

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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Editors' Note: This month's *Adoption Advocate* is intended to be a resource to adoptive parent couples. It is not intended to send a message that adoption is only for couples. Whether always single, divorced, or widowed, there are a lot of single adoptive parents who thrive with the children in their care.

For Couples Who Adopt *How to Keep Your Relationship Strong*

BY RYAN AND KAYLA NORTH

Whatever stage of the adoption process you are in—from contemplation to post-adoption—working to fortify your relationship will have an impact upon those around you, most especially children in your care.

Amber Lewis, a licensed counselor in Oklahoma who works with families during the home study process and post-adoption says, “It is vital that couples go into an adoption with a relationship characterized by strong communication, cooperation, respect, and love. The challenges of adoption often exacerbate weaknesses in marriages, and it can be devastating for the whole family if those weaknesses grow. But, if a couple is strongly committed to each other with firm grounding in their love, roles, and mutual respect, the family is much better prepared to successfully weather the stress that can come with building a family by adoption.”¹

We encourage you to approach this article with a growth mindset—we all have things to learn and ways to improve and grow. Perhaps your

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¹ A. Lewis, personal communication, May 22, 2020

relationship is strong heading into an adoption process—*that is great*—seek to identify ways to reinforce that foundation. Perhaps your marriage is falling apart five years after your family adopted—we are glad you are looking for resources and strongly believe there is good reason for you to be hopeful that change and help are possible.

Our Story

One of the first important conversations we had as newlyweds centered around the topic of children. We wanted to understand each other's hopes and expectations. How long would we wait to grow our family? How many children did we want? Although we did not agree on everything, we were pleasantly surprised to learn that both of us wanted to build our family through adoption.

There was another thing we agreed on: We would take a vacation to South Africa where Ryan was born before we became parents. After a wonderful time with friends and family, we ended our time in South Africa with three days in Cape Town. On our last day, we took a trip to Seal Island. We sat on the benches at the back of the boat because we did not want to get wet from the spray at the bow. Although that sounded like fun, we were heading to the airport from the harbor and the idea of a 12-hour flight in wet clothing did not sound appealing at all.

We are so glad that we sat where we did.

As the staff readied the boat for departure, kids from the local orphanage accompanied by two adults joined us for the trip to Seal Island. They boarded the boat and sat at the back near us. They laughed and enjoyed the gentle rocking of the ocean on the way out. They did not laugh on the way back though— instead, they sang. We were moved by their beautiful chorus of voices. One thing was clear to us by the time we climbed in the car to head to the airport; just as we had originally agreed, we were going to build our family through adoption.

We did not know much about parenting kids with trauma histories when we started our parenting journey. Trauma-informed care was not a thing back then. We also had no idea how much we would learn about ourselves as parents of children who had experienced trauma before coming to us in adoption. There are some people who think those of us who adopt children—and particularly children with known physical and emotional challenges—are somehow extraordinary people who are unaffected by the normal challenges of life. They think we have the answers to every parenting challenge, never grow weary or feel like giving up, and for those of us who are married, our marriages are immune from difficulty.

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Not true! Families who adopt children, even those who go into adopting with their eyes wide open, experience the same challenges all families do. However, in parenting children who have experienced trauma, these regular people may be called upon to parent through greater challenges than most. We have learned that protecting our marriage is vital to being successful parents. Coming to terms with our own histories and understanding our triggers has become a vital part of parenting our kids and loving each other well.

Now, after 10 years of foster parenting, we have six children, four of whom were adopted from foster care. After hundreds of hours of training—first for ourselves and then training others—we formed an organization to teach others about childhood trauma.² Through our work with adoptive and foster families across the country, we have seen many couples who have had to endure the stress of challenging family dynamics. This article pulls together wisdom we have accumulated for couples considering adoption, couples in the middle of their adoption process, and couples who have already grown their family through adoption.

Communication

Communication is vital to any healthy relationship, and poor communication can be the thing that tears people apart. Once we were married and found ourselves in an occasional disagreement, one or both of us would raise our voices to make our point, falsely believing that our volume somehow strengthened our position in our desire to win the argument. People like to feel in control, and a romantic relationship is no different. But when we seek to control our spouse/partner, it is our way of saying, “What I want is more important than our relationship.” It is an attempt to meet our own needs at the expense of our spouse’s.

Several years ago we found ourselves having the same disagreement over and over again. Each of us was intent on winning the other one over to our way of thinking, but neither of us was really listening. We went to marriage counseling, and one of the many nuggets of wisdom we took from the sessions was that we have to believe that what is best for us as a couple must come before what is best for us as individuals. While so simple, this wisdom has helped us communicate better. We seek to understand and find what is best for our marriage, instead of winning the argument. When we said our marriage vows, we promised to love, honor, and respect one another. That means that we listen to one another and

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² <https://www.onebighappyhome.com/about/>

often find ways to compromise. The concept of compromise is one we teach parents who are struggling in their relationship with their kids, so why not apply it to our marriage?

Setting clear expectations and reevaluating those expectations leads to better communication. If we go into a marriage believing that our spouse should do certain things, or behave a certain way, then when the other does not live up to expectations, we will leave frustrated and wondering what went wrong. So communicating our expectations, and being willing to adjust them can bring healing to relationships where one spouse is feeling disappointed and the other is feeling confused.

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Practical ways to communicate:

- **Have a weekly calendar meeting.** Setting proper expectations for schedules and division of labor helps keep the communication lines open and ensure we do not have the “But I thought you were going to...” conversation at the end of the week.
- **Regularly review the budget.** One of the number one reasons that couples argue is finances. Fixing this is often as simple as getting on the same page.

Connection

Maintaining healthy connections in marriage can be especially challenging when parenting kids who have experienced trauma, and many children who have been adopted experienced much hurt and pain before they came to their family by adoption. Sometimes parents find themselves dealing with big emotions, sleepless nights, and complete exhaustion as a result of parenting. By the time the day is over and kids are in bed, we just want to crawl into bed or watch a mindless TV show. At our house, both of those things are often interrupted by a child who cannot sleep because of paralyzing anxiety, or another who needs advice about dating and relationships. Deep conversations and intimacy often take a backseat to good parenting in all families, but the parents of children who have experienced trauma will be called upon all the more to patiently love and nurture their kids through their pain and fears.

Jude Cassidy, a well-known attachment expert, gives us four hallmarks of secure attachment that can serve as guidelines for reviewing the strength of our connection to our spouse. In her article, *Truth, lies, and intimacy: An attachment perspective*,³ Cassidy tells us that we can evaluate the relationship by these four areas:

³ <https://www.recoveryonpurpose.com/upload/Truth,%20Lies,%20and%20Intimacy%20An%20Attachment%20Perspective.pdf>

- The ability to seek care
- The ability to give care
- The ability to feel comfortable with an autonomous self
- The ability to negotiate

Being able to seek care from our spouse and give care to our spouse are important steps toward a healthy relationship. If we can allow ourselves to be cared for and consider others above ourselves, then we have taken the first steps toward connecting on a deeper level. So ask yourself: “Am I able to come to my spouse when I have had a hard day and share? Do I seek comfort from my spouse or do I shut them out and push them away? Am I afraid that they won’t react well and that I’ll be rejected?”

Being comfortable with who you are as a person is hard for many people. So many come to marriage looking for someone to complete them, versus a spouse to complement them. Part of maintaining a healthy connection is actually finding something you can do on your own—finding something you enjoy outside of parenting and marriage that fulfills you and brings you joy. For example, Kayla enjoys reading a good fiction book so she visits the library as often as possible to check out a book to read and enjoy. Ryan loves to play guitar. Many times during the day he will pull his guitar off the wall and play songs and strum away, getting lost in the music. These things bring us joy and refreshment. And even though these activities are done apart from one another, they allow us the autonomy we need to refresh so we can invest in our marriage.

Having the freedom to speak and have your voice heard is another important piece of staying connected in your relationship. When we feel the freedom to disagree, knowing we can reach a peaceful resolution, we are able to build an even stronger bond.

Practical ideas for building connection:

- **Steal time alone when you can.** By the end of the day, we are exhausted from a long day of parenting and life, so instead of waiting until after the kids go to bed, we find little pockets of time during the day. Sometimes this is the first thing in the morning, before anyone is awake. Other times it is in the afternoon when the kids are all playing. Take advantage of those few quiet moments and enjoy each other’s company.
- **At-home date night.** We may not be able to go out every week on elaborate dates to fancy restaurants and movie theaters, but we can put the kids to bed early, order take out, and sit and talk or play a game.

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- **Being intentional about affection.** We've all seen the cute older couple who walks around holding hands, and that's who we want to be one day. We don't pass up an opportunity to steal a kiss or a hug.

Over the years we have learned that in order to have the relationship we long for, we must invest in the marriage. We choose quality over quantity during these years of parenting.

Conflict

There tends to be very little conflict when we are aligned around parenting, finances, communication, etc. For us, conflict occurs when we are no longer running parallel to each other. Intersections in relationships, like intersections on the road, are dangerous. (It is estimated that 40 percent of all crashes in the United States occur in intersections.)⁴

But conflict in every relationship is inevitable. We are two individuals with different histories and experiences. We came to marriage with different ideas about marriage and parenting. Growing in relationship has meant learning to listen to each other, compromising when needed, and learning how to move forward together.

We cannot let past hurts and relationships get in the way of the marriage. We need to understand both of our histories and expectations, and work through any problems that arise as a result of them. Sometimes there is conflict in trying to get on the same page. We wish that we could peacefully work through our issues and differences, but we understand that challenging each other has made us better as individuals and as a couple.

We also understand that not all conflict is resolvable, at least not in the moment. When we were newlyweds, we would keep the argument going in hopes that we would resolve it before we went to sleep. What we learned was there are diminishing returns on trying to find resolution the later it gets into the night. What we have since done is make sure we do not go to bed angry, and agree that we can work towards resolution in the morning. A good night's sleep has proven to be a remarkable ally many times over the years.

Dealing with disagreements in ways that build a stronger relationship is a vital part of our marriage. We have always looked at our marriage as a living, growing organism and not as a one-time transaction. We both have a responsibility to do the work necessary to ensure that our home is a place where everyone feels safe and where real healing can happen.

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⁴ <https://www.autoaccident.com/statistics-on-intersection-accidents.html>

Better Together

There was a time in my life (Ryan) when I was terrified of flying, not afraid, but *terrified*. My fear and anxiety would paralyze me. There were many occasions when my fear almost kept me from getting on the plane. I remember a particularly bumpy departure from Nashville one afternoon. It felt to me as if we were not going to make it safely to the ground. I was struggling to cope, which mirrored my impression that the plane was struggling to gain and maintain altitude. My palms were sweaty, my heart was racing, and I could not breathe.

Since we travel together most of the time when we speak, I reached out and held Kayla's hand. She was reading a book and seemingly unaware of my personal crisis. But here is the thing, seconds after I took her hand my breathing went from short and shallow to something resembling normal. I noticed the change in my breathing and started to focus on taking deep breaths which helped me regulate and deal with my stress.

Is there something magical about holding my wife's hand? No, of course there is not. If the plane was in trouble would holding her hand help any? No. The real power in holding her hand helped me feel that we were in it together. It is amazing what we are able to do when we understand that we are not alone; when we get that someone is on our side no matter what.

We have learned this lesson over and over in our marriage as well. We are able to make it through some tough times when we are connected and working together.

Parenting vulnerable children can often bring relationship problems to the surface. We can blame those issues on our kids, or we can recognize that we need to work through our own histories in order to grow in relationship with each other. We must look back to understand why we relate to others the way we do, including our spouses. We must be intentional about staying connected to each other while learning to communicate effectively as spouses and parents.

Resources

Getting guidance on how to sustain, strengthen, or repair a marriage relationship is critical, not just for the couple but for their children as well. Debbie B. Riley, a licensed clinical marriage and family therapist, and CEO of Center for Adoption Support and Education says, "Couples need to recognize that bringing a child into their family will have an impact upon

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their relationship... bringing joys and challenges. A commitment to open communication and setting realistic expectations of each other and as a couple will be key to your success as a parent. Recognizing, as well, that adoptive parenting is the same as and different from parenting children by birth. Couples need to prepare to be open to embracing differences and accept guidance to address these differences.”⁵

There are a plethora of resources, such as this [episode of our podcast](#)⁶, for couples seeking to understand and strengthen their relationship. Here are just a few other resources to get you started:

Online courses and assessments

[PREPARE/ENRICH](#)⁷ is a pre-marital preparation and marriage assessment course that has been used by millions of couples to better understand their relationship. There is also an [adoption/foster care version](#)⁸ of PREPARE/ENRICH to help identify and assess couples’ strengths and issues as they prepare for parenting children by adoption/foster care.

Marriage/Relationship books

Some relationship books are grounded in attachment theory, such as Sue Johnson’s *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, as well as Amir Levine and Rachel Heller’s book *Attached*. These books help couples identify ways that their past history may be impacting their current relationships. Other books are grounded in couples-focused research, such as the widely read *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman and Nan Silver. And although it is not a book about marriage, the authors of this article have found *Anatomy of the Soul* by Dr. Curt Thompson instructive on attachment and relationships.

Counseling

Of course marriage counseling or family counseling can be another way to work directly with a trained therapist for support, insight, and assistance to promote healthy relationships. When seeking a marriage or family therapist, ask your general practitioner doctor or health insurance provider for referrals. Many faith-based communities have resources and referral recommendations as well. There are even online counseling options available for couples who have limited availability or schedule flexibility to make counseling work.

⁵ D. Riley, personal communication, May 23, 2020.

⁶ <https://empoweredparent.podbean.com/e/better-together-staying-connected-in-marriage-while-parenting-kids-from-trauma-s06-e03/>

⁷ <https://www.prepare-enrich.com>

⁸ https://www.prepare-enrich.com/pe/pdf/adoption/adoption_overview.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ryan and Kayla North have six children, four adopted from foster care. They are co-founders of One Big Happy Home and are considered experts on childhood trauma. Together they have developed training materials and programs for churches, schools, and parents educating them on trauma and its impacts.

The Norths have trained and mentored hundreds of ministry leaders and crisis intervention trainers in the U.S. and Canada. They are both TBRI (Trust-Based Relationship Intervention) Practitioners and speak at churches, schools, conferences, and retreats nationwide. Ryan and Kayla have had the privilege of working with some of the most respected voices in the fields of Developmental Trauma and Attachment including: Dr. Karyn Purvis, Dr. David Cross, Dr. Curt Thompson, Dr. Tina Payne-Bryson, Cindy Lee, and Jayne Schooler.

You can hear them on [The Empowered Parent Podcast](#) and read their writing at [One Big Happy Home](#).

[Illuminate](#) – Ryan & Kayla’s online Six-part Trauma Masterclass for parents. Use discount code ADOPTIONCOUNCIL for 15% off the enrollment fee!



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