

REACH

Tulare
County

Resource • Education • Advocacy • Crisis Intervention • Hope

Aspiranet and Tulare County Adoption Support Program



Fall 2015

The adoption journey is full of so many precious moments of joy, excitement, and happiness. Maybe it was that first moment that you brought your child home. Maybe it was the very first moment that your child looked up at you and comfortably called you, “mommy” or “daddy”. Maybe it was the first time that you saw your child truly smile and let themselves be silly and play with you. There are so many precious moments in adoption and naturally, we must celebrate these moments! But sometimes, we avoid talking about the “hard stuff.” In a magazine article entitled “Embracing the Grief of Adoption”, adoptive parent Michael Monroe states “My tendency is to focus on the miracle, blessing and joy of adoption – and rightfully so. These are the undeniably beautiful realities of the adoption journey. But they do not negate the equally unavoidable reality that there is no adoption without loss and pain. Adoption is at the same time born from a response to hurt, loss and sorrow” (p. 32). Grief and loss is something that affects every member of the adoptive family in different ways. It is important that parents have the tools and language to be able to talk about these issues with their children as well as to acknowledge and work through their own feelings. Michael Monroe went on to state, “As I held him close I so desperately wanted to tell him that I understood what he was thinking and feeling...and God knows I wanted to, but I can’t. Not truly. He knows it and so do I. As a result, all we could offer him was our reassuring presence to help him run toward the loss and pain, not away from it” (p. 32). The key is to remember that there is “beauty and meaning in the pain” and these moments of vulnerability are also opportunities for healing (p. 32).

Inside this edition, you will find various articles on grief and loss with suggestions and tools to help parents talk about these issues with their children. We hope you enjoy the coming Holidays with your family and remember to treasure every moment spent with them.

*** The Tulare REACH Adoption Support group is moving locations. Please look for an email coming soon with location details!**

Inside This Issue

1. Embracing the Grief of Adoption
2. Helping your Child with Grief and Loss
3. Lifebooks
4. Movie Review & Reducing your Child's Triggers During the Holidays
5. Calendar of Events, Support Group Info
6. REACH Services

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NEED HELP?

Is your adoptive child exhibiting any of the following behaviors?

- Frequent running away
- Sexualized behavior
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- Aggressive/assaultive behavior
- Oppositional/defiant behavior
- Self-injurious behavior
- One or more hospitalizations in a Mental Health facility
- Substance use disorder
- Fire starter
- Minor criminal behavior
- School behavior/truancy problems
- Beyond control of parents and or primary care adults
- Mild Developmental disorder not recognized by a Regional Center

If so, we can help! The REACH program can connect adoptive families to services that can help. Some of the services available to your family include Therapeutic Behavior Services (TBS) and Tulare County Wraparound. TBS is an intensive one-to-one behavioral mental health service. The service is available to parents/caregivers of children/youth who experience serious emotional challenges. Tulare County Wraparound provides high-risk youth and their families an alternative to group home care. Wraparound is a family-centered, strength-based, needs-driven philosophy promoting the reestablishment of at-risk youth and families into community support systems.

Helping your Child with Grief and Loss

Gray, Deborah (2007). *Nurturing Adoptions: Creating Resilience after Neglect and Trauma*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Perspectives Press.

Helping our children know how to respond and deal with grief and loss is an important role we can play in their lives. Grief and loss is common for adopted children and as parents we can be prepared to help them when issues surface. In the book, *Nurturing Adoptions*, Deborah Gray gives parents suggestions on ways to support their own child's grief process. The following are tips from the section of the book entitled "Exercises for Helping Parents to Help their Children with their Grief Issues":

Setting the Emotional Tone: Parents should find a time to speak with their children when parents are available and reflective. The environment should be calm with the television and other electronics off. Parents should be emotionally present and be ready to comfort their children and help them process their loss – and not try to talk them out of their grief.

Ways to Approach a Child: Reading stories is a great chance to open the discussion about specific losses. Doing lifebook work or looking through a completed lifebook can also help open the dialogue. When talking to children it can be helpful to give the nonverbal message that you care by mirroring their body language.

Issues for Children: Sometimes children experience big feelings related to their losses and can have a phobic reaction to the loss. Assure children that you can help them share the load so that they do not become too overwhelmed. Children may also feel that their losses are the way they stay connected with their birthparent. In these cases, children need to find a different way to positively connect with the birthparent such as a shared interest, haircut, etc. Another issue children may have is feeling like their adoptive parents are supposed to be happy about the placement; therefore the children do not want to share their loss issues because they think it might upset the parent. Parents can let children know they expect and can help them with their sadness.

Noticing Your Child's Grief: Be aware of reminders that may trigger feelings of loss such as birthdays and Mother's day. You may also notice irritability in your children as they search for a missing piece of themselves. In unresolved grief there may be a dull ache and loneliness that is often present in children. Also pay attention to comments such as "The day I was born was the saddest day of my life. It was the day that I saw for the last time my birthmother's face". Follow up those types of comments with comfort and discussion. Parents can also be conscious of their children withdrawing and needing quiet time or alternately becoming clingy or fearful when experiencing feelings of grief and loss.

When Grief Coincides with a Need for Behavior Shaping:

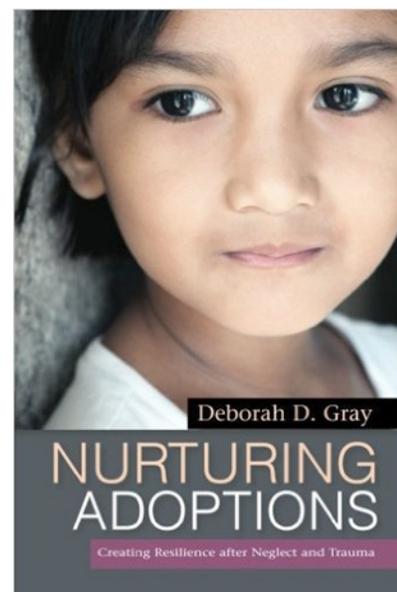
Parents need to teach their children emotional modulation and help them understand that it is okay to feel bad, but not okay to hurt others in response to their sad feelings. Good grieving has support, but children should not feel that they have permission to overtake the household with their grieving. For example, you may find that children want to talk about their birthparents at night as an excuse to

stay up later. A response you could have for them is, "At bedtime we will not be talking about missing your birthmother. We will have snuggle time in the morning at which time you are welcome to talk about your birthmother."

How to Help Children Grieve: Set time aside when you are available for your children. Be okay with anger surfacing during the grief process. Do not be afraid of strong feelings. Children often express rage if they were neglected and abused. Some children have conflicted loyalties and do not want their parents to hear some of their negative thoughts about birthparents, so meeting with a therapist can be a good idea in these situations. The following are hands on approaches that parents can use to help their children process grief:

- Use one piece of paper and color the color of their feelings. They can decide which colors mean which feelings.
- Buy or make paper dolls to act out the scenes of their lives.
- Supply facts. Put the facts on a timeline to help children stay organized.
- Use rituals to say goodbye. (Wish on a star).
- Use memorials, for example, contributing to an orphanage or a fund to give school supplies to foster children.

The goal in helping children cope with their loss is to move them to a place where they can talk about their experiences without suffering an overwhelming amount of emotion. With support, children can develop a sense of themselves and their histories so they become present-focused and learn that they do not have to face the difficulties in life alone.



Lifebooks

A Therapeutic Tool to Help Children Work through Their Grief and Loss

David Brodzinsky, Ph.D. is a well known clinician in the adoption community who has published several books and research articles around adoption and his work with adoptive families. Some of his well known publications include, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self and Children's Adjustment to Adoption: Developmental and Clinical Implications*. David Brodzinsky has given lectures on "Preparing Children and Parents For Successful Adoption Placements" in which he explores the importance of using a child's lifebook as a therapeutic tool. According to Brodzinsky, a lifebook is a representation of the child's past, present, and future. So, the structure of a lifebook can be around these three questions, Where Do I Come From? Where Am I Now? and Where am I Going? A lifebook should be co-constructed with the child and can help bring "order" to the mystery and chaos of a child's life. What determines what is included in a child's lifebook? This depends on the child's age, readiness to deal with various issues, and the availability of information. When there is very little information available about the child's past, children are encouraged to share their fantasies, hopes, and expectations around this. Brodzinsky recommends parents work with the child's social worker and/or therapist to gather as much available

information about the child's birth family and birth heritage. Parents can also collect general information about the child's background (such as maps representing where the child was born). A lifebook can help to normalize and validate a child's curiosity about their origins, promote a more realistic understanding of adoption, create a more positive view of self, and open up communication about adoption.

There are several online resources that parents can utilize to print out suggested formats for their child's lifebook, and it's free!. At http://www.ifapa.org/publications/IFAPA_Lifebook_Pages.asp, this website offers the ability to print out pages entitled, "Dear Mom" or "Dear Dad". These pages offer the child a private way to write a letter to their birth mother or birth father with any questions, thoughts, or feelings they may have towards them. Other pages on this website include, "If I Could Change One Thing", "I Grew Up With", "Messages From Important People in My Life", and many more! If you would like other suggestions for lifebook work with your child, contact any REACH Adoption Social Worker and make an appointment to come to our office where we can show you several books and workbooks in our REACH library.

"The Psychological Presence" in Grief & Loss

Boss, Pauline (1999). Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Children who enter the foster care system often find themselves in hopeless situations due to the early losses they experience in life. Many of these children are legally removed from the care of their birth parents

and birth family, and are consequently uprooted from the community that raised them in their early years of life. Often times, these children come to experience the world as an unfair place due to these early disruptions. As these children enter adoptive placement and face the prospect of a finalized adoption, their lives have already been marked by separations and losses that leave them with lingering feelings of uncertainty. Children who are adopted at birth may not have experienced shifts in placements but they have endured the irretrievable loss of a birth

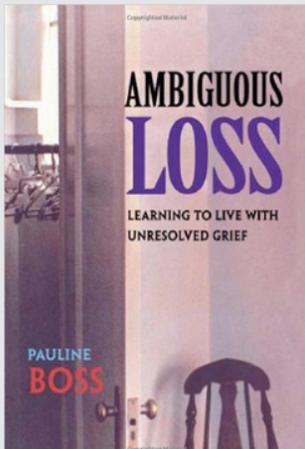
parent that can impact their identity formation later in life. Parents and professionals who work with children, who have faced these early losses, should have awareness about the impact of the psychological presence in the lives of children.

Children who have experienced the loss of a birth parent and have transitioned into adoption may face a phenomenon known as the Psychological Presence. Adoption researcher, Deborah Fravel, describes this phenomenon as "the symbolic existence of an individual in the perception of other family members in a way that influences

thoughts, emotions, behavior, identity or unity of remaining family members." In adoptive families, this phenomenon is evident in the lives of parents who fear "being displaced" as primary caretakers if they were to seek additional information about the birth parents. Consequently, parents who do not have open communication about adoption with their children can lead the children to feel that they are "betraying" their adoptive family because their thoughts and feelings towards the birth family are inappropriate. Adoptive parents who are unaware about the psychological presence of a birth parent in the family can minimize the loss of a child, thereby interfering with the child's ability to externalize his/her grief. Parents will need to build a relationship based on trust and open communication with their child in order for the child to express his/her feelings and to trust that his/her feelings will be validated.

In *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, researcher Pauline Boss explores the ambiguousness that arises as a result of the psychological presence. In adoptive families, birth parents are not physically a part of the family, but they are on the minds of the family. Moreover, it is important for parents to live with and adapt to the ambivalence felt from the psychological presence of a birth parent in order for children to cope with grief in a healthy way. The book highlights six guidelines to live with unresolved loss.

1. Find Meaning (Look at values, beliefs, traditions, remove blame)
2. Accept Uncertainty (Balance need for control with acceptance of ambiguity)
3. Reconstruct Identity (Roles and family dynamics change)
4. Normalize Ambivalence (Develop coping strategies, manage conflicting feelings)
5. Revisit attachment (Celebrate the missing and mourn the changes)
6. Discover hope (Look at strengths, making it with the pain)



Movie Review: *The Dark Matter of Love*



In *The Dark Matter of Love*, the Diaz family decides to embark on an incredible adoption journey that was not quite what they had expected. The Diaz family originally consisted of Claudio Diaz, his wife Cheryl, and their fourteen year old daughter Cami. The Diaz' live in a suburban neighborhood in Wisconsin. After yearning to expand their family, they are finally granted the opportunity to adopt eleven year old Masha Kulabokhova from Russia. Masha is notably a bit shy and withdrawn. The Diaz' also decide to adopt two five year old twin brothers, Marcel and Vadim, who are also from Russia. The boys present as a bit more rambunctious and lively. All three children were raised in government institutions where they learned not to trust adults and mostly fended for themselves. Claudio and Cheryl Diaz knew that it would take awhile for the children to learn to trust them and allow themselves to be parented, but they did not anticipate that it would be this hard. They also did not anticipate that this process would take such an emotional toll on every member of the family. Fourteen year old Cami Diaz was excited about the idea of having younger siblings and was looking forward to it. Now, after the children have come into the home and are slowly being integrated into the family system, Cami starts to feel anger and resentment towards the children. Cami sees her parents devoting all of their time and attention to Masha, Marcel, and Vadim who all have significant emotional needs. She worries that there isn't anything left for her. The Diaz' decide that they need help in order to stabilize and heal their family. They hire two developmental psychologists, Professor Emeritus and Dr. Robert Marvin, who begin working with the family in the home and use a therapy program that is based on 100 years of scientific research in the field of parent/ child love. The goal of the therapy is to help the Diaz' create an environment in which Masha, Marcel, and Vadim can feel safe and form supporting and loving relationships. Another goal is to help Cami overcome her jealousy and increase her confidence that she will be able to continue to go to her parents with her problems and get her own needs met. The therapy also involves Claudio and Cheryl examining their own parenting and attachment styles and how this may help or hinder their ability to remain flexible and parent their children according to their individual needs. *The Dark Matter of Love* is a great documentary film that captures how grief and loss affects **ALL** members of the adoptive family and shows that there is always hope at the end of the tunnel.

Reducing your Child's Triggers During the Holidays

By Vanessa Gutierrez, MFTI

The holidays are a time of family and togetherness. For some it is a time to rejoice in religious/spiritual beliefs. For others it's a time to celebrate the gift of friends and family uniting, all the while sharing special memories. The aroma of food cooking, cookies baking and sound of family and friends engaged in laughter often warms our soul and fills our hearts with bliss.

Holidays can also be a time of unmet expectations, stress and disappointment. Adopted children may experience all of those emotions. The holidays may be a time of unanswerable questions, a feeling of disconnection and a sense of emptiness.

For adopted children, holidays are often a reminder of birth parents and memories they will carry, even as adults. They might have happy memories along with reminders of abuse and neglect, and past trauma can trigger various responses. Children can behave as if a traumatic event that occurred in the past is happening all over again.

Children who have been adopted or are in care often wonder where they came from, the meaning of past relationships, and the future of present relationships. This may be true even for children who were adopted very early in life.

The first step in helping adopted children during the holiday season is to establish emotional safety, this is keeping the child psychologically safe through communication, regardless of the child's past traumatic events. After safety has been established, reconnecting children rapidly with familiar and reliable caregivers is perhaps the most effective psychological first aid.

See below for steps in making it easier for your child to feel emotionally safe during the holidays:

Include Your Child's Culture Incorporate your child's culture into your holiday celebration. Help your child preserve his culture and fond memories based on his or her heritage and traditions. Keep in mind that memorable foods can be a powerful tool for providing comfort and a sense of healing.

Incorporate Your Child's Birth Family Difficulty around grief and loss of parents/family members may often be experienced by your adopted child. You might help your child write out a card for their birth parents and keep it in a special place, or light a candle each night to honor the memory of family members who are no longer in the child's life, but remain in their heart.

Simplicity is Key Holidays are often overwhelming for an adopted child who may not be familiar with your traditions and your family; it just may be too much and cause unnecessary anxiety. Keep the holidays simple until your child gets adjusted to their new family. Limit the number of parties you attend, the gifts you exchange and the families you introduce them to. Talk with your child about how they may be feeling to better understand their comfort level.

Lower Your Expectations The holidays are an emotional time, and when children are still processing their grief over the past, it is uncertain how they'll react and what their behavior will be like during this highly charged time of the year. Pushing your child to enjoy the holidays when they are not yet ready will only lock the two of you into repeated power struggles and arguments that'll put the entire family in a not so festive mood.

Communication is Most Effective Don't forget to talk to your adopted child about what the holidays mean to them, what they are thinking about and how they'd like to celebrate. Doing so can result in a more festive holiday celebration for your entire family.

SUPPORT GROUPS & EVENTS

Upcoming Calendar of Events

October

- 6** Tulare REACH Adoption Support Group
6:30 pm - 8:30 pm
Location to be determined
- 9** Attachment: Embracing the Journey & Learning the Dance
6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
COS Kern 732, Visalia
- 13** Kings REACH Adoption Support Group
6:00 pm – 8:00 pm
Koinonia Christian Fellowship Church, Hanford
- 15** Tulare REACH Adoption Support Group
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Location to be determined

November

- 3** Tulare REACH Adoption Support Group
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Location to be determined
- 10** Kings REACH Adoption Support Group
6:00 pm – 8:00 pm
Koinonia Christian Fellowship Church, Hanford
- 13** Becoming a Trauma Competent Healing Parent (Part 1)
6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
COS Kern 732, Visalia
- 14** Becoming a Trauma Competent Healing Parent (Parts 2&3)
9:00 am - 3:00 pm
COS Kern 732, Visalia
- 19** Tulare REACH Adoption Support Group
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Location to be determined

December

- 1** Tulare REACH Adoption Support Group
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Location to be determined
- 7** The Adoption Process
6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
COS Kern 727B, Visalia
- 9** Second Time Around Moms Group
9:00 am – 10:30 am
Aspiranet office, Visalia
- 17** Tulare REACH Adoption Support Group
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Location to be determined

TULARE COUNTY REACH ADOPTION SUPPORT GROUP

This group is designed for new and experienced adoptive parents as well as others touched by adoption. Training hours provided. **PARENTS MUST RSVP FOR CHILD CARE.** Infants are welcome to join parents/caregivers.

Where: Location to be determined

When: 1st Tuesday of the month & 3rd Thursday of the month 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM

- October 6th
- November 3rd
- December 1st
- * October 15th
- * November 19th
- * December 17th

Contact: JulieAnn Jones (559)741-7358, ext. 4506 or jujones@aspiranet.org

2ND TIME AROUND MOMS GROUP

This group is designed to help connect moms who are parenting their second generation of children. Training hours are provided.

THERE IS NO CHILD CARE FOR THIS GROUP.

Where: Visalia Aspiranet Office
4128 S. Demaree Street, Suite B, Visalia CA 93277

When: This group meets quarterly from 9am - 10:30am

- December 9th

Contact: JulieAnn Jones (559)741-7358, ext. 4506 or jujones@aspiranet.org

KINGS COUNTY REACH ADOPTION SUPPORT GROUP

This group is designed for adults thinking about adoption, parents awaiting adoptive placement and parents of adopted children. Training hours and childcare provided. **PARENTS MUST RSVP FOR CHILD CARE.**

Where: Koinonia Christian Fellowship Church
12536 Hanford Armona Road, Hanford, CA 93230

When: 2nd Tuesday of the month from 6:00 PM – 8:00 PM

- October 13th
- November 10th
- December – **Meeting Cancelled. Happy Holidays!**

COLLEGE OF SEQUOIAS FOSTER & KINSHIP PROGRAM

The College of Sequoias Foster and Kinship Program offers training of interest to foster and adoptive parents at no charge in Visalia and Hanford. For a complete list of classes, Google the key words **COS Visalia Kinship**. Register for classes with Linda Paredes at (559)737-4862 or email lindap@cos.edu. Classes are available in English and in Spanish. REACH will be conducting the following trainings through the College of Sequoias Foster & Kinship Program in the Fall of 2015.

Attachment: Embracing the Journey and Learning the Dance
COS Kern 732, Visalia
Friday, October 9th from 6pm to 9pm

The Adoption Process
COS Kern 727B, Visalia
Monday, December 7th from 6pm to 9pm

Becoming a Trauma Competent Healing Parent (2 day training)
COS Kern 732, Visalia
Friday, November 13th from 6pm – 9pm
Saturday, November 14th from 9am - 3pm

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We're on the Web:
www.reachtularecounty.org



ASPIRAnet
Strengthening Children, Youth, Families and Communities



REACH and Tulare County Adoption Support Services

Resource: We provide 1) telephone support and referral to local services 2) referral to local adoption related community trainings 3) linkage to local therapists with experience working with adoptive families 4) lending library and website access 5) quarterly newsletter which includes book reviews and relevant adoption related information.

Education: Educational support groups and meetings are regularly held and offer a variety of topics pertinent to adoption. In addition, access to the lending library and website offer many opportunities to learn more about adoption and the impact of adoption on all members of the triad (adoptive parents, adoptees and birth family).

Advocacy: We are here to help navigate common issues facing adoptive families. We assist adoptive parents with advocating for the assistance needed in working with educational, legislative and community partners to best meet their children's needs.

Crisis Intervention/Case Management: Participants are eligible to receive short-term therapeutic services, free of charge, by master's level social workers who are trained and experienced in adoption-related issues. Families are also eligible to receive in-home case management services as needed. Spanish translation services are provided.

Hope: We utilize our agency values of Respect, Integrity, Courage and Hope (RICH) to guide our work with adoptive families. Our goal is to promote safe, healthy and stable adoptive families through access to our services.