain your power
Check the plugs	Keep your spark
Check wear on tires	Realize you are wearing down before you burst.

Contained in each of these suggestions is all you really need to know about maintaining health in an adoption. The best truths are simple ones. A recent best seller tells us that we learned in kindergarten everything we need for a happy, fulfilled life. Well, some of us may have gotten it all the first time, but most of us could use a refresher. If you got it all at first, then stop here. But if you need to hear a bit more, read on.

Why Do Adoptions Fail?

There are many reasons for disrupted adoptions, but they all boil down to one overall issue. Families choose to adopt for many reasons, but they want to do a good thing for all concerned. Although they know there will be struggle, they do not adopt to put everyone through great pain. Adoptions fail when a commitment to a child begins to harm commitments to other loved ones.

If it gets to the point that something has to go, it will probably be the adopted child. There are two important perspectives here:

The family. There may be many reasons to adopt, but in the end a family decides it has room in its members' lives and hearts for a new family member. But what are they to do if their offers of love and affection are met with lack of interest or even hostility? The family can understand that life may have been difficult for the child but believe all that can change if the child simply accepts the loving care of this new family. After weeks and then months of a child letting the family know that he or she wants neither their home nor their heart, all that the adoption seems to be bringing everyone is pain. Maybe the child would be better off somewhere else, and clearly the family members were better off before all this started. This often becomes the final chapter, one filled with failure, guilt, and grief for everyone.

The child. All adopted children have experienced deep loss or they wouldn't need a family. Most special-needs children have experienced much more than loss. Fearful and adrift in the foster care system, the child is informed that he will soon get a new family. But do people realize what family may mean to the child—the ones that were supposed to always be there for you but weren't? To the child, Mom and Dad may mean someone who didn't care, or worse, someone who was very abusive. The child has probably been in numerous homes and schools. Such children can't put their heart on the line again unless they know it will be safe, so they test the family. Sometimes their testing is misinterpreted by the family, and a negative cycle begins. The worse it gets, the more fear arises and then more testing occurs. The child begins to see the family stop trying and waits for the caseworker to appear and once again move the child from a home that was supposed to always be there for him or her but wasn't. This confirms again that the world is a cruel place where you have to fight to survive and avoid being vulnerable at all costs. And the world has another antisocial personality.

How can these traps be avoided? How can the process not only last but be a good experience for everyone?

What Successful Adoptions Look Like

Successful adoptions involving a child with special needs tend to have a lot of TLC. Tender loving care, you say? Absolutely not! Tender loving care is almost always in abundant supply in failed adoptions with these children. That just may be one of the principal problems. In this case TLC means something very different:

T = Translating correctly what is really going on with the child in order to understand where the child really is. It is commonly known that manipulative teenagers (and aren't they all) talk in opposites. It is often a safe bet to retranslate what they are saying to get closer to the truth. Practice by retranslating the following: I don't want rules; I'm not worried about my future; I am all caught up on my schoolwork; I'll be home early tonight. This same principle works with special-needs children.

L = Learning from the challenges of adopting a difficult child becomes one of the indicators of success, not how smooth it's going for everyone. If you want smooth, get some Jell-O. But

adopting is not smooth—it is trouble or challenge, depending on your point of view. The more you see it as a challenge to learn from, the better the candidate you are to adopt a difficult child.

C = Stay in control at all times in all situations involving the child. These children did not get difficult on their own; they had lots of help from chaotic, abusive, and neglectful families that could not provide a safe or secure home. Constant control sounds pretty heavy, but if you adopt one of these children, he or she will constantly test to see just how in control you are. If the child is able to gain control, everyone loses; if the child can't, everyone wins. It's that simple.

TLC – Translating, Learning and Control – is easier said than done. But here is part of the point – what does a difficult adoption offer you? It offers an opportunity to grow yourself, as you give a deserving child a fresh chance to be part of a family.

Seven Strategies for Success

1. Understand the real needs of the child. It is not often helpful to listen to the child's words or even to accept the child's behavior at face value because of the opposite issue. If the child has had an abusive or neglectful past, then his or her needs are pretty straight-forward despite the way the child acts. These children need the following:

Safety. Will I be safe in a nonviolent environment where my basic needs will be met?

Security. I need a structured situation where a parent is in charge and I can just be a kid.

Acceptance. I need people who can accept me as a person even if they don't like or accept my behavior.

Belonging. I need to belong to someone; I need to be connected to others and learn to give and receive affection.

Trust. I need to learn to trust and be trusted; I need to be treated fairly, with honest, to respect, and firmness.

Relationship. I need to be in relationships with others in a way that no one is victimized and both sides are enhanced.

Self-awareness. I need to learn how to make changes in my personality and behavior by self-understanding.

Personal worth. The final indicator of my being a success as a person is, Do I believe in myself and my own worth?

2. Positive discipline is the quickest route to your control and to the child's personal worth. Techniques include separate the child from the behavior; don't punish—discipline (which means to teach); don't let "time-outs" become a disguised punishment; use logical consequences; don't ask the child to lie by asking questions you know the answer to; avoid power struggles; have the child fight with himself/herself, not with you; keep your sense of humor and don't let the child decide what you will feel; and allow the child to change and be more responsible by not always locking the youngster into past behaviors.

3. Learn to win the manipulation game. Don't let the child use your rules against you. Don't be completely predictable to a manipulative child; you'll become an easy target. Keep the child off balance when he or she is trying to beat you. In general, if the child is manipulating to get

something, do your best to prevent the child from getting his or her way or you will get more manipulation (because it worked). Stay a couple of steps ahead by predicting what the child might do and what you will do in return. Don't respond emotionally; you won't think very creatively then. Parenting is best done by a team; talk over your next move and get advice and ideas. If the child has you on the run, the child will win the manipulation game and both of you will lose.

4. Get the help you need from the right source. Quite frankly, some counselors who don't understand these children can make the situation considerably worse. It is not much of a challenge for a manipulative child to be "perfect" an hour a week in someone's office. If the counselor starts looking at you like you must be the problem, get someone else. Ask prospective counselors about their experience with adoption, abused children, and kids with attachment problems. Or better yet, go to a counselor who comes highly recommended for his or her skills with a child just like yours.

5. The only given is that this type of adoption will be difficult; it does not have to be terrible. The difference is something you have complete control over – your feelings and sense of humor, the world just isn't funny anymore," and adoption is like that.

6. Make sure you are more than a parent. If you are a parent twenty-four hours a day, you have become pretty dull. Be a wife, a student, a hiker, a volunteer, a square dancer, an artist, a husband, or whatever, but don't get stuck in the parent role where there is a whole lot more giving than receiving. Batteries don't last long if they never get recharged.

7. Don't get in a hurry. The saddest failed adoptions are the ones where the child is desperately testing and the parents call it off. If only they could understand that the desperation is an indicator that the testing is nearly over and that they have almost passed the test. It has taken a long time for these children to be hurt; it takes time for them to be vulnerable again. But don't continue down a road that is clearly leading nowhere. Get some good help from a counselor who has a good road map – there may be a much better road to get where you want to go.

Final Thoughts

So what do you think? If it sounds like a lot more work than you thought, don't feel alone. Just consider – if parents knew all they would have to endure with their birth children, would they be so eager to go through with it? Make no mistake – parenting is the world's most complex and difficult job. It is even more challenging if you have to pick up the pieces that someone else has failed with. If all this is more than you can imagine, then get a pet. But if you want the ride of your life, if you want to be the most substantial influence in a young person's life, and if you want to learn more about yourself than you thought was possible, then boy, does CSD have a deal for you!