

Family Resistance and

It's something you would have never considered during the piles of paperwork, homestudy scrutiny, or stress-filled waiting period, but your adopted child finally arrives home only to get resistance or worse yet — rejection — from your own family. With all the talk about Post-Adoption Depression Syndrome, if that doesn't bring it on, nothing will.

Even prior to our adoption, my husband and I had experienced resistance from more than a few of my family members. I married later in life and Mike had two teenage children at the time from a previous marriage. Our efforts to make a family of our own were difficult. My stepchildren were kept at a distance, but I overlooked it and after they completed college and decided to settle 800 miles away where they were raised. We began to think of a child of our own through adoption. We considered we might get some resistance from them, but the two welcomed the child easily. It was my family that was, at best, indifferent and, at worst, completely intolerant of the child. A few brought gifts but it was apparent that my decision to adopt a child from another country was not embraced.

The message was subtle and no matter how I tried to tell myself it was my imagination, I knew inside it wasn't. I thought they would somehow outgrow it; and some did, but others did not. The experience became a major turning point in my life as far as my own growth and it was not just about my move into motherhood. It allowed me to look back on my life and the family members who encouraged me through the years, and those who offered the negative reinforcements. The incident in midlife concerning my adopted son not only caused a three-year period of intermittent depressive symptoms, but also brought insight and understanding of a long history of interaction with an abusive family past. I realized then why I had struggled so much in my earlier years having spent many hours in therapy

Post-Adoption Depression

by Sandra Enders, MS, SYC

for an eating disorder, but also many years in formal study of human behavior. It was clear that I had grown much more than other members of my family because of my past struggles. It had been many years since my therapy ended, but after the adoption all the old eating patterns re-emerged and I ended up in therapy again.

I am still unsure if it was adoptism, racism, ageism, or what the issues were, but as a sociology teacher, who embraced diversity, it did not sit right with me. I was not going to allow my son to endure the same negative environment that I had struggled with through the years. I made the decision then to move a few family members out of my life and realized it was a decision that I should have made years ago, but never had the insight to do it, or maybe the self-confidence.

With so much talk lately about PADS and my own experience with it, I decided to do some research of my own and came across the work of Karen Foli, an adoptive mother herself, from the Purdue University School of Nursing. After reading her study, "Depression in Adoptive Parents: A model of understanding through grounded theory," published by the Western Journal of Nursing Research, I realized I was not alone in my depression.

The study explained the interaction and complexities during the adoption process and it found that PADS was often caused by unfulfilled and unrealistic expectations in four specific domains; the self, the child, family or friends, and society at large. Foli's research did not try to measure depression itself or assess its intensity. Rather it focused on the interaction of those involved in the adoption process as well as surrounding relationships. Specifically, it looked at the expectations of the adopting parents prior to the adoption in relation to the subsequent actual experience. The recurrent theme of unfulfilled and unrealistic expectations arose repeatedly. My research on

PADS relieved any doubts that I had about the source of my own experience.

Adam will soon be 7 and I still feel sad that I never got to have a baby shower, arrival party, or much of a baptism celebration due to the family reaction. It is especially difficult around his birthday but gets easier each year. With so many risk factors in an international adoption, I needed the social support. My husband's family resided out of town, as well as my grown stepchildren and only a small handful of my own offered encouragement. So I had to make changes and reach out to others in my world. I found that the greatest support came from my church parish, but I also received it from the community and neighborhood, and even the agency that we had used for the adoption. It is amazing where compassion pours from, but you need to reach for it. Below are six strategies which I followed to seek support elsewhere.

1. Take care of yourself and your child first. Children at any age sense depressive symptoms in their caregiver and it is not good to have the child feel any kind of negative emotions in you whether it is anger, anxiety, depression or others. Seek professional help if necessary.
2. Reach out to the family members who did support the adoption. I did have a few family members who supported me through the process, including my mother. It is important that the child feels that he or she belongs to a family.
3. Reach out to others in the community. I had been in the neighborhood for five years prior to the adoption and never realized how nice and welcoming everyone could be. After the news got out, strangers would drop off children's items, clothes and toys. My son was ill with ear problems after his arrival at 7 months which caused major speech delays. Autism was even suspected before a local

ear surgeon placed tubes in Adams ears at 18 months and by age 4 he began to speak understandably.

4. Reach out to the state system. When my son was 2, I contacted the Connecticut Birth to Three program {www.birth23.org} and they not only offered assessments, counseling and speech therapy, but they later transitioned Adam into the local school system where he still gets therapy and support. I was surprised and grateful at how dedicated the local school system has been to him.
5. Join a local church group for support. This is the place where I found most of my strength. I had always stayed in touch with my faith through the years and was a member at my local Catholic parish, but I reached out for support and the church community simply fell in love with the boy. I am still involved there and it is a major part of our lives today.

6. Stay in touch with your agency or join an adoptive parent group. We were lucky that we chose a good agency that offers post-adoption counseling and support, as well as regular cultural activities for the children. But even if your agency does not offer post-adoption support, there are many support groups online which do.

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References

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