

A Plan for Attachment

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by
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In the world of adoption, you hear and read the term "attachment" all the time. Some parents write on their blogs or adoption web sites that their child(ren) "attached instantly and never looked back";, some declare their children "attached after that magic 3 day window"; and then you read someone asking for help because their child has been home a week or two and has yet to attach.

My husband and I prepared for this adoption by becoming educated in the many challenges faced by adoptive parents. We read books, joined a support group and met many families at different stages in their adoption. We've learned the challenges we'll be facing are very different from what parents of biological children face and we have learned a variety of approaches we may/may not use once we have our daughter.

In very simple terms, babies attach to their mothers when their needs are met consistently. The baby cries and the mother figures out what is wrong and fixes it. This is a very simple explanation of a very complex process but the result of this cycle of baby crying and having their needs addressed consistently over time is that the baby learns to trust and love their mother. As a child grows, and if they are well attached, they will be able to develop healthy relationships and love others. They will be able to learn and understand right from wrong and be able to empathize with others.

In the case of children that were taken from/abandoned by their mother this cycle is broken. It makes it harder to trust the next person that comes along. In the case of institutionalized children, they are put in a room with many other orphans and many times their cries are not addressed or their needs met. It is not always the fault of the caregivers, they just have too many babies assigned and it's impossible to react promptly to the cries of 10-18 infants. The result is that many institutionalized babies never learn how to trust or love. They have been put in an emotional limbo. They learn to take care of themselves and take control of meeting their own needs by suppressing them or engaging in abnormal behavior to get more attention (such as banging their heads against a crib). Other children just give up. They don't grow up trusting and loving, they see others as a means to an end, to be manipulated through charm or other means to secure what they want. They don't empathize with others and are not capable of understanding when they are doing harm that it is wrong. As long as they get what they want they don't care. They are just survivors.

What this means for us is that we will be taking on the monumental task of convincing our daughter we are going to be her parents forever. She has to trust that she doesn't have to take care of meeting her own needs because we will. In the beginning

she has to learn that I am her mother and it is my job to meet her needs.

When

we say we are trying to get her to attach we are saying that it will take years. We will have good days and bad days. We might make significant progress only to have her regress when she encounters a trigger somewhere on the way. We just don't know how long it will take. What we do know is that we will be following the advice of experienced adoptive parents and professionals in our parenting approach. While we know many people will mean well in their advice, I want to explain some things so that you can understand why we will thank you and do it our way:

The

first days we need to be open to anything and everything. She might kick and scream when she's handed to us or she might just shut down. She also might smile and be happy and then lose it when we get to the hotel. She might be wonderful the first few days and then lose it for several. We just don't know. We don't expect a smooth transition. Those are too far and few. Imagine how you might react if a stranger plucked you out of your current life and handed you to a well-meaning, smiley couple that didn't look like you or even spoke your language? You might scream, panic, or you might decide you like all the toys and want to humor them so you can play a while and then later on pitch a fit….

Sleeping arrangements – We have set up a beautiful nursery. We know our daughter will love it one day. However, when we first get home she will sleep in our room in a co-sleeper next to me. I read in a book that a lot of children that were abandoned experience terrible night terrors. The explanation that had the greatest impact on me is that most of these children are abandoned and found in the early morning hours. I can't begin to imagine the fear of a newborn (in some instances a toddler) being left alone in the dark until someone finds her. Darkness must bring on some terrible feelings for these children. Even in the orphanages it must be very scary to be in the dark. With staff changes you never know from one day to the next who is taking care of you and who will be there in the morning. Our daughter will sleep in our room so I can be there if she wakes up and is scared or crying and just so that when she wakes she sees the same people day in and day out.

Stroller vs. Carrier – A lot of adoptive parents plop their children in strollers facing away from them and push them all over the place. That's a lot of sensory overload for children that were most likely in a single building for the better part of their lives. There isn't any way for them to shield themselves from the noise and confusion that comes with shopping malls, Disney characters, etc. The lights and sounds and even the smells are going to be overwhelming. These children do not have the background to take everything in and process it.

I've

consulted with a lot of people. The best thing for us is for me to use a carrier as much as possible. I will carry my little girl every chance I get for as long as I can. She will be turned in facing me so she can learn to make eye contact with me and so that she can see the world in the safety of my arms and, later, my husband's. Our daughter is 18 months old so this will be a challenge. I've purchased a couple of carriers that will work for children up to 40 lbs and I hope we can make this work as long as possible. When we get home, we will not be

out and about every day. We will introduce her to our world at a pace she can handle.

If you are an adoptive parent reading this, I know it is not always possible to carry a child. We do have a stroller! Some children are older and some parents have physical limitations. Not to mention adopting twins makes carrying almost impossible. Our decision is what is best for our family. While I encourage everyone to consider ways to carry their child, I do respect those that make up for the inability to carry them by doubling their other efforts to help the child attach. We are not trying to hurt anyone's feelings, we are trying to explain what is right for our family.

Feeding

– The greatest tool for establishing trust and love between a mother and child is feeding. Our little girl is currently still taking a bottle and I will continue to give her a bottle, with her in my arms, as long as possible. I know in the US children stop their bottles earlier but my daughter hasn't had a chance to have her mom feed her every time she's hungry so we are going to be making up for lost opportunities to teach love and trust. I have to be the one to feed her. She also eats rice porridge (traditional in China) and I'll be feeding her that too. It might be months before my husband will share that responsibility and we cannot have others feeding her. She needs to know who her parents are. They are the ones that meet her needs. If others get involved in feeding her she will just get confused and view us as caretakers and wonder when the next strange white people are going to come along and remove her from her current environment.

Children

from China can also come with huge appetites. They might be malnourished or just exploring but we've seen some of these girls eat huge amounts of food in one sitting. If my daughter is one of these children, we will always have food out and available for her. We will keep fresh fruits and vegetables out for her to get whenever she wants. As she becomes more aware that she will always have food, she will be more secure and feel safe with us. We want to prevent food hoarding which is a common issue.

Conversely, she might not want to try a lot of new foods. She will need to be introduced to new textures and tastes over time. This is a trial and error thing. We will not make her “clean her plate”.

Meeting others – When we first get back, we know many people will want to share in our joy. We will not be having a big party to introduce her to the world. All of us, my husband and I and everyone following our journey have had time to prepare and contemplate this adoption. No one told our baby! We are about to rock this little girl's world and she needs time to adjust. Visitors coming and going will only confuse her. At her orphanage, the director is very open and allows American visitors all the time. A very kind lady visited with her for 2 days and sent us pictures! Our child will not be able to understand the difference if we have people coming and going. This doesn't mean we don't want people emailing us and oohing and aahing over the many adorable pictures we will post but we are asking for some time before we start introducing her. When we do, it will be to one or two people at a time. Please understand when we make our first outings to your homes that if we need to leave a little sooner than usual because she's getting stressed that it's nothing against you, she just needs time to adjust.

When

you do visit with her, play with her, talk to her, celebrate what a cute

little girl she is, just please, please, don't pick her up. We know how hard it will be but until we start seeing her asking us for permission to be picked up we cannot have others holding her. If she stretches out her arms to you please just kindly tell her to look for her mommy or daddy to hold her. Don't worry, we will be right there to step in. Don't pull back and make her feel bad, just gently direct her to us and reinforce the idea "here's your mommy and she's going to hold you". This will not be forever, just until we see our daughter knows the difference between her parents and the rest of the world. Eventually she'll learn that relatives can hold her but strangers can't. I cannot put a timeline on this, it will be up to her.

Crying ‐

We will not let our little girl “cry it out”. She’s been doing that for 18 months and she needs to learn that she now has two people in her life that love her very much and will do all that we can to meet her needs and make her feel safe and secure and happy. We are not spoiling her, we are helping her heal.

Temper Tantrums/meltdowns ‐ These might seem like tantrums to you but they can mean a lot of things to a post-institutionalized child. They do experience loss and sadness at their circumstance. They might miss the world we’ve taken them from. They sometimes rage against the absolute injustice of everything that has happened to them.

While

no one is going to argue she would be better off staying in the orphanage, to our baby it is the only thing she’s known for her entire life. She will miss it and be sad again and again. We know she has a favorite nanny. We are taking her away from the closest thing to a mommy she has had.

As

adults, we have learned many ways to overcome loss but anyone that has lost a loved one by death or divorce can absolutely understand that the sadness comes and goes. There will be triggers that we might not know about such as a smell or a sound that can result in some huge, overwhelming emotions for her. Some children react strongly and have terrible sadness during the holidays and birthdays. These will be hard on everyone. Of course she will have her simple “terrible twos and threes” but it will take us some time to figure out which is which.

We

do expect some delays. For every 3 months in an orphanage, a child is around 1 month delayed. We know at 17 months she is not walking, she might not be potty trained until she’s 3-4, she might take longer to talk. She might cry for months or only occasionally. We plan on having her evaluated for the federal Early Intervention Program as soon as possible to get her any of the therapies (speech, etc) offered to help bring her up to speed. I’ve done a lot of research on ways to help her and warning signs to look for so that our daughter will have every chance to catch up to her peers. But if she can’t, we will deal with it and let her know we love her for who she is. We're not going to compare her to her peers and we hope those around her don't either. Just celebrate her successes and know that they do come quickly to these kids. They make progress in some areas in leaps and bounds so check back frequently for updates.

She

will have rules and boundaries early on. One of the tools for establishing trust and love is predictability. She will lead a rather humdrum life at first until she shows us that she’s attaching in a healthy way. She will play a lot with us, swim, eat, sleep

and repeat. We will not spoil her, she will not be allowed to break things, hurt the dogs or others, etc. without facing consequences. But we will have our own ways of dealing with these behaviors if they arise. The rules might seem silly to those that aren't adoptive parents but they will be well thought out and meant to help our child.

One of the biggest challenges faced by parents overcoming attachment issues is that their children only turn ugly when they are alone with the parents. Since they are always "shopping" for that next family they turn on the charm when others are around. Actually, if our daughter is super eager to be around strangers and jumps on everyone's lap you should know that is a big problem. Our little girl needs to be encouraged to refer to us to know who is OK and when it is OK to get hugs from others.

Our child will be loved by a lot of people. We hope everyone hangs in there and understands that she is a beautiful child that needs her parents to love her bunches and bunches. She will not be loved any less than if she were a biological child because she is our child but we will parent her differently because that's what she needs to grow up happy and secure and, most importantly feeling loved by us. We thank you for your understanding.

We look forward to things settling down in the future and for our daughter to get to know all the wonderful families and children in our immediate family and the ones we've met on this incredible journey.