

Attachment

By Janelle Althen, LCSW – Red Thread Counseling Center

When we hear our families say, “We bonded in China!” we share their joy and are thrilled that they are getting off to a good start on their adoption journey. As an agency, we hope to help families understand that attachment is not a magical moment, but a *process* - a process that can take from months to years and is different for every family.

What is “attachment?” A healthy attachment between a parent and child is a profound bond that is unique (a child intuitively knows this caretaker is special and different from others from a very early stage), reciprocal (the adult’s attachment to the child is just as important as the child’s attachment to the adult), and emotionally attuned (the adult is “tuned in” to the child’s emotional needs at any given moment and responds appropriately). Attachment provides the secure base that children need to thrive and grow into emotionally and mentally healthy people. Secure attachment to a primary caregiver provides a child with the ability to regulate stress and emotions, the ability to view the world as an “o.k.” place, the ability and desire to relate on a personal level with others, and the capacity to feel empathy, compassion, and independence. A healthy attachment is one of the key elements to a successful parent-child relationship and the foundation of a successful adoption.

Internationally adopting parents sometimes wonder if the months or years before their child comes into their home will hurt their child’s ability to bond or attach to them. What if the nannies were spread too thin to give the individual attention that their child needed or the foster parent wasn’t attending to their child in the way that their child needed? The great news is that it is rarely too late to mitigate a compromised beginning. Children will respond to loving, nurturing, consistent care over time. It is the *repetition* of sensitive, protective, and predictable caregiving that helps children attach and form a secure base. The more we can rise above the stress, insecurity, and reactivity that can be part of parenting, the more we can offer the emotional consistency and predictability that our children need to feel safe and form a healthy, secure attachment to us and to thrive.

The first six to twelve months of placement are a critical window for establishing a secure attachment. The chronological age of your child is not as important as meeting your child’s needs for comfort and security in an unconditional way. Developmentally, we are foundational beings. If we don’t establish a secure attachment foundation with our adopted kids first, we will struggle in trying to teach them other things. For example, no matter their age, getting your internationally adopted child to “sleep through the night” is secondary to comforting them back to sleep and making them feel safe and secure in the first few months that they are placed in your home. If you adopt a 15-month-old who still has a bottle, it is o.k. to keep them on a bottle for several months to maintain a sense of security and comfort for them. You can help them unlearn any behaviors you wish down the road, *after* they are securely attached and comfortable in their new surroundings. Older adopted children may regress to some younger behaviors or seem inappropriately needy, babyish, or clingy at times. The more you can nurture them in these moments, the faster they can move through any anxiety or stress that is causing that kind of behavior. The most important thing to remember, no matter how young or old your child is at placement, is that the more energy, commitment, and time you can put into helping your child feeling secure, protected, safe, and unconditionally loved in the first months and years of your child’s placement, the sooner they will develop a secure attachment, integrate into your family, and be able to move on to normal emotional development.

If you are having *any* struggles, doubts, or worries about your adopted child, don't hesitate to call your social worker or The Red Thread Counseling Center at CCAI. Early intervention and prevention is the key.