

Counseling the Adopted Child



by Julie Smith Lowe

- Ten-year-old Billy was adopted at age seven. During his years in foster care before his adoption, Billy was well cared for. His foster family always talked honestly and openly about his birth family. He was happy when he was adopted by this foster family and adjusted with little difficulty. For Billy, adoption was welcome and desirable. It brought him a sense of permanency and belonging with his new family.
- Sally was adopted at the age of four. She grew up in a loving adoptive home, but by the age of eight, she began to wrestle with questions about her birth family. She day-dreamed about her parents and what they looked like. She wondered how they would respond if she contacted them. She had many questions for them, including, “Why didn’t you keep me? Why did you give me away?” Despite her adoptive parents’ attempts to assure her of how much they love her, Sally felt that she must be unlovable. Why else would her birth parents give her up? Her adoptive parents struggled with how to help Sally work through her fears and anxieties. Their own secret fear was that she might love her birth family more than she loved them.
- Joey, adorable and quiet by nature, was seventeen-months-old when he was

adopted. Joey’s adoptive parents noticed his withdrawn and unexpressive behavior, but felt that with enough time and love, they would win his trust and affection. But as Joey got older, they found it difficult to break through the self-protective wall that he built around himself. In school, Joey was diagnosed with severe learning disabilities, and he began to act out in anger. He became unyielding in conflict and his anger soon turned into outbursts of rage. His parents were at a loss as how to understand this extreme behavior

Billy, Sally, and Joey represent three broad ways in which adopted children respond to their life situations, although there may be many variations of these responses:

- Children who seem to adapt reasonably well to their adoption. These children, like Billy, either do not struggle with issues of adoption or they go through a temporary period of questioning. They may ask questions about their adoption story, but once they have the basic information, they seem to accept the situation without difficulty. They acknowledge the details of their story positively and continue on with their lives.
- Children who go through the “normal” struggles associated with being adopted. Like Sally, these children think and ask numerous questions their about birth

**Julie Smith Lowe is a counselor at CCEF and a foster/adoptive parent.*

families. They feel “different” from the adoptive family and struggle with a sense of loss, rejection, and even shame and embarrassment over their adoption. Even with these questions, they do not act out or cause major difficulties within their adoptive family or at school.

- Children with serious behavior and/or adjustment problems. Like Joey, these behavior/adjustment problems cannot be addressed easily or concisely. Mental health issues, severe trauma, or even physical or sexual abuse may be involved. These children may display a lack of conscience, be unable to articulate feelings, exhibit severe oppositional behavior, and/or have difficulty forming close relationships with the adults who care for them. They may also lie, steal, damage or destroy property of others. The sometimes deliberately hurt other children or pets. Children with this degree of negative behavior often need long-term counseling.¹

Many adoptive families who bring their children for counseling are average, loving, families who struggle with questions about how to handle the distress their child faced before entering their own family, how to handle specific problems adoptive children face, and how to handle the chaos these children occasionally create in their home and school. Abusive families rarely seek counseling, but at some point, you may counsel an adult who was adopted as a child and find these forms of being sinned against lurking in the background. Divorce, physical abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, instability, and other crises in the child’s natural family drastically impair the child’s welfare and adjustment to the adoptive family.

Our Fallen World: Where People Struggle

How can we better understand the struggles of adoptive children? Though we cannot negate the effects of personal sin/weaknesses, temperament, and the current family/cultural surroundings, we must look at these children in terms of the fallen world in which we live. As much as we rightly value

adoption, we cannot ignore that the need for adoption inherently points to the fact that we live in a fallen, sinful world. In a sinless world, would we have broken families, abuse, orphans, or adoption? These children’s stories always begin with broken relationships. They have difficulty in accurately making sense of their own life situation.

Adopted children, like all of us, think, interpret, and draw conclusions about life based on life experiences. Adoption brings to the forefront a fundamental truth that often goes unrecognized: we are interpreters. We try to make sense out of our world, ourselves, and our experiences. And we are meant to do so. But it is a second fundamental truth that we cannot accurately make sense of our world without reference to the One who made us and who correctly interprets our world for us. As human beings, we were created to understand life based on what God says about Himself, our world, and ourselves. Without that reference point, we draw faulty conclusions about ourselves, God, and our life experiences. We become the center of our own world and act accordingly.

Adoptive parents and other adults in the child’s life don’t always see or understand how these children interpret their personal life events. And they don’t clearly understand the emotions and behaviors that result from the broken relationships within their own natural families. Adoptive parents often hesitate to discuss their children’s background with their children for fear of disrupting their behavior even more. Yet, they must do so to understand the child’s inner world.

Adopted Children Interpret Their Identity

What forms a child’s identity? All children are affected by family values and traditions, siblings and relatives, positive and negative experiences. Adopted children have additional factors that affect their lives. They may have been in one or more foster placements before their adoption. They may have been placed in homes where other children already lived and who may have resented the intrusion of strangers into their own family and space. Each temporary placement brings a confusing array of conflicting values into the child’s life. Some of these values

directly contradict those of their natural families. Even children who were adopted at birth wrestle with the details of their own natural family's story.

We all live out of some sense of who we are. We all measure our own potential, our resources for dealing with any particular experience. When left to ourselves, we take our experiences and begin to form interpretations that shape our thinking. Our emotional reactions to our experiences often morph into a sense of identity. We don't do this consciously, but it happens none the less. Adopted children often have confused thoughts and feelings about their separation from their natural parents. They feel a sense of loss of loss of identity, culture, or connection to their past. They see that their adoptive family has relatives and traditions, but they know nothing of their own relatives and traditions. Sally wonders, "Do I have a sister? Do I have aunts and uncles?"

How do adopted children interpret their life circumstances? Let's look at some common responses.

- **"Something is not right." "I am not loved." "I am being punished." "I am different." "I am not good enough." "I must be a bad person."**

Adopted children often have mixed feeling about their adoption. They may learn to love their adoptive parents, but struggle with the fact that their own birth mothers gave them up. They might ask the adoptive parent, "Why do you want me? Why didn't my birth mom want me? What is wrong with me?" Worse, they might think these things, but not ask them. They sense that something is not right about their situation, and they don't know what to think or how to feel about it.

- **"They will get rid of me, too. So I will push them away before they hurt me."** They fear not being good enough to be a part of the adoptive family. Many adopted children live with a fear (vocalized or not) that they were somehow too bad to handle and that is why their birth parents gave them up. A sense of shame prevails despite how

much adopted parents tell them otherwise. They sometimes act out their fears and insecurities in extreme ways: temper tantrums, hitting and hurting siblings, destroying toys and books, name-calling and cursing, hurting family pets, and inappropriate behavior in public places. Children do not know what to do with their feelings or how to express them, so it comes out in extreme behaviors.

- **"I am a victim. I am helpless. Others must tell me what to do."**

Many adopted children feel that they are victims in their situation. They live with a strong sense of unfairness. Life-altering decisions were made for them by judges, social workers, counselors, or overwhelmed birth parents. They had no choice in the matter. Perhaps weighty and long-term decisions were made at the child's birth. A child may come to the conclusion that he has no choice about how to respond to life choices, and as a result, he may allow others to make choices for him. He takes a passive role in life and becomes unresponsive like Joey.

- **"The world is not safe." "I have to protect myself." "I have to take care of myself."**

These thoughts often lead to hopelessness and depression. One common approach is to try to "empower" these children by teaching them to take control of their lives and choices. Yet by doing this, we unwittingly misguide children to trust in themselves or other people. Adopted children come to believe that worth is based on their performance or their ability to be in control, loved, or safe.

- **"It's not okay to be different. I must be perfect to earn another person's love."**

In an effort to become part of a family, some adopted children try to be perfect. They fear they will not be accepted if they cause any trouble, so they become people-pleasers. They hide their worries about their broken relationships with their natural parents. They do anything

to gain positive attention from others. Of course, this type of behavior only leads to later problems when they use the same strategies to gain friends and they do whatever it takes to get and keep friends.

- **“I would be happy if I lived with my own family.”**

Some adopted children are afraid to talk or ask questions about their birth family so they fantasize about the birth family instead—“My life would be great if only I could live with my parents. They would love me and take me places and give me money and I wouldn’t have to follow all these rules. I would be much happier back home.” Many children fantasize about what their birth parents look like, what they do for a living, and how much they are missed.

- **“What is my real mother doing right now?”**

Life events frequently draw adopted children back to memories of the past. Birthdays, holidays, and important events (first basketball games, first dances, school graduations, parent nights at school, good report cards) are hard for these children. What is a time of celebration for others is often a sad reminder of loss or rejection for them. We celebrate the day of their birth; but they secretly mourn the loss of their parents. They fantasize about how things could have been different “if only ___.”

- **“God doesn’t care about me and He won’t help me.”**

Children interpret life and experiences, whether or not we talk to them about it. Often we avoid discussing what we don’t want to deal with, thinking that children will not think about it. The problem is that children are already thinking, interpreting, and drawing conclusions about their life – and they do it without any loving guidance or a biblically informed redemptive worldview.

Our interpretations inform how we see life, people, ourselves, and most importantly God. Often experiences shape the way we see God,

rather than God informing the way we interpret experiences. For example, a child may think, “If I suffer, then God must be weak, uninvolved, uncaring, distant, unkind because He is punishing me.”

Adoptive Families Issues Interpret the Child’s Identity

What does it mean to adopt a child? Families who adopt may also struggle with how to interpret life with adoptive children—even when the adoption process appears smooth and the child cooperative. They have many questions. How and what adoptive parents think and believe will inform their child’s view of her adoption. Here are some questions that can help counselors, work with the adoptive parents to resolve the issues that brought them to counseling.

- **How do the adoptive parents view adoption?**

What expectations do they have for adoption?

Do they adopt a child to fulfill a need or void in their own lives?

- **How do the adoptive parents view the child’s birth parents?**

Do they understand the birth mother’s experience and the decision she made?

Do they respect this decision or refer to it with contempt?

How do they talk about the birth parents to the adopted children?

Do they feel rejected when the child asks about his birth parents?

- **How do the adoptive parents talk to their child about the adoption?**

What information is appropriate to share? And at what point?

Has the child had been hurt by their birth parent? Does the child act out as a result? How much of the negative information should the adoptive parents share?

- **How do they understand and validate their child’s feelings?**

Isn’t love enough? What else do they need?

Do they know how to determine when something more serious is going on?

- **How do they handle the child’s**

misbehaviors?

Do they take the child's misbehavior personally?

Or do they see it as part of the child's responses to his own broken relationship with his natural parents?

How consistent are they in responding to inappropriate behavior?

Do the parents agree on how to handle the misbehavior?

• **Do they look at adoption redemptively?**

How do they see God working in their lives and in their adoptive children's lives?

How do they instill confidence in God's plan?

How will they teach their children about God?

Adoption is not always an easy process. Adoptive parents need to try to understand the often conflicting emotions and thoughts their child often experiences regarding their adoption.² Let's turn our attention to some of the practical ways that parents can address these adoption issues.

Practical Ways to Address Adoption Issues

God's redeeming love invades our personal histories in the details just as He invades all human history. He works with what is, with what actually happens, with reality. That means honesty comes first. So be open with your adopted child from the start, especially when your child was adopted at birth and has no personal knowledge of the adoption. The longer you wait talk about the adoption, the harder it will be to bring up the subject. Deception can damage trust in ways that takes years to repair. Children may hear about their adoption from some other well-meaning person. Perhaps another child hears his own parent talk about your child's adoption. He asks your child a question out on the playground, "What happened to your real parents? How come you were adopted?" That is not the way for a child to find out such a basic fact of his life.

Your child may sense your discomfort and become aware that something is amiss. He may think, "Why do they have so many pictures of my little sister as a baby, but none of me? Maybe

they don't like me as much as my sister." If you are open from the beginning, you will not jeopardize your child's trust. Point out the lack of pictures before your child notices it. "I wish we had more pictures of you as a little child." These simple reassurances tell them that you love them.

Talk about adoption with your child before he even understands what it means. Use simple words. "You are special. We love you. We adopted you." When you don't do this, you deprive your child of the story God is writing for him.

Because children form beliefs about life and themselves very early it is important to teach them a Godly way to think and believe. Children rely on parents to help them make sense out of their experiences. Give them the freedom to be confused about how they feel, while walking them through mixed feelings. Help them express their thoughts and feelings. Put words to their thoughts. "You feel sad today because it's your birthday and that makes you think of your mother. Yes, I feel sad about that, too."

Initiate conversations with children about their birth families. Ask questions about what they think, feel, or dream about. Foster open communication so you will know how to speak into their experiences. Children not only need to be given permission to talk about their uncomfortable feelings, they need to be openly invited and encouraged to do so.

Be conscious of the child's privacy and right to his own story. Children do not like to be referred to as "adopted." It makes them feel different or abnormal. It is sometimes embarrassing to children to have their story told in front of others. Instead, talk to them about what they would like others to know about their adoption and the reasons for it. Invite them to be part of the decision. Rehearse what they might say if someone asks why they have been adopted.

Finally, think redemptively about adoption and teach adoptive families how to rightly understand the meaning of adoption.

The Redemptive View of Adoption: Our Identity is in Christ

We are interpreters. We all seek to make

sense out of our worlds. And because we are creatures made to live in relationship with God and others, we can only correctly understand our experiences with reference to what God says about Himself, our world, and us. Adopted children wrestle with identity: Who am I? Who loves me? Who will take care of me? What will become of me? As we grow, we all ask these questions, but adoption brings out distinct issues for the child that must be better understood and addressed by the adoptive family. These children often wrestle with feelings of loss, rejection, and sometimes victimization. Even children who have not experienced cruelty at the hands of their birth parents or adopted parents have questions. Without intervention, adopted children come to believe that their worth is based on their performance or their ability to be in control of themselves.

But let's look at this another way. "How does God deal with *us* in our broken world?"

dwells with us, in us. Even though the world continues to be a broken place and sin remains in us, we are God's people.

We live in the middle of God's story and we are to understand everything that happens in our world by making reference to that story. This understanding changes how we interpret ourselves, our relationship to God, and our relationship to the world. We must interpret the details of our lives in light of the larger themes of the story of redemption. This interpretation of life determines how we understand ourselves, our experiences, our world, and our relationships; in short, all of reality.

Parents and counselors can help and act as God's redemptive agents. They must teach children about themselves and their life experiences from a biblical perspective. They need to develop a redemptive view of adoption, meaning that our own personal assurance, comfort, and hope come from the fact that we

Adoption is a mirror image of what God does for His people. Adoption redeems the broken lives of children, just as God adopts us and redeems our brokenness and sinfulness.

What do we mean when we talk about a redemptive world view, or a redemptive view of adoption? It means that God is committed to not having our world and our lives remain broken. God is committed to restoring creation to everything that He intended for it to be, where there will be no more sin, sickness, death, pain, or suffering of any sort. God is committed to dwelling with man in a perfect world, where man perfectly relates to God, the world, and one another. Sin has marred this original purpose, but God is not deterred. At exactly the right time and place God Himself came to us in the person of His Son to begin this process of redemption, restoration, and renewal. And when He comes again, all things will be made new. That process of renewal has begun already in His people, in those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. God has a plan and He draws near to us and engages us in a relationship as part of that plan. He makes us His people and

have a loving Creator/Father who takes our brokenness and the brokenness of this world and redeems it. Adoption is a mirror image of what God does for His people. Adoption redeems the broken lives of children, just as God adopts us and redeems our brokenness and sinfulness.

Children do not instinctively accept this redemptive view of adoption. Our job as counselors, teachers, and parents is to better understand their actual experiences and then to help them reinterpret their lives through a redemptive framework. How can God use their brokenness?

To do this, we need to accurately interpret the adopted child's life experiences.

1. Help children interpret their lives through God's eyes.

Parents must take every opportunity to interpret the child's life through God's eyes. For example, as a parent, it is not enough to tell a

child “You are an answer to my prayers” believing this alone will be enough to comfort them. Many children resent hearing this because they never prayed for being separated from their own parents in the first place, and they certainly didn’t pray to be adopted by strangers! These children would pray just the opposite—“Please, God, let me live with my own parents.” In some cases they would pray this despite abuse that may have caused the separation from the parents in the first place. They see God as distant and uncaring because He does not answer the one prayer that comes from the very bottom of their hearts.

It is helpful and important, though never enough, to tell your adoptive child how much you love her, want her, and are committed to caring for her. But this does not address the child’s feelings of rejection by the parent who should want her. The child thinks, “If my own parent rejected me, maybe this adoptive parent will, too.” Tell your child that you, too, feel very sorry that her own parents could not take care of her, but that you will do your best to help her grow in a way that would make the natural parent proud.

Adopted children live their lives at the mercy of other people—their horizontal relationships with social workers, judges, counselors, teachers, foster parents, and then adoptive parents. They often fear that they may be rejected again or feel shame that they were not wanted by their own mother or father. They might think, “They are just going to reject me too, so why should I be good for them?” An adoptive parent may convince a child that this is not so and slowly win a child over with love. This is important, but we must also teach them to find their identity, comfort, and safety in more than human relationships. They need to find their identity in Christ. How will children find identity and hope in the One who will not fail, disappoint, or reject them? Teach these principles.

2. God is at work in their lives.

Children need to be taught that the hand of God has been at work in their lives from the very beginning of time. Share Bible passages with them that clearly teach this reality. Help them build their belief that God was not absent in those moments of trouble in his life. He was

present and He was at work even before the child was born. For example, consider these words of life:

- For You have formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. (Ps. 139:13-16)
- Listen to me...Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. For the LORD comforts His people and will have compassion on His afflicted ones. (Isa. 49:1)
- Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on this child she has born? Though she may forget, I (God) will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands. (Isa. 49:14-16)
- Those who hope in Me will not be disappointed. (Isa. 49:23)
- Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations. (Jer. 1:5)
- For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, Plans to prosper you, not harm you – to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD. (Jer. 29:11-14)

Have your children memorize and visualize what God is saying in these verses. These truths feed a healthy imagination, a living faith. Can they picture God in heaven speaking with Jesus about them? Can they picture their names engraved on *both* of God’s hands? Can they picture themselves sitting on Jesus’ lap and hearing Him tell stories? Can they imagine the comfort that sitting on Jesus’ lap brings?

3. God has a purpose for their lives.

Talk about the lives of well-known Bible characters who were separated from their natural parents at birth or at a young age and adopted by strangers. Show how these people came to know God's love and accomplished significant things for Him in their later lives. God used the difficult and painful experiences of their lives for His purposes. Part of that is that He wants to be in relationship with us and He wants us to seek Him out.

- Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and his adoption was part of God's overall plan for the divine deliverance of Israel from Egypt. (Ex. 2:1-10)
- When Esther's parents died, Mordecai, her cousin, took her as his own daughter

have brought sadness into their lives to God's intervention and active involvement. This perspective becomes vertical (person to God and God to person) rather than horizontal (person to person). The horizontal focus leaves adopted children feeling like victims. The vertical offers comfort and confidence in a divine plan for their lives. "This may be a hard time in my life right now, but one day God will use my experiences to help other people and to demonstrate His love for me. He provided a family for me when I needed one." Help them see their own life story in the midst of God's greater redemptive story.

4. God has adopted all of us through His Son, Jesus.

Adopted children often believe that their lives are based on who does or does not love

When children learn to find their identity in Christ,
it doesn't negate the struggle of their experiences,
but it creates a grid through which they can
accurately make sense of life.

and adopted her. (Esther 2:15) This led to the deliverance of the people of God.

- Joseph was taken away from his father and had terrible things happen to him – but he saw that what others meant for evil, God meant for good. He helped prepare a place of safety for his family during a time of great famine. (Gen. 45)

Adoptive children—like all children!—generally do not see God as present in their lives. Our goal is to help them see God as the faithful Author of their story. No detail of their story was by accident. He is expertly and winsomely writing each chapter. We may not understand each chapter of our story, or why the characters in the story are there, or how the next chapter is going to unfold, but we do know that He is faithful and will complete the good work in our lives (Rom. 8:28, Phil. 1:6) He was not absent in the chapters of their story; He was present and He was at work.

Help adopted children switch their focus on the human decisions and behaviors that

them. That belief only leads them to question, worry, or strive for love. By helping them look at their lives through God's eyes, they learn that their life is based on God's love for them and His divine intervention from the time He formed them.

We are forever wanted by God Himself. Be careful not to say this in a way that minimizes the loss or rejection by their natural parents. It is meant to bring perspective and confidence in a God who sees all and does what is good in our lives. This is a lesson we all need to learn, but we can see how directly it relates to the issues of adoption.

Jesus was raised by a father who was not His biological father. He lived with brothers and sisters that were the natural children of His parents. Jesus grew up, and because of His actions, we have a place in eternity with God.

When children learn to find their identity in Christ, it doesn't negate the struggle of their experiences, but it creates a grid through which they can accurately make sense of life. Our life is temporary. Our relationship with God and Jesus is eternal. We can only enter heaven

through adoption. Then we will know God and live with God. God is good. He is a protector. He knows what He is doing and He is up to something good. He is loving, kind, just, faithful. He sees us and knows us. And He has adopted us.

- How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are! (1 John 3:3)
- Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves His child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out His commands. And His commands are not burdensome, for everyone who is born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (1 John 5:1-5)

Other helpful passages also proclaim that we are loved and adopted by as children of God.

- Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, in accordance with His pleasure and will, to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One he loves. (Eph. 1:5-6)
- For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Rom. 8:14-17)

Discuss these things with your child informally and formally as much as possible. One way to formally do this is through building Lifebooks. Many children have responded very positively using this method of learning and talking about their natural parents and the reasons for their adoption.

Lifebooks

Sharing details about an adopted child's birth family usually brings the adoptive family closer. The child may feel comfort and relief. Many children begin to feel better because they know more about their heritage. They may ask you to tell and retell things that you remember or know about the natural parent. Incorporate only truthful facts about the child's history as you know them. Always speak the truth on a child's level. Discern what information is appropriate to share and how to share it. Some stories have painful chapters, but they are still part of the child's story. Be sensitive about how these painful pieces are discussed, but don't take that away from them.

Assembling a "lifebook," a combination photo album/scrapbook about your adopted child's life, is a good way to do this. Lifebooks help children connect with their own beginnings and early history. They create a foundation on which to attach to their adoptive families. Begin the lifebook at the adopted child's birth and focus on the child's experience in truthful, child-friendly ways. Include the bits and pieces of a child's life that you know before he came to be adopted. Build this book with the child and emphasize that this is his own "special book." His lifebook tells his own story as God is writing it for him.

Have the child participate in making, illustrating, reading, talking about his life story. Include adoption ceremonies, songs, photos, and cards. Incorporate his culture or family of origin into the adopted family: pictures of the birth family or relatives; tokens from the culture of origin; family crests, songs, music from their culture; stories from foster care or the birth family.

A lifebook can have a significant impact in your adopted child's life. Consider this example given by social worker Veronica Fiscus.³

If anyone had bad luck it was Sam... He had close to ten placements in his twelve years of life... several disruptions not related to him... one adoptive father died, while another committed suicide. He had nine older siblings living all over the state. Would making a Lifebook for Sam make things worse? After reading his Lifebook, Sam asked, "Is that it? That's not so bad!" Putting it all down on paper made it so much more manageable for him.

When you adopt a child through an international agency, consider decorating the child's room to represent his birth family's culture. Learn some words from the language that can be taught to the entire family. Record unique and special stories, such as the following, about the child, family, or events that brought the child to his new family.

A couple adopting from Russia was planning to follow their religious tradition of naming their new baby after a grandmother who had passed on. Often people choose either the first name or the first initial, which was M in this instance. When they received the referral papers, the baby's first name already started with M, and she was born the same day that the grandmother died.⁴

As you help an adoptive child understand how God was and is working in their lives, find ways of expressing it. Children can sometimes express

it better:

Teacher Debbie Moon's first graders were discussing a picture of a family. One little boy in the picture had different hair color than the other family members. One child suggested that he was adopted and a little girl named Jocelynn Jay said, "I know all about adoption because I'm adopted." Another child asked what it meant to be adopted. "It means," said Jocelynn, "That you grew in your mother's heart instead of her tummy."⁵

Put in redemptive terms, we grew in God's heart and He watched over us through all of our hard times. His Son's death and atonement for our sins restored our relationship with God and we become His adopted children.

¹ Such children's behavior is often labeled Reactive Attachment Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Conduct Disorder.

² Sherrie Eldridge, *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, (New York: Dell, 1999).

³ Beth O'Malley, *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child*, Reprint Edition (Winthrop, MA: Adoption-Works, 2000).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

This article is published in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, a publication of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF). All content is protected by copyright and may not be reproduced in any manner without written permission from CCEF. For more information on classes, materials, speaking events, distance education and other services, please visit www.ccef.org.