



**THE MONROE FAMILY** has grown their family through adoption. Michael and Amy adopted, from left, Kate, Carter, Grant and Miles. Kate and Carter are twins adopted from Guatemala and Miles and Grant were adopted domestically. Left, Dr. Karyn Purvis hugs Dimitri at a summer camp in Fort Worth, Texas.

*Understanding the need for honest self-evaluation is an important aspect of the adoption journey*

# Adoption from the Inside Out

By Michael Monroe and Karyn B. Purvis, PhD

**F**or many, the adoption process begins by surveying agency information, evaluating financial considerations and tackling mountains of paperwork, all while working through a complex array of questions, doubts and even fears. Likewise, once a family welcomes a child home their attention generally turns to the everyday aspects of parenting, as well as dealing with the extras that come with being a family who has been woven together through the miracle of adoption.

While these are all important aspects of the adoption process, they can often crowd out some equally important steps along the way. One important, but often overlooked, aspect is the need to engage the adoption journey from the “inside out” — through ongoing, honest self-reflection and self-evaluation.

### **Starting from the Inside**

We know how important it is for adoptive parents to engage in a self-evaluation process intentionally focused on assessing their motivations for adopting and examining their expectations about what they will likely experience. While this process may be time consuming and even at times a bit uncomfortable, it is always time well spent.

**Properly Motivated** — Being honest about motivations can be a tricky thing. However, it is critically important that you start with healthy motivations. It is not so much that there is one single “right” motivation for adopting, as there are several wrong motivations — motivations that often can lead to great disappointment and much hurt and heartache for everyone involved.

At its core, adoption should not be a humanitarian cause aimed at “rescuing” a poor, orphaned child or “fixing” a broken child, as heartbreaking as their children’s realities may be. It is equally important not to adopt in order to try to prove something or to make a point, nor because it is the “in” thing or even the “Christian thing” to do. Invariably, motivations such as these can cause a parent to bring a great deal of unnecessary “baggage” to the new parent-child relationship, resulting in unrealistic expectations, disappointment and a



**ENJOYING** a day at the beach are Kristin and Anthony Violi with their children 4-year-old Luke and 1-year-old Cade. Luke was adopted from Russia and Cade was adopted domestically.

host of other negative outcomes.

Instead, a primary motivation for adopting must always be love — love that a parent has and is willing and able to unconditionally give to a child for a lifetime. This love is not merely a sentiment or a feeling, but rather a true commitment of the heart, soul, mind and body. Motivated by this kind of love, parents are far better well-positioned to partner with their child in order to build a healthy and trusting relationship. With this foundation parents can then begin to empower their children, help them heal and allow them to fully experience the blessings of a forever family.

Ultimately, adoption must be more about the child than it is about the parent. Although there is no denying the “mutual blessing” of adoption, it is essential that parents be willing to ask themselves difficult questions and provide honest answers to ensure that they are properly motivated and can thus provide the necessary foundations for a healthy relationship and a positive outcome.

**Realistically Expecting** — Adoptive parents who maintain realistic expectations throughout the entire adoption journey are far more likely to thrive even in the midst of the challenges that often arise. As a family travels the adoption journey it is essential that they avoid overly romanticized notions of how the

adoption experience will unfold. There will undoubtedly be major milestones, “miracle moments” and breakthroughs filled with joy as a child begins to receive and respond to the love and care showered upon him or her. However, there will also likely be some amount of frustration, disappointment and pain as well.

No doubt every family truly believes they are adopting the “perfect child.” However, early on in the adoption process our heads often know, though our hearts may forget, that even though you may adopt the “perfect child” for your family, your child is not “perfect.” The good news, however, is neither are you. So every adoptive family should fully expect to encounter some challenges and bumps along the roadway as together they seek to learn and develop a healthy, trusting relationship. Our experience is that no family is completely immune.

The challenges start right away for some families, and unrealistic expectations can have a lot to do with both the cause and the ultimate outcomes. Some families travel half way around the world to adopt a young child and when they arrive at the orphanage they may unrealistically expect the child to instantaneously connect with them and them with him or her — the so-called “mommy or daddy moment.” While this does sometimes happen,



**SHARING HUGS** are Andy and Julie Crofts with their children 5-year-old Lindsay and 7-year-old Nathan. Both children were adopted from Korea.



**HELPING HEAL THE HURT** of a young child is Karyn Purvis at a recent camp for adopted children.

for many reasons it is not always, or even generally, the norm. In fact, children who seem to instantly “attach” may be in reality exhibiting an attachment issue called “indiscriminate friendliness,” which will require guidance over time to help them understand how to create a healthy parent-child attachment.

Likewise, some adoptive parents choose to adopt older children only to be surprised that after a short “honeymoon” period the child, plucked from an orphanage in another country and culture and removed from all that is familiar and “safe” to him or her, is not grateful and compliant. Instead, the parents find themselves struggling with issues relating to communication, making good decisions and learning to follow the rules. More generally, they find themselves facing the challenge of helping the child fully understand what it means to be part of a family.

Regardless of the challenge or issue that arises it is all important to remember that the solu-

tions and successes will not come over night. What is called for is “investment parenting,” though for many of us, accustomed to our fast paced society of instant gratification and quick results, the “return” on the “investment” is painfully slow in coming. The “investment” can be made in any number of ways, such as taking time off work for an extended period after a child comes home in order to help him or her connect with the new family. Some families make the “investment” by not putting the child in school or daycare immediately to allow for more time and interaction with parents and family members.

When a child comes into our family through birth we naturally expect several months of sleepless nights, dirty diapers and constant attention. Likewise, when a child comes into our family through adoption, parents should expect to make an equal “investment” of time to help the child feel safe and connected, even if the diapers and feedings are replaced with other expressions of care and attention.

One additional key to creating realistic expectations is to be sure not to travel the adoption journey alone. Other adoptive families can often be the best resource for helping sift through what to realistically expect. It is important, however, that these experienced adoptive families are willing to be honest and open about their experiences — both the highs and the lows. Support groups, church ministries and other communities of families are a great place to connect with families like these to learn about what you should realistically expect and how you can best be prepared to respond.

#### *It's Never Too Late to Ask the Right*

**Questions** — While honest and critical self-evaluation is vitally important early on in the adoption process, it is never too late for parents to start looking “inside” to ask themselves the right questions. As challenges and issues with a child arise it is all too easy for parents to assume that the problem, and therefore the solution, lies completely with the child. However, this assumption can often mask the true reality and serve to only further prolong the pain and frustration.

It is critical for parents to be willing to not only assess their motivations and expectations on an ongoing basis, but to also be willing to explore their own histories and address what they may find. In order to guide a child toward healing, parents need to know the path themselves. All things being equal, parents who fearlessly explore their own history and how it may affect their parenting are parents who are generally better prepared to welcome a child home and begin partnering with their child so they can connect and heal.

Melanie Chung Sherman, an independent adoption social worker in Texas and a Korean adoptee herself, explains: “Parenting can bring an array of emotions and feelings to the surface. When parents build their families through adoption, many times unresolved issues such as grief and loss due to infertility, past abuse and neglect, past addictions or health problems come to the surface. The child’s deep needs can often trigger these unresolved issues of the past and the impacts can ultimately find their way to the child. If

parents do not intentionally and honestly assess themselves and begin to work toward healing for unresolved issues, the adoption dynamics can compound these past traumas and prevent parents from fully embracing the complexities and joys of the adoption journey. Self-assessment and self-evaluation must go well beyond the homestudy and become an ongoing part of how to engage the adoption journey as it unfolds. It is no doubt messy and

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difficult, but the long-term rewards will be substantial for the well-being of the child and the entire family.”

This is reinforced by recent research from the TCU Institute of Child Development documenting specific critical parent issues that can become hindrances to positive outcomes for adoptive families if the issues are not explored and resolved. These issues include childhood losses such as the death of a parent, death of a sibling, divorce, alcoholism of a parent, trauma, neglect or abuse. Adult losses that need to be explored include miscarriage, divorce, death of a loved one and trauma. In addition, numerous researchers have documented significant positive shifts in families where the parents are able to process their own histories. In turn, these parents are empowered and able to guide their children through a similar process.

Approaching adoption from the “inside out” is an important ongoing part of the adoption journey that can be incredibly beneficial for both you and your child. The life-long journey of adoption is filled with blessings and joy, though it can also bring its fair share of challenges, loss and pain. In the end, however, we have come to believe that the truest blessing of adoption is not in living “happily ever after,” but rather in the God-kissed opportunity to

unconditionally give your love away with the hope that your gift will be fully accepted and will transform the life of a child — forever.

#### **A Few Questions to Consider . . .**

Here are a few questions that can help you examine your motivations, expectations and any unresolved issues that may affect your ability to fully connect with your child:

- What are the reasons why I want to adopt?
- Is adoption more about me or the child I will welcome into my family?
- What issues or challenges do I expect to encounter as I parent my children? How do I plan to deal with those issues and challenges?
- How will I respond if things don’t turn out as I have planned after I bring my child home?
- How will those around me, such as friends and family, react if things do not go as planned?
- Are there issues in my past such as unresolved grief, loss, abuse or trauma that I have not adequately dealt with? If so, how do I plan to address and deal with those issues?

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