

Into the Safety of Our Hearts

Tools for forming strong attachments.

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Years of working with at-risk adopted children have taught us powerful truths about how to forge a strong parent-child connection. When children have experienced maltreatment or neglect prior to adoption, the idea of family may be confusing to them. But we have found that six words express the best way for parents to create a safe environment for their children: Be compassionate. Be firm. Be proactive.

Be Compassionate

Before they can send messages of love and safety, parents who adopt children from “hard places” must understand the effects of non-optimal care on children’s development as well as on their beliefs about themselves. Children adopted before age two rarely have retrievable memories of their experiences, but they may feel chronic and pervasive loneliness, hunger, or fear. Despite having safe homes and adoring parents, children who have experienced fear may be haunted by an overwhelming feeling of being unloved.

Paradoxical as it seems, older children with concrete memories of their hardships are often easier to help. Talking about pre-adoptive memories (“I was hungry and there wasn’t enough food”) can release them from the power of these early experiences. Adopted children frequently form belief systems based on their experiences with early caregivers. They may think, “I am not lovable” or “Adults can’t be trusted.” In time, however, compassionate parents who are attentive to their child’s belief systems can guide him to the truth that he is safe, loved, and deeply cared for. Ask two questions: “What is my child really saying?” and “What does my child really need?”

Sensory processing deficits are also relatively common, causing children to misinterpret social cues and to avoid hugs or touching because of tactile defensiveness. Although parents may find such behavior painful (and often mistake it for attachment problems), compassionate patience will reap rewards. For guidance, we recommend *The Out of Sync Child*. The author, Carol Kranowitz (2005), describes how sensory deficits are manifested and suggests way for parents to intervene at home and at school.

Be Firm

While compassion is profoundly important, firmness is equally important. A child who has not had healthy boundaries before he came home to you needs to be given clear, enforceable limits to his behavior.

Children should be given short scripts that they can easily encode and follow, bearing lessons such as “be gentle and kind,” “listen and obey,” and “accept no.” Many newly adopted children whose previous caretakers were not trustworthy find it difficult to relinquish control to their new parents. Parents must gently wrest control from a child who feels that she does not need a mommy or daddy.

Be Proactive

Keeping a journal for a few weeks and noting when and where your child has behavioral difficulties can help you identify events, places, and times that present particular challenges. For

example, some parents discover that their child needs a half hour at the playground before going to the grocery store. Others learn that a nourishing snack every two to three hours makes a world of difference.

Six words: Be compassionate. Be firm. Be proactive. Use these powerful approaches to bring children into the safety of your home and into the safety of your heart.