

# ADOPTION

Nicole Callahan, *editor*  
Chuck Johnson, *editor*

## ADVOCATE

### The Joys and Challenges of Parenting Older Adopted Children

BY DR. GARY MATLOFF

#### Introduction

Parenting adopted children brings with it unique challenges and rewards. Children adopted at older ages—especially those from the U.S. foster care system—typically come to their new families after a history of some trauma, abuse, or neglect, and a storehouse of unresolved emotions. From the start, adoptive parents need to be ready with their sleeves rolled up, prepared to work hard in order to experience the many rewards of adopting older children.

It is said that you never truly know someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes. Empathy, understanding the thoughts and feelings of another, is a learned skill, and grows only through consistent practice and follow-through. It is an especially important skill for adoptive parents to acquire, particularly when past experiences of trauma or neglect render their children uncooperative or disrespectful. At such times, traditional disciplinary practices need to be rejected in favor of practices that facilitate open, honest communication between parent and child. Adoptive parents must be ready and willing to fully commit to the ongoing, continual process of first understanding, then meeting the needs of their children.

Many older adopted children come to their new families already spinning on a cycle of emotions that start with feelings of shame. They might believe



National Council  
For Adoption

225 N. Washington Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 299-6633  
[www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)

they were cast aside or rejected by their families of origin. These feelings can be perpetuated by subsequent experiences of instability in their lives—for example, if they are shuffled from foster placement to foster placement, unable to remain at the same school or put down roots. These children may have trouble believing that the prospect of adoption means familial stability will finally be realized.

Anger can emerge as a function of the hurt and grief they have experienced. They cannot direct their anger towards the source, or find resolution there, and so instead it is redirected to those closest to and most invested in them: their adoptive parents. Especially in the beginning, being mistrustful that their needs will be met further fuels the drive toward self-preservation and the need for control. A child may have difficulty attaching and bonding with his new parents because he is trying to defend himself from further rejection. He might battle for control over his destiny while his adoptive parents battle for authority in the name of his best interest.

Almost all children who have had a prolonged disruption in their caregiving leading to some form of institutionalization (e.g., foster care, orphanage, residential treatment facility) will display some form of attachment problems. By accepting the inevitability of having to work through some degree of attachment issues with their older adopted child, parents will be better prepared to seek the time and patience needed to parent a child who is simply waiting to see if she is loved before loving her parents back.

## Autonomous Parenting

Autonomous parenting represents a relatively new approach, and at its heart lies an emphasis on fostering self-respect. Parents can provide opportunities for their children to make choices and take responsibility for those choices by teaching children appropriately and then stepping back. They can allow their children to explore, make mistakes, and—most importantly—learn from those mistakes. When tasks are challenging, growth takes place in the struggle. Every time a child accomplishes something on her own, it builds her self-confidence.

Autonomous parenting requires time and patience when allowing children to have some control in a world where adults typically make all the decisions. When a problem arises, it is important for the parent to resist the urge to provide solutions that bail their child out; rather, their child's struggle should be respected. He should be given the time and support necessary to work through the process, toward a solution. He needs to experience whatever the outcome might be for himself, with his parents ready to ride the wave of success with him or comfort him if he should

fail. Allowing their child to own his destiny, within the context of what is reasonable and with the appropriate boundaries still in place, communicates a kind of acceptance he may not have experienced in the past.

The fact that a child was adopted never goes away; it is an undeniable part of who she or he is. Autonomous parenting fits especially well in the parenting of these children; parents can't do the emotional recovery work for their adopted children, yet their support can hold special meaning for them. For many of these children, who have a history of relationship disruption, having a parent who is tuned into their need for control and nurturing in their caregiving can be integral in helping them develop an attachment. Although we still have yet to see longitudinal studies corroborating the anecdotes of many families, positive results of autonomous parenting speak to the strength of the human propensity for relatedness. Older children adopted by supportive caregivers utilizing autonomous parenting practices often develop trusting and secure attachments.

## The Twelve Commandments of Parenting Older Adopted Children

Perhaps the greatest fear adopted children have is the fear of being rejected or abandoned again. Adoptive parents must communicate to their children complete, unconditional love and commitment, especially during difficult times. **Abandonment should never be threatened** (*Commandment #1*), as it only reinforces fear and non-acceptance, further fostering a defensive mindset that breeds an "I'll reject you first!" reaction. These children challenge their parents not because they want to leave, but because they want their parents to prove to them that they are wanted. If parents need to correct their child's behavior, it would be best to communicate with them in an inclusive way; e.g., "You are part of our family, and we don't act that way." An adopted child should never be left in doubt of their parent's lasting commitment.

These children have likely experienced a great deal of unpredictability in their young lives, often marked by chaos and fear. Their lives might have been in constant flux, with expectations and rules always changing. Often there was no one they could rely on. Structure, therefore, equals safety. **Embrace structure** (*Commandment #2*), for having a consistent routine provides children with security and predictability. If the rules are firmly in place and never change, then the child can begin to alter his or her behavior to what is acceptable and more normative within the adoptive family.

A byproduct of placing an emphasis on structure and routine is the **fostering of dependence** (*Commandment #3*). As a child matures,

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her normal development is marked with the move toward greater independence. But older adopted children have had to learn self-sufficiency early in life, usually in a maladaptive manner, in order to survive. Many have had to try and meet their own needs and parent themselves. Parents should not, therefore, wait for their child to *ask* for what she needs, as she might take this as a sign that she is not cared and provided for. It is the parents' task to help their child "let go" and allow others to care for her—to be the child she could not be before.

Too many children who are adopted from foster care have understandable issues related to food. All too common are bouts of stealing, hoarding, gorging, and/or lying about food, in response to a past when there was uncertainty about being regularly fed. Food also tends to be heavily symbolic of nurturance, and conditions should never be placed on love and nurturance. Therefore, **food should never be used as a consequence** (*Commandment #4*). Children who are sent to bed hungry won't learn the lesson parents hope they will; instead they will learn that their basic needs may not be met.

Authentic relationships between people must be anchored by genuineness and sincerity. When an adoptive parent **maintains honesty in all their relations with their child** (*Commandment #5*), they subsequently maintain their integrity and trustworthiness. Being realistic with these children is a must, as they will hold you to whatever you should say, regardless of whether it might have been uttered as a passing thought, without consideration of the logistics, practicality, affordability, etc. Many older adopted children have already experienced numerous disappointments in their lives, and they will be acutely aware of any promises that are made. They are watching to see if they can trust that you mean what you say. Rather than make promises that you might not be able to keep, be honest and say "We really hope we are able to do this."

Children who have attachment issues often struggle to feel that they are a part of the family. It is not unusual for these children to try and cut their losses and walk away. It is important for the parent to beat them to the emotional punch and **check back** with them (*Commandment #6*)—to take the initiative, rather than simply expect there will be some sort of acknowledgment. Parents should develop a ritual of hugs, a last look, a wave, etc. whenever there is a separation from their child. This will serve as a reminder that the parent continues to be part of their child's life, even if they cannot be physically seen or heard. The relationship between parent and child then becomes more of a constant rather than a transient and unreliable idea.

For older adopted children, who have likely experienced harsh punishments for misbehavior, parents should resist disciplinary practices that isolate them. These disciplinary practices only cause greater inner turmoil, and do not teach or enforce proper behavior. It is often far more effective to pull these children in *closer* to the parent, by conducting a **time-in rather than time-out** (*Commandment #7*). A time-in might mean the child must sit in a chair in the kitchen while the parent cooks, or must do chores rather than be sent to their room. Being isolated, away from the parent, only reinforces their feelings of rejection. They need to feel respected and valuable enough to be taught the “right way” of behaving. A time-in that involves talking and spending time together further enhances bonding, which is a typically fragile process with older adopted children.

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These children tend to look at the world through a filter that is negatively colored by their past experiences. It is the parents’ job to **change the filter** (*Commandment #8*). If a child was constantly shouted at, his adoptive parents will be far more effective if they react calmly and quietly, however challenging this might be. For the child who was talked down to and physically intimidated, the adoptive parents should get down at their eye level rather than tower over them in what could be perceived as a threatening manner. Even if parents are uncertain about what their child might have experienced in the past, it can be reasonably certain that their filter is colored by negative experiences, and needs to be replaced with a more positive filter.

It only takes a flash before the struggle for control becomes a losing proposition. **Pick your battles** (*Commandment #9*) and refrain from making an issue over something that cannot or does not need to be controlled. Keeping the peace rather than “sweating the small stuff” will better preserve parental influence and authority for larger issues. It might be difficult at times for parents to tolerate a child’s actions or preferences or desires. But these forms of self-expression (i.e., clothing, hairstyles, or relatively harmless television, movie, or music preferences) are far less important than rules and practices emphasizing safety, respect, and appropriate boundaries.

The **use of humor** (*Commandment #10*) can also be highly effective in defusing a conflict. Humor is best used as that “unexpected” turn that alters the rigid perspectives fueling a battle of wills. With humor, initially fixed viewpoints can begin to soften, allowing for reason and cooperation to creep in. It can also allow parents to keep their perspective when feeling unnerved, helping them avoid overreaction. By keeping a more flexible frame of mind in noting the absurdity of their child’s words and/or actions, their child becomes more transparent, and subsequently easier to redirect.

Most difficult for parents during trying times with their child is the need to **keep it in perspective** (*Commandment #11*). Children's behavior shouldn't be taken personally, even when targeted specifically—e.g., “You're not my real mother!” For adopted children, these outbursts are related to the deep-seated, unresolved anger and grief with which these children struggle, projected onto their adoptive parents. When a more rational state of being returns, parents can also help their children keep matters in perspective by reminding them to “Say what you mean, and mean what you say.”

When the conflict is over, it is essential to **forgive and forget** (*Commandment #12*). “Forgetting” in this case simply means agreeing to move on. All children, even adopted children, can be remarkably resilient in being ready to give the “family thing” another try after a heated moment with their parents. However, these children need the conflict to remain in the past, and not be constantly held over their heads. Praising children for better, more constructive behavior will have a far greater impact than needlessly rehashing what they have done wrong in the past.

## Conclusion

A common theme of the Twelve Commandments of Parenting Older Adopted Children is the emphasis on *flexibility*. Parenting according to some fixed, universal idea of what it means to raise children risks harming these children via unrealistic and imposed expectations that are not necessarily relevant to their needs. Responsive, sensitive communication is essential for parenting older adopted children, as a means of forming and encouraging meaningful attachment. The potential for a secure, loving attachment does not reside in the child alone; it is the parent's job to nurture a secure attachment in their child. The adoptive parent manages and facilitates an attuned connection with their child within a framework of unconditional love, clear limits and boundaries, and firm but appropriate discipline.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Gary Matloff is a licensed psychologist with a Ph.D. in school psychology. For the past twenty years, he has specialized in counseling children and adolescents, including many who have experienced foster care or adoption. Dr. Matloff has had original studies and literature reviews published in academic journals, and has presented at local, state, and national conferences on a variety of issues pertaining to children's mental health and emotional adjustment. He is a proud single father to a pair of brothers adopted from Brazil when they were eight and eleven years old. Dr. Matloff is also the author of *See You Tomorrow...Reclaiming the Beacon of Hope*, a true story about parenting his sons and the reality of adopting older children. Find Dr. Matloff online at [www.psyched4kids.com](http://www.psyched4kids.com) and [www.drgarytheadoptiveparent.blogspot.com](http://www.drgarytheadoptiveparent.blogspot.com).



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