

Family Romancing

By Sandra Enders, MS, SYC

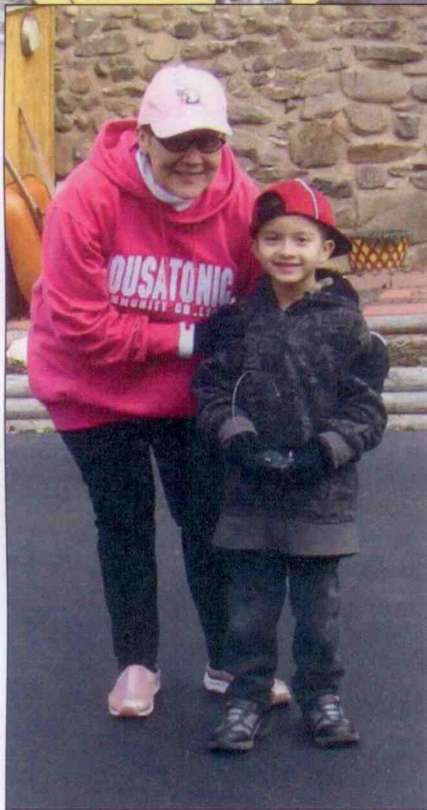
Opening Up Dialogue in His Own Time

I can't recall my husband and I ever having a specific plan in place to talk to our son, Adam, about his adoption. I guess we just assumed it would come naturally if we were open in dialogue about it in the household, to friends, and even to interested strangers that we met. I took it seriously, the phrase "seize the moment as a teaching opportunity" and I did just that with every chance that I got. Being a social sciences instructor, I think it just came naturally for me to want to talk about it, as the topic of intercountry adoption never ceased to interest me, it was so full of sociological and psychological issues. So from the time Adam arrived home at 7 months, from his homeland of Guatemala, we discussed the adoption openly. Of course, in his younger years all he really understood was that he was from Guatemala (and he could point to it on a map), and that we were his mommy and daddy. That is until that night two months before his sixth birthday. Adam was in the spring of his Kindergarten year when he opened up the dialogue directly to us, in his own time.

I had read quite a bit on adoption and often worked the topic into my graduate formal

studies in social psychology. I knew that it was between the ages of 6 and 8 during the shift between Piaget's cognitive pre-operational period II (2-7 years) and concrete operations period III (7-11 years) when the child entered into more logical and reasoning processes, that the adopted child would come to realize what adoption meant. I was aware of the grief and sadness that would follow with the realization that another set of parents were left behind.

I was also aware of Freud's family romance theory and of Brodzinsky's continued work on the theory concerning the adopted child. The concept of family romance is primarily associated with the school of thought which arose from the work of Freud in the early years of the 20th century. The theory, which Freud first spoke of in his historical five lectures at Clark University in 1909 on his first visit to America, pertained to fantasies in childhood. He proposed it as a common fantasy in which the child imagines that he or she is not the child of his or her biological parents, but instead are offspring of a royal or noble line of kinship. He placed the behavioral development beginning during the phallic psychosexual



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SPENDING the day together are Sandra Enders and her son Adam. Above, Adam shows off his latest cars and trucks.

stage of development (3-6 years) in the child, continuing through the latency stage (6-11 years). Freud saw this as rooted in the Oedipus complex concerning the erotic feelings of the son toward the mother, accompanied by rivalry and hostility toward the father. The gender reversal would be the female Oedipus complex. Often the family romance is viewed as a naturally occurring phenomenon centering on the emerging identity of the child. For both adopted and biological children, between ages 6 and 11, family romances represent not only fantasies, but also verify the existence of, as well as possible reunions with, the biological parents. This romance period which is a normal in childhood, becomes more complex to the adopted child as there are two families to fantasize about, and in turn, unresolved issues surrounding this in childhood may affect later identity issues during the teens years. Of course, this is a concept originating from a specific school of thought in psychology, but even so, psychoanalytic thinking is respected by many, including myself.

Considering my son's cognitive development, I thought the questions would arrive sometime in first or second grade. Adam had struggled considerably with delayed speech due to excessive fluid in both ears in infancy and toddlerhood, and that situation somewhat effected his early behavioral and cognitive development. So he caught us off guard when he suddenly remarked one night, "I miss my other parents in Guatemala," which shocked my husband and me. He had already figured out that there were parents in his homeland before us, and he was not even 6 yet. It was a huge step developmentally that we were not expecting so soon. I was elated that night not only because he cognitively realized the situation on his own, but that the openness and expression of sadness to us was genuine and comfortable for him.

The surprising outburst happened during a viewing of the movie, *Astro Boy*, which includes a band of orphans in the movie plot. The story line ironically included an animated view of class struggle and stratification in a futuristic vision of Earth with robots being the marginalized class who were fighting for equality. The elite lived in Metro City, an island



ENJOYING a day together are Sandra Enders, her husband, and son Adam.

in the sky, and many orphaned children were left behind on the mainland to live in poverty. I could not help but compare it to the children left behind in the dumpsites in Adam's homeland and I wondered if he also was recognizing the difference in social status from the movie, aside from the orphaned status of the children.

The ending scene included one of the orphaned girls, who had run away, reunited with her parents. I felt that was what led Adam to piece it together. Almost in tears, and with fear in his eyes upon blurting the words out, I thought of using this situation to ask if he wanted to see a photo of his birth mother or photos of his homeland, but instead I just expressed my sensitivity to his sadness. My husband confirmed to him that in a few years we would take him to his homeland and then maybe we could meet them. We both expressed how much we loved him and I held him until he fell asleep for the night. Not wanting to overwhelm him, I was glad that I left it at that, and held the photo of his birth mother for a future opportunity when he was more prepared to see it. The occasion gave me confidence that not only was he understanding of the situation, but more importantly that he was comfortable with discussing the topic and that he will address the issue again.

It has been almost a year now since that night and Adam has often brought up fantasy stories of his family in Guatemala. He has created memories of his own, specifically surrounding his birth grandparents, sometimes good and sometimes bad. He is unraveling the pieces himself, by his curious questions and our honest answers, and I know he will be well prepared if and when he asks the question "can I go and meet my birth parents" and it will be, in his own time.

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