



Anything

AS an adoptive dad I've come to the place that I can easily acknowledge that all of my kids are a little different in some way or another. Different than what, you ask? I'm not entirely sure, but I know that they are different.

As I listen to dads who don't share the adoption or foster experience, I realize how normal being an adoptive dad is. I can relate to almost everything they talk about because I've experienced it myself. But I know that there are more than a few things about my experience as an adoptive dad that these other dads can't relate to. I am generally OK with that. Most of the time I don't really think about my kids being different. It is just who they are, and a part of who we are. But every once in a while I notice it, and it can leave me feeling a bit misunderstood and even isolated, except among other adoptive dads.

"Typical" is the word that seems to have replaced the word "normal" in the world of adoption and foster care. This is probably for good reason. After all, children who have backgrounds involving trauma, abuse, abandonment and institutionalization aren't abnormal, but they often don't develop in the same way and at the same pace as a "typically developing" child. And as many adoptive and foster parents have discovered, neither do they generally respond to the "typical" parenting strategies. But that's an entirely different conversation.

In many ways my 6-year-old-son Carter is a typical 6-year-old boy. He loves to play sports, ride his scooter, fight with his brother, bother his sister, act silly, give a good hug and eat as much candy as he can. But in other ways he is anything but typical, at least if your reference point is other "typical" kids, whoever they

AUTHOR Michael Monroe and his son Carter.

But Typical

by Michael Monroe

are. Because of his history, Carter faces many challenges that most typical kids don't. Many of those challenges he has already overcome. Others he and we are still working on. But I can tell you that this atypical little boy has already learned a lot of valuable life lessons, and has taught me more than a few as well.

Carter is not typical for other reasons as well. It's all too easy to look at him and some of his lingering challenges as a glass that is half empty. But on those days when I slow down enough to take a step back and look at the entirety of the picture that is my son, I realize that his life is already, at the age of only 6, a glass that is full and overflowing.

Typical kids don't experience the series of hurdles that life's circumstances have thrown his way. Who am I kidding, most typical kids wouldn't survive his start in life. Typical kids don't endure the years of illnesses and surgeries and bounce back in record time, every time. Typical kids don't go to countless therapies, refrain from eating most of the foods that kids love, take all kinds of medications and supplements, and on most days without so much as even a whimper. Many typical kids don't have the same "can do" spirit and love for life.

Don't get me wrong, I know that some children face far greater and graver challenges than my son. Still I hope it doesn't come across as bragging when I say that he is one amazing and resilient kid.

Yet, I know that this kind of proud dad talk just doesn't seem to fit when I'm at the water cooler talking with dads who have typical kids. Their kids are soccer stars or geniuses, or so they are convinced. Imagine if I chimed in "Oh yeah? Well Carter scored a goal in his soccer game and his therapists say he is rock star at speech AND occupational therapy." See what I mean? I suspect I would be left standing there with my coffee as everyone suddenly looks at their blackberries and realize they are all late for a meeting.

Loving this atypical son of mine can be challenging and extremely humbling. More often than not, however, it reveals far more about my shortcomings and flaws than it does about his. For me to love him well I must learn to be anything but typical myself. No, I don't need to be some sort of superdad or become a child rearing expert. But neither can I put things into default mode or on cruise control. I need to constantly meet him where he is, even as he takes two steps

forward on some days and one step back on others. I need to remember and celebrate how far he has come. And I must always be willing to kindly and firmly take him by the hand and walk with him side-by-side in the direction that together we need to go.

I am realizing that I cannot have Carter and have a "typical" son. Far from being any sort of sacrifice, this reality is nothing but a blessing from God, for which I am forever thankful. As this atypical son of mine continues making me, day-by-day, into a rather atypical father, I am learning how much I still have to learn. And yet, I clearly see all that he has already taught me.

So maybe next time the guys start to brag about their kids I should just call it like it is. Or maybe not. I'm not sure they will understand why a 6-year-old boy from Guatemala is, in many ways, a hero to me. After all, heroes are supposed to be strong and courageous; they are supposed to inspire you and be larger than life. Exactly.

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