

Second Time's a Charm

By Laurie Ritchie, Adoptive Mom of Two

Today is the one-year anniversary of Referral Day for our second daughter Kelly! We were so full of excitement, anticipation, wonder, and joy. It had taken us a long while to decide to adopt a second child; it would be 3 ½ years since our first adoption. Our 4 ½ year old daughter Dana (Hunan 2001) took one look at her mei mei's stunning photo and said "I like her!" Good thing! And Kelly looked like she could, um, hold her own in the world!

We adopted again for all the "right" reasons; we've had such a wonderful experience with Dana that we really wanted to parent another child and thought it would be great for Dana to have a sister. I read all the sibling adjustment and bonding/attachment books, as well as the pre-adoption handouts that CCAI sent us as a second time family (don't compare adoptions, be ready for anything, etc.). We knew a lot of people who had adopted from China twice, and I thought we were prepared. And yes, regardless of all the caveats, on some level we expected a somewhat similar experience to our first adoption, which was a magical, "fairytale" experience. Our mutual bonding was instantaneous. Dana is the love of our lives and is a very sweet, mellow, cuddly, and loving five-year-old.

The past year has been challenging, frustrating, humbling, and marvelous, all at the same time. For our second adoption we requested 18-24 months, so we knew it would be a different experience. We just weren't completely prepared for how different. Kelly could not be more opposite of Dana; she is very physical, muscular, and active. She has the strongest will of any child I've met. Kelly has bonded very well to us, exhibits all the appropriate behaviors (good eye contact, prefers us to strangers, accepts comfort, etc.), but it took longer from our side. We have been incredibly fortunate in this regard, especially since she was nearly 19 months old at adoption. We always *loved* her, and have always been completely committed to parenting her, but the bonding process has been so different from with our first adoption.

All the preparation in the world (reading, classes, etc.) did not prepare me for dealing with MY adjustment. It took a lot longer to feel as bonded to Kelly as I did to Dana. Kelly is adorable, happy, smart, playful, busy, social, and laughs a lot. I felt so guilty; I didn't feel bonded to her; what was wrong with me? She is also very independent, very squirmy and not really a cuddler. My emotions ranged from frustration to resentment, from sadness to indifference. How could I feel indifference, of all things, toward my own child? I wondered if I was suffering from depression - why else would I feel so conflicted? I'd had none of these issues with our first adoption. All sorts of doubts ran through our minds. Had we made a mistake, should we have adopted again? It seems that most of us wonder if we could ever get as fabulous a child as our first; I've heard that time and again. At times, I would feel like I was "there" with bonding, only to cycle back to feeling conflicted again. My husband Ken commented a few weeks after we got home that he didn't feel the same way about Kelly that he does about Dana, and did I think that was bad? I told him it's only natural to feel more bonded to a child you've been parenting for 3.5 years than to one you've known for 4 weeks.

I felt like I was the only mom who'd ever been through this, others seemed to not have these issues. I couldn't admit that our adoption wasn't perfect; I'm the president of the Adoptive Parents Council, for Pete's sake! What would people think? I put out a few "feeler" comments to other adoptive parents. Their responses and blank looks made me feel even more alone and alienated.

Then I started *really* talking to a few friends who had also adopted their *second* child in the last 6-12 months, and found out how common my experience was. The floodgates opened. It has been wonderful to be able to talk to other moms who have been there and gotten through it, and to know that I am not alone, that I am not deficient in some way as a parent. Then I was invited to join a wonderful support group of moms who talked frankly, honestly, and openly about the challenges they had faced with their second adoptions. These women saved my sanity at a time when I doubted myself as a mother and have become my closest confidantes.

Another aspect that I was unprepared for was having my beloved, "perfect" first child turn into someone I didn't know. Dana did so great in China; we had a marvelous time. She was so sweet with Kelly, helping her get dressed and looking out for her when we were out and about. She told everyone we saw, "this is my baby sister Kelly, she's cute but she's a stinker." Once we got home she started acting out, wetting the bed (which she had *never* done before), insulting people (asking a close relative why she was so fat, telling our Chinese friends she hates Chinese people), and basically acting like a demon child. It was difficult dealing with feelings of frustration and anger toward her; she had been such a delightful child up until then. I was surprised by my emotions and reactions to Dana's behavior. And feeling guilty too, this is my BABY I'm yelling at! Her feelings of displacement were very surprising, since she'd been so excited about Kelly from the start. Sure, one expects some sibling rivalry, but I was more concerned with Dana's emotional well-being than with Kelly's at that point; I'd had 3.5 years to become attached to Dana and it felt totally alien to feel so frustrated and at odds with her! Seeing my baby hurting when people went on and on about Kelly was difficult, I could practically see the steam coming out of Dana's ears. Then came the acting-out behaviors. Ah, more guilt!

We've been home for nearly 10 months now, and we are starting to hit our "groove." Everyone I talked to said that six months seemed to be a turning point for them; they said to just hang in there and things will be better after six months. They were right; we did feel that things were going better after six months. We have learned how to appreciate, accommodate, and even enjoy some of the major differences between our two marvelous children! We are learning how to parent two very different children in two different styles, all at the very same time. The girls are well on their way to being lifelong pals and it is so wonderful to see them play, laugh, giggle, and conspire against mom and dad together!

My husband read this over and said "wow, that's some personal stuff." Yes, it is very personal. But we as a community are always saying, "bonding is a process," and to allow our new child the space and time they need. Why not extend ourselves the same kindness, so we can be the best parents we can be? The message here is that there is nothing wrong with admitting these challenges, and with allowing ourselves the time to grow bonded and attached to our child(ren). If our story helps one mom realize she isn't alone and helps her to reach out to others, it's worth it. In the end, I did not seek treatment, although I do feel that I was approaching clinical depression. Many moms I've met have benefited from medication and there's nothing wrong with that, either!

This may all sound very dramatic, and others have certainly faced more challenging situations. You may have one or more "fairytale" adoption experiences, fantastic! But if you don't, give yourself a break, allow yourself time to fall in love with this little soul if you don't feel it right away. And what I wish I knew then that I know now is that it will get better, you will bond, and it is definitely worth it in the end. Most important of all, find someone to talk to about your feelings that you may not want to acknowledge to yourself, much less admit or deal with. Hopefully my "confession" will

help to normalize other families' "imperfect" adoption experiences, and will help to alleviate some of the feelings of alienation and guilt that many of us face.

Picture: Ritchie

Caption: The Koch/Ritchie Family: Dana, Ken, Kelly, & Laurie