

Dear adoptive parents...

I am a 30-something year old intercountry adoptee, adopted from Vietnam to an Aussie family where I inherited three older biological brothers who all have red hair! I grew up in an isolated country town with no other Asian faces around me, but my family were unconditionally loving and considering the total lack of education they received about the issues that come with intercountry adoption, I think they did an awesome job in raising me.

The glory of hindsight allows me to pinpoint issues, situations and strategies that I believe can assist the upcoming generations of adoptive families in avoiding the challenges that we, as a first generation, faced; or at minimum, educate you of their existence so at least you can be mindful of them along the way.

One key issue for adoptive parents to realise, is that our lives didn't start when we were placed in your arms. Like you, our life actually began at birth, and just because there may not be any factual information about those beginnings, it is fundamental that you realise, recognise and acknowledge that time period and the experiences that we went through. We understand that in the lead up to receiving us, you went through your own challenging journey; and we appreciate the effort and energy expended; but what you need to understand is that during that time, we have gone through one of the most traumatic experiences that is humanly possible; and by this I am referring to the separation from and loss of our biological mother.

A biological mother is the person that you are supposed to be able to assume you can rely on to love you and be there for you no matter what. Therefore, when we are 'abandoned' or given up, it can feel like a type of rejection and we can sometimes question what was wrong about us to cause her to not want to keep us. Cognitively, we understand the circumstances behind our adoption situation, but emotionally it can feel like maybe it was our fault in some way; and we suspect that maybe we just weren't good enough for her to keep.

The result of this fundamental question of self worth, can impact quite significantly on our ability to trust, our self esteem and our ability to receive love. And unfortunately, these issues can manifest themselves in our behaviour, actions and relationships throughout both our childhood and adult life.

When the person you're supposed to be able to rely on to be with you rejects you, you can spend your life expecting that everyone else will eventually do the same; after all, if SHE couldn't love you enough to be with you forever, then why or how could anyone else? The result is that we grow up with a distinct fear of abandonment and for those of us who were unfortunate enough to be moved from place to place prior to being adopted, our ability to attach and trust people is compromised even more. This fear is stored in the hearts and minds of many adoptees, and often the impact can be seen in our behaviour.

There are two behavioural extremes that adoptees sometimes head towards. Personally, I tried to be the 'perfect' daughter, ensuring I never challenged my parents and always did the right thing in the hopes I'd never give them any reason to reject me like my birth mother did. I even went so far as to hide all the pain I had about my initial loss and sadness from my parents; subconsciously this ensured I spared them any feelings of pain or discomfort, again thinking by showing them this pain they would have a reason to not love me and therefore abandon me.

Other adoptees can head in an alternative direction and challenge their parents with aggressive type behaviour, as a way to 'test' the resilience of their new parent's love. Because we expect everyone who loves us to leave us, we figure it will eventually happen so instead of waiting for it to arrive, we can try and bring on the rejection earlier, or try and sever the bond ourselves before the other party decides to do so.

Adoptive parents should expect that at some stage their child will experience grief over the loss of their biology. Even though we didn't know our birth mother, we feel the same loss that you might feel when you lose your own parent. As a child, it is not usually something we can articulate but as an adult I can describe the pain as intense and confusing. It is important that adoptive parents are aware of this pain carried by your

child, even though they may not be in touch with it themselves. It is important for your child to feel they can talk to you openly and honestly about their feelings surrounding their birth family, their beginnings, their birth country and their birth culture. For some of us, especially if we have adopted the 'good child' syndrome and seek to protect your feelings at all costs, it can be a scary concept to embrace our curiosity about our beginnings because we fear you will be offended or hurt by our questions. But when you adopt a child from another country and another culture, you need to be prepared for them to want to know about their beginnings and it is so important that you not feel threatened by their need to know and learn, and it is critical that you actively encourage a lifelong attachment to the culture and country in which they came from.

Racial identity and pride in what we look like and where we were born, is important for many reasons. Feeling proud and secure in where we have come from is important for our sense of worth and in ensuring we can cope with racism. Parents need to assume that if their child looks different, then they will experience racism. I believe that if we have pride in who we are and a secure sense of racial identity then racism has no impact. To develop this sense of racial pride adoptive parents should actively offer opportunities to integrate our birth culture and country into our adoptive life. You should also be prepared, however, for us to reject your offerings at times and embrace them at other times. We all operate with our own pace and sometimes we are interested in our birth culture, while at other times we don't want to have any association at all with it; just be aware that our interest will come in ebbs and flows but the key is that you should continue to offer it to us. Your offerings may come in the form of attending traditional celebrations, eating out at restaurants that offer our birth country's cuisine, socialising with people from our birth country, etc.

When you adopt a child from another country you are making a commitment to open your lives to that culture. If you think you can adopt your child and then neglect their origins you should probably reconsider your decision to adopt. Interestingly, the majority of adult adoptees I've met lament the fact that they cannot speak the language of their birth culture; and we all agree that it is often too giant a task to learn as adults. However, many adoptive parents have reported that when they offer their child classes to learn their birth language, the idea is met with resistance. It might be a lot easier for your child to embrace the idea if you also learn the language with them; after all, how can your child retain the skill if there is no one to practise conversing with; additionally, what a great symbol of your respect you're showing to your child's beginnings by embracing their language.

It's also important to realise that for the first 3, 6, 10, 15 months of our life (or whatever the duration was before we came to you) we were completely surrounded by people who look like us, by a language that was most likely not English, and by smells that were native to our birth country. We lived in a very non-Australian birth country and were surrounded by people from a very non-Australian culture. So for us to then be faced with Australian people, English language and Australian smells – the contrast is quite overwhelming, confusing and scary. In essence, everything we had become used to and familiar with, is taken away. And while it may seem like a short time that we spent in our birth country, it is actually an extremely crucial developmental period.

I was in an orphanage for the first 10 months of my life, and during this time I learned that what I wanted or needed wasn't very important to other people. Let me try and explain what I mean. As a baby I assume that I cried when I was hungry, I probably cried when I wanted some physical contact and I probably cried when I needed a nappy change. Unfortunately, when you reside in an institution where constant care and attention isn't always available, those cries can be ignored, which means our needs go unmet. So as a result, we learn that our cries and our needs may not matter to anyone else. Sometimes we learn that there is no use crying or showing our feelings at all because we expect no one will respond, and we can assume that no one responds because we are not worth responding to. Again, this can impact on our sense of self worth, which is something we can carry with us as we grow older.

The thing is, babies are not born with a fully functional brain; rather, our brains develop in accordance with our experiences. So when we cry for food but we don't receive food, that part of our brain doesn't develop the same way that a brain in a baby who *does* receive food would; similarly, when we cry because we need

physical comfort, when we do not receive a hug in response, that part of our brain that would normally develop does not. Therefore, physiologically, the brain development in adoptees who are institutionalised can be slightly differently to babies who do not come from these complex beginnings.

If you opt to return to the birth country while your children are still young, be aware that they may be quite fearful about returning, thinking that you might be planning to leave them there. It might sound odd, but it's not uncommon for young adoptees returning to their birth country with their adoptive families to harbour this suspicion. For this reason, be sure to make your child feel secure and comfortable at all times, both during the lead up to the trip and while you are there. Ideally, you should return to the birth country only when your child feels comfortable and enthusiastic to do so.

Another one of the most important things you can do for your adopted child is to establish relationships with other adoptees and adoptive families. Not only does this help normalise your family structure, but as an adoptee, I can tell you from experience, that having contact with people who have also had beginnings similar to my own has been an incredibly comforting and therapeutic experience. To know that my life is not freakish and to be able to share thoughts and feelings with others who also have them is fantastic and extremely important to the emotional wellbeing of your child. It can also prove pretty useful for you to mix with other adoptive parents so you too can share ideas and experiences along the way.

Parenting is a challenging task even before introducing the issues that intercountry adoption brings with it; but by being aware of some of these elements you can at least be mindful of the specific needs that your adopted child might have. It can be tempting to overanalyse your child's behaviour in light of their beginnings, but do try and remember some issues you will face along the way are simply 'kid' issues rather than 'adoptee' issues; but at least by being aware of the implications of our situation you can keep them in mind and draw on them when appropriate.

I wish you luck in your parenting role and welcome any contact from you or your child in the years to come.

All the best



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