

Getting the Right Help

By Janelle Althen, LCSW, Clinical Director, Red Thread Counseling Center

Too many adoptive parents struggle alone, behind closed doors! Sometimes parents ignore their gut feelings and hesitate to reach out for the help they need because others minimize their concerns... *“You paid so much, waited so long, and worked so hard to get this child, why are you complaining?” “She’s just a normal, healthy 15-month-old; let her cry it out...” “You’re holding her too much, you’re spoiling her...” or “She’ll grow out of it; my daughter did.”* Others hesitate because they are unsure where to turn in a sea of thousands of mental health professionals. Some are worried about the stigma of “therapy.” Additionally, the sheer amount of information out there and different types of therapies can be overwhelming... Which book has the right answers? Who has expertise with a child with my child’s history or specific problem?

Parents who educate themselves will be better prepared to help their child and to practice healing parenting and to find the “right” kind of help if they need professional help. Parents need to look for *current* literature and therapists who specialize in international adoption or therapists who have expertise in trauma, emotional regulation, and early child development. There has been a huge paradigm shift in the area of attachment and trauma over the last six or seven years. Theory, understanding, and treatment have shifted because of major advances in neuroscience and a deeper understanding of how early trauma, neglect, or compromised care impact children’s emotional and neurological development.

The degree to which children are impacted by the loss, trauma, or compromised care that they experience before they are placed in our homes varies. Things are made more complicated by the multiple factors that play into how these early experiences will impact later emotional and behavioral development.... How mild or severe was the early trauma or neglect? How deep were the losses? Was the child deeply attached to a nanny who held her in a baby-carrier all of the time or did she sit neglected in a walker in a foster home or orphanage? Once the child is placed... What are the adoptive family dynamics like? Is the parent able to stay regulated and calm in the face of their child’s emotional distress? The child’s temperament, intelligence, and adaptability also play a part. Professionals can help parents sort these things out.

Rather than struggle, wonder, or worry alone, we encourage families to “reach out and reach early” in their child’s placement. Early intervention is so powerful! At the same time, recognize that many behaviors and “symptoms” that families observe during the first few months are related to initial adjustment rather than something that requires therapeutic intervention. The levels of stress hormones in their child’s body in those first weeks and months may cause many of them to regress, be up frequently at night, cry a lot, or seem exceptionally clingy or needy. Others will appear perfectly happy as if they have no needs at all, only to start regressing two or three months into placement. These are scenarios that are normal for children who are going through the trauma of such an enormous change. These children are literally in survival mode as they make the transition from their familiar environment in China to your home. Most families see these types of behaviors dissipate over time as their child’s sense of safety and security increases and their attachment to their parents deepens. When parents find themselves struggling with challenging or puzzling behaviors *after* the initial adjustment phase, or when parents find themselves struggling with their own attachment (I am not feeling any maternal or paternal feeling for this child... Help!), they need to consult with someone about how to get things moving in a different direction.

Remember, calling a therapist doesn't mean a commitment to years of weekly sessions. Long-term, weekly sessions may have been more common in the past, but shorter-term, solution-oriented therapies are the model that the majority of psychotherapists follow these days. Some families come regularly for several months and some benefit from a few sessions. A counselor will tailor treatment to fit the severity and complexity of the situation.

Some things to consider when looking for the right professional:

- Parents should look for therapists who are familiar with the aforementioned research and who are committed to staying current in terms of research and practice methods.
- Seek out therapists that use a family therapy model of treatment (a therapist working with you or you and your child, rather than individual therapy with your child.) The most powerful place for intervention with a child is with his or her primary attachment figure/primary caregiver. A therapist who can coach, guide, and empower a parent to interact with their child in a healing, regulating manner can help a family make enormous progress. Because the parent-child relationship is the cornerstone of treatment, sound models also incorporate a focus on and work with the parent – their characteristics, their strengths and weakness, and their own personal triggers.
- Pay attention to a therapist's framework. Current models that treat attachment and trauma issues look at children's misbehavior, acting out, or aggression less as a need for control or manipulation and more as the child regressing from being in a state of fear, stress, or shame. Emerging models have shifted the treatment focus from merely reducing negative behavior or "breaking" through the defenses a child may have built to establishing felt safety and strengthening a child's ability to regulate emotion. Once a child has developed an increased sense of safety and a better ability to regulate their emotions, they are able to "handle" powerful emotions that trigger past traumas instead of being overwhelmed by them.
- Try to find therapists who are holistic and collaborative. No one professional has all of the answers.
- Search for therapists who focus on connection and relationship. Some of the earlier models seemed to emphasize parents and therapists being "in charge," but seemed to be a bit lean on compassion and connection. Emerging models help parents develop interaction with their children that is compassionate, firm, sensitive, connected, clear, highly attuned, and non-judgmental.
- Be a savvy consumer. Don't be afraid to interview therapists and ask them questions about their experience, treatment model, and philosophies. Also remember that therapy is more about the therapist's skills, expertise, and ideal fit with the client than the type of mental health degree he or she has.

We want adoptive parents to be empowered by our firm beliefs: Healthy, nurturing, connected, and safe relationships can be part of a healing journey for children touched by trauma and loss. Adoptive parents are essential ingredients to help their children heal, and with the right support and right tools, they can thrive.

Families can access the Red Thread Counseling Center at 303-850-9998 x 31.