

FOCUS: Celebrations of Life II

Adopted Children in the Kindergarten: My experience as an adoptive parent

— India Cante

Since the age of seven I have known that the path to parenthood and being united with my soul family would be through adoption. I have talked about adoption my whole life. I met my beautiful husband in Australia and after just three days together we were talking about our future family. He revealed that he too had the same feelings since childhood and knew his children would be adopted. Exactly fourteen years later, we met our little girls for the first time. Our two beautiful adopted daughters started kindergarten last September aged three-and-a-half and (just) five years old. At that time I had only been their mummy for a year.

Deciding to introduce our children to a new social environment was a big step for my husband and me, with a number of factors pulling us towards

making the decision. While we had originally wanted to keep the girls at home for at least two years, it became clear that the older child really needed the companionship of other children. Also, after nine months at home my husband needed to return to work and I knew I would need some help to offer the girls the most nurturing environment I could. Additionally the legal aspects of adoption take time, and as we still don't yet have full parental control, the state puts pressure on the parents for a five-year-old child to attend school. Thank goodness we knew about the Waldorf/Steiner kindergartens, as I know that a regular school simply wouldn't be able to provide the stage-appropriate care that our adopted children need. At a kindergarten open day, the wise words of a teacher to "keep the girls together" (they

had been each others' only consistent attachment figure) helped our decision. We then met their teacher and we knew we were making the right choice.

As I share our experiences I will keep names and places private. I must protect my children's dignity at all times. One day when they are young adults they may read this article. I want them to know that I try to write with grace and deep respect for their privacy. With this in mind I would like to share with you a poem I wrote to express how terrifying I felt their early lives had been. I can't go into the specific details of my children's past experiences but I believe the poem will give you a taste of their courage.

GooGooGagaa-Guantanamo Bay

*Hush little baby no one will hear you in your cell
Swallow your tears who can you tell
Orange playsuit is shackled with bile
Nappy lays sodden on cold unwanted tile*

*The hunger strike is held by another
Relief of warm food comes not from your mother
Sleep deprivation is a daily routine
Drugged up milk your only canteen*

*That noise that drives right through your ear
Reeks a melody pitched only with fear
Rocking comes not from a cradle pushed
gently by hand
But from knees clenched in motion your
heart beat so bland*

*Who will drive your campaign for freedom
This toddler life of doomed teardom
Candles not lit when your second birthday comes
League of empty kitchen pans are desperation drums*

*Captors drive you away again
The pick up van of guilt and shame
From cell to cell your transport drops
Till finally you hear the word adopt*

*The sentence so cruel has been given a pardon
At last you can play in life's wild garden
Smell the fresh air and breathe out the stain
Know here in safety you will remain*

My poem ends with the word "safety" in the last line. I would like to share my thoughts about the feeling

of "safety" for adopted children. Kind people often say to me that what children need is love. I am often told that the love I am giving is a true example of "un-conditional love." These remarks really made me think about love. I needed to break this down as what my experience has taught me is that there certainly are conditions to love. Steiner said "Love is wanting to do that of which one has gained an understanding." What happens when a child's past experience of love includes gut-wrenching experiences, which introduce a pattern to the child that the meaning of love is being abused and abandoned? If this is the condition by which love has been experienced how do we offer the child healthy love? The first thing I realized was that the initial love I needed to offer was the safety of love. Feeling safe is the key to supporting adopted children at kindergarten as they will have massive attachment issues. Adopted children really know what it is to feel unsafe and terrified. It is within the core of their experience. As a result of their past experiences their brain development suffers. The pathways of safe attachment don't form. The healing work we do needs to give the brain a different path to travel down so that the safety of love can be felt through body, mind and spirit. It is my opinion and experience that the first step with helping a child to feel safe and experience non-abusive love is attachment.

Understanding attachment issues with adopted children

It's a hard task for parents to hand over the care of their child to the teacher. Regular children will be attached to their parents, a process the teachers understand very well. But with adopted children who enter kindergarten they are often not attached to any adult yet. It is understood that initial attachment between an adopted child and his or her new parent takes at least two years. One way of looking at this is to realize that children need at least two of every season for the senses to register that they are now with the same parent and will stay in the same home.

Children who are adopted from the UK have been removed from their birth family because it is in the best interest for the wellbeing of the child. Most adopted children will have experienced abandonment, and the vast majority have experienced neglect, abuse, and hardships of unimaginable magnitude. This forms a vast contrast to the experiences of the majority of

children who enter the caring and compassionate world of kindergarten. Often multiple placements in emergency care and foster families mean that these children are left with a barrier to being attached. While as grownups we understand that emergency care and foster placements are a necessary process, the children see this through their fragile young eyes. However kind and supportive the carers are, from the children's perspective these temporary carers will abandon them as they are moved from placement to placement. The final move into an adopted home is terrifying for adopted children, as they expect the parents to leave them.

For our children we were their fifth placement into a new family, with my youngest only two years of age. Can you imagine how terrifying this must have been for them? Their precious little brains have been thrown into negative extremes from within the womb where the neglect began. As a result of their early years of trauma they have both had to develop severely unhealthy survival modes to cope with the huge amounts of stress in their system. My girls have opposite survival modes. One will go straight into fight or flight, and the other will freeze, completely silent and still. Both responses mean that a seriously harmful amount of stress hormones is flooding their systems.

Understanding these survival modes — “fight, flight or freeze” — and how they reveal themselves within the kindergarten environment was the first task at hand. The behavior may look similar to that of other children, but there is a massive difference in the building blocks that regular kids are standing on, versus the fragile and sometimes non-existent sponge-like blocks that adopted children wobble and collapse upon. Their foundation was built in terror and trauma, not the loving guidance of a consistent caregiver, and this paints a stain upon every path of development.

Let me give you some examples of how the survival modes challenged my children and how their loving teacher set about making a play plan to help them settle.

Transition to story time

Transitions are particularly hard for my older girl. Remember that these children have had multiple carers, all of whom (in the child's eyes) have abandoned them. So a simple move from outside play to

the outside storytelling place under a tree is a challenge for her. As the teacher sings a song to indicate that story time will begin, my daughter starts to hide, run, climb up a tree. She is in flight survival mode. Her feeling of “safety” has been taken away and now an unpredictable moment has triggered her fear center. She is being moved again, and so post-traumatic stress is hijacking her brain as her stress hormones pump up her tiny body and get ready to switch into survival mode. Her body feels under attack. As she dashes about pulling away from the teacher's hand and runs behind a tree to hide, her “flight” mode is in full swing. Consider how, without the knowledge I am sharing here and the thinking behind the behavior, this could easily look like any other child testing out the boundaries. In a way she is testing, but the test is about terror (feeling very unsafe), not the normal test of limitations.

So how can we help her to feel safe? It is all about making adopted children feel safe through predictable behavior patterns. This is what was put in place:

Before story time the teacher would prepare my child for the transition. Firstly a verbal indication; it is often necessary to be verbally explicit with adopted children as unlike other children within your kindergarten care, adopted children aren't expecting something nice and safe such as a story to happen next. Their past experiences teach them that something unsafe may happen. Therefore, they need a plan of action. First, to calm her stress hormones, my daughter needed to hang off something such as a tree, which helped to release some of the stress hormones that had been building up since the post-traumatic stress was triggered. Then the teacher gave her a little job before story time or something to hold during story time. Lastly, the teacher made sure that she was seated near to her to feel safe. By the fifth week of this type of care she was able to transition into story time without all of the added support. Her body had started to learn that story time was a safe and predictable experience. This was a massive step for her and a great achievement for the teacher and assistants.

Holding hands: being close to teachers and other children

For adopted children there is often an intimacy barrier. Something as natural as holding the hand of a teacher can trigger survival mode. In my daughter's case, “fight” mode (pulling the hand very hard) and

“flight” mode (pulling other children into the circle and trying to “fly,” get away from the situation of circle-time) resulted in disrupting the play. If we look through her eyes, she feels unsafe. She is being asked to hold the hand of an unpredictable stranger (her teacher or a child). What if this hand harms her, as her past experiences have taught her? Also, why should she trust this hand and allow the person to get close to her if — like every other grownup or child in her life — the person will just abandon her when she is forced to move on again (abandonment issues)? She is sensing a threat. Now her stress hormones flood her body. This flooding of the stress hormones would have been a regular pattern of experience in times of terror (feeling unsafe) — a very familiar pattern that’s hard to break. So how does the teacher help her to feel safe enough to join circle time?

One of the first things that can help reduce these “survival” reactions is by helping the body senses to be calm before the challenge of hand-holding arises. Prevention, rather than cure. Things like making sure she isn’t hungry or needs the toilet prior to this challenge are very important. Hunger and personal hygiene issues can trigger post-traumatic stress, so must be cared for with great attention to detail. Making sure she has had some upper body regulation, such as hanging off a tree or pushing something heavy such as a wheelbarrow, reduces the stress hormones). Also on occasion baby talk can help, as this appeals to the stage the brain has regressed to and can be soothing. The trauma happened when she was a baby and toddler, so in times of stress she regresses to that age stage and her brain responds well to actions that appeal to the younger brain. Leading her into the task by telling her whose hand she will be holding (normally the teacher’s until she settles) really helped. The last ingredient is the patience to let her allow this experience to be repeated until she learns it is another safe and predictable kindergarten experience. Now circle time is a joyful experience where she is able to feel in her little body. Her teacher tells me that my daughter loves to add on her own little moves here and there. How wonderful that she now feels safe enough to explore.

The relationship between the school, teacher, and adopted child’s parents

I am fortunate that I now have complete faith and trust in my children’s wonderful kindergarten teach-

er. In our house we call her a wise owl. But looking back to the early days I now realize that when I first met her I was in a very stressful place. I found it too hard to convey all of the fear I had about the girls settling at kindergarten. I had only been a mummy for a year and now I had to trust the healing of my girls’ trauma to someone I didn’t know. I didn’t even trust myself to get things right, so how could I trust another person? I also had moments when the transference of trauma and pain from my child to me was overwhelming and would make me react in an aggressive and completely unregulated way. I have never experienced such feelings or actions in my life and so this new and unwanted side of me really scared me. I was very worried that something might happen at school. I worked very hard at appearing in control, which means that I couldn’t really reveal how I was feeling. The transference from my child to me is called secondary trauma. Both my husband and I have experienced high levels of this secondary trauma. Secondary Trauma is a term used to describe the high levels of stress experienced by the adoptive parents (or caregivers) of a traumatized child. The term explains that the empathy needed to parent such a child produces psychological changes as though the parents/caregivers themselves have been exposed to the trauma. For example, brain function changes, parents can become less articulate, less emotionally literate, easily agitated, more angry, aggressive, and despairing.

The caring teacher listened to my every word and together we spoke with social workers and trauma experts to be as prepared as we could. We had mini meetings whenever possible and emails flowing back and forth. The teacher gave her complete dedication to the task at hand, but we were somewhat alone with our monumental challenge. While the school was very helpful and did all they could to help, they didn’t have any adoption policy or insights in place (something I would very much like to introduce to Waldorf schools). The lack of this policy and past experiences meant that the teacher and I would have to address issues as they came up. This creates a lot of additional thought and work at a time when stress levels are already very high. It would have been so helpful if we could have contacted other adoptive families and teachers within the Waldorf/Steiner community for insight and support, but adoptive families are rare. I do so hope that over time we can

encourage teachers and adopted families to share information in a confidential and appropriate way that may benefit others. If you have any experiences with adopted children perhaps you could get in touch with me and we could start a support network.

The last word must be about my girls. Their courage and grace is what continually inspires us to help them live their lives feeling a little bit safer every day. I am delighted to share with you that they are now able to experience joy that is free of fear at kindergarten. The future will bring challenges that are different from that of other families. However, when I reflect

upon the friendships both they and we have made and think about the multiple healing experiences that kindergarten offers, it lights up and settles my soul. I truly believe that every adopted child would benefit from a Waldorf education and will strive to use my voice to raise awareness of the school and its healing work. I can't thank their teacher and classroom assistants enough for showing my girls how to shine their little lights brightly. ♦

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