

Pitfalls of Adoption

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Parenting Today's Teens
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Kids were made to be in a family, with real parents. No family is perfect, and I don't think I have ever met a perfect parent, have you? About the time parents near "perfection," their children are all gone and living on their own. Though adoption is never perfect, I do think that parents who are considering adoption need to be perfectly prepared and informed before they take this big step.

Adoption is riddled with acts of love by all involved. And once understood and fully appreciated by the adopted child (usually in their 20's), they will understand God's desire to adopt each of us to be a part of His family. As pure and undefiled as this act is, the act of adoption can still have difficulties and struggles, just as God often experiences struggles and sometimes rejection by His children.

It may seem from my following thoughts and warnings that I'm against adoption, but the opposite is true. In fact, I sit on the board of directors of an international adoption agency and some time ago I regularly worked with adoption agencies as the CEO of the National Association of Christian Child and Family Agencies. But I have to balance my own zeal for adoption with my experience of dealing with hundreds of parents who have contacted me over the years after running into an emotional firestorm when their adopted child reached the teen years.

Most of my experience has to do with the adopted kids who have come to live with us at Heartlight — kids who were struggling with serious behavioral issues. In fact, about one third of all the teens who have ever come to live with us in our residential counseling program have been adopted. That's a pretty high ratio, since we don't target helping adopted children in our program. I'm sure that none of the parents thought that they would have to send their child away one day, nor anticipate that things would go wrong. But things did go wrong...to the point that the child could no longer live at home. That's big. It's bigger than just big. I would call it a crisis. It is a situation that no parent would hope for when adopting, but it is something to be prepared for.

I have had parents tell me that they wish someone would have asked them some deeper questions before they made the decision to adopt. And others who say that they wished they would have listened when someone did try to forewarn them about the possible future emotional struggles or mental and behavioral effects of alcohol or drug abuse during pregnancy by the child's birth mother. Some have even shared how they wish someone would have stopped their adoption from happening.

So whose fault is it when something does go "wrong"? The adopted infant who, at the very least, had no say in the adoption? Or the older child when adopted, who out of a longing to have a family agreed to all conditions presented to him or her? Or the parents, who out of the goodness of their heart decided to bring a precious child into their family? Or the adoption agency that feels a call from God to help children and families by bringing them both together to fulfill one of God's greatest plans? Or God Himself who created a world that has over 50 million orphans in it? You can figure all you want. But there's only one thing that you have control over. As a parent, you can check your motives, see if adoption is right for you, and be prepared for everything that lies ahead. All things being equal among teens, the adopted child has more of a proclivity to struggle.

In fact, some adoptions cause quite a bit of pain and grief in the lives of moms, dads, sisters, brothers, and other relatives. But just because there's conflict, it doesn't mean that the adoption wasn't meant to be. I believe that God uses all things, especially conflict and struggle, to work together for the good and bring about a good "end". Your understanding of God's faithfulness to you, should you find yourself in the midst of struggles in an adoption, will make all the difference in the world as you begin to understand what is happening around you. This understanding will usually determine how you respond, what you expect, and how you see the "bigger picture" of adoption in the life of your family, rather than just writing off something that was (and still is) so well intended, as just a mistake.

God has a plan. And if He has a plan for some people to adopt, He might also have a plan for some not to. I have met many people that have adopted. I have met many more that I hope will adopt. And I have met people who perhaps should not have adopted. Granted, it's not my call. But it is my observation that some people have been motivated by wrong things, moved by emotion or a missionary purpose rather than logic and reason, and have made decisions about adoption that were not good choices for them. How do I know? They've told me, and these are the comments that I have heard:

"Why didn't someone question what we were doing?"

“I think we got caught up in the excitement about adoption and really didn’t think about all the implications.”

“I never wanted this child, I was just being supportive of my wife’s idea.”

“This really isn’t what we thought it was going to be.”

“This child is destroying our marriage and ruining our family...what a mistake.”

“How could something that at one time felt so right...now feel so wrong?”

And because I hear kids who have been adopted say this:

“I always thought the biggest mistake was me being born...but I now think it was that someone allowed my parents to adopt me.”

“It’s almost as if I went from one bad situation to another bad situation, except people expect me to be thankful.”

“I’d rather go back to Ukraine (or any other country).”

“I don’t think my parents were supposed to have kids”

“Everyone said that this was going to be so good...what happened?”

“Something’s missing, and I don’t know what it is.”

A little chilling isn’t it? I’m sure that the parents who adopted never thought they would hear those words come out of their mouths. And I’m sure that those who were adopted (whether they were older or younger) would ever think that they would want a different situation or family. But in my experience, for the most part, even the worst adoptions tend to resolve themselves when the child turns a bit older; when their brain is fully wired. The transitional adolescent years are when most kids rebel (if they are going to rebel at all), and adopted kids often have physical or emotional scars that can make this time of confusion many times worse.

When rebellion comes to the surface, seemingly overnight, parents can’t help but have an “I deserve better than this” attitude. After all, they’ve saved the child from a less privileged life. They’ve given the child their love, their home, and so much more. Now the child slaps them in the face? That hurts! So, it can be a time when emotions run high. That’s why it is so imperative for adoptive parents to know how to act and what to expect, and to most of all not take it personally. It’s not about you, it’s about the teen’s confusion and struggles. It requires a willingness to hang in there, even in the face of hatred and rejection. How severe or long that period is depends on the teen, but also somewhat how the parents respond to it.

Am I attempting to keep you from adopting? By no means. If the child isn’t adopted, they may live their lives without the presence and structure of the family to give them guidance, wisdom, love, hugs, birthday celebrations, and everything else a family offers. But be prepared for what lies before you, and don’t resort to thinking the adoption is a failure should the adopted child struggle through some pretty “heavy” issues in the teen years.

Adoption is a good thing, but it’s not for everybody. If I can get those who wouldn’t be good adoptive parent to choose not to adopt, then I have done a good thing by sharing these concerns. If they choose to go ahead and adopt, then I have also done a good thing by making them aware that issues might arise that they should be prepared to handle.

If you are considering adopting, pray about it, seek counsel, ask for honest answers to the difficult questions, and don’t get caught up in it as the “Christian thing” to do. By all means, don’t rush into it. Talk to people whose adoptions have gone well, and those whose have not gone well. Ask questions. Listen wisely. Proverbs 15:22 reminds us, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” My point is this. Ask many people about the adoption process that if that is what you are considering.

If adoption is right for you, then pursue it with abandon. But if it’s not, don’t hesitate to say so, and know that God has another plan for you, for the child, and for your family’s life. Make sure each spouse and any remaining children in the family are fully on board, not just going along with it. Make sure that what you’re doing is the right thing to do... FOR YOU, FOR YOUR FAMILY and FOR YOUR MARRIAGE. Because if it’s the wrong thing to do, the child and your family will both pay a great price (and I’m not just talking about money).

If you’ve already adopted, embrace that which is before you and know that God has not abandoned you if things aren’t working the way you want them to. I guarantee that He is involved. Remember, any issue that does arise, can be worked through, dealt with, and resolved. You can get on the other side, whether that is a change in your child’s behavior and issues, your issues that you brought into the adoption, or the way that you view those issues that have landed on your doorstep. It’s merely a new test,

a new challenge, and a new opportunity for change, in the lives of all involved. There is hope. There are answers. So, if you are at that point, please don't hesitate to call me. I can help you through these issues.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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