

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF ATTACHMENT

Surviving the Meltdowns of an Older Adopted Child

August 1, 2006 – Patricia Gillule

Mom, just leave me alone, I'm having a bad day.” So began our conversation at McDonald's, while Leah was fishing french-fries out of her Happy Meal box. “Don't sit by me. I want to be alone.”

We had just survived two hours' worth of mood swings and tears that were initially triggered by her having to go to the bathroom while we were driving to church. Her anxiety over “having to go” was heightened by my inability to help her with her physical need while speeding down a busy highway. After we finally were able to take care of the essentials, Leah alternated between being happy and grumpy. Try as she might, it was hard for her to shake off that sense that her needs weren't met by mom in a timely enough manner. This was out of the ordinary behavior for my normally spunky, smiley little girl.



After church, I thought that perhaps a trip to McDonald's for lunch would pull her out of her funk. Sometimes a change of scenery and a few french-fries can work wonders. Besides, we often do our best talking at mealtimes.

Six-year-old Leah, who had arrived from China just fourteen months before, was tough and resilient. She had weathered early abandonment, prematurity and malnutrition, and came out ahead. This latest feeling of abandonment was just another experience that she thought she would need to navigate on her own.

Not so.

What she said she *wanted* was her own space, but what she really *needed* was for me to be close to her, to send her the reassuring message that I was never going away. That although I'm not perfect and can't meet her needs one hundred percent of the time, I promise to try my very best and will meet them whenever I can. It's a subtle difference, these *wants versus needs* --and something so critical to the health and well-being of our kids who have had life-altering adjustments. At times, it seems like an oxymoron. The child wants space and so we draw closer to her instead.

Sometimes the rules *are* different for our adopted kids. Whether or not we like to admit it, their playing field was forever altered when they left their birth family. “Abandonment” has many levels of intensity, ranging from the infant for whom an adoption plan is lovingly arranged, to a child who is left in a questionable place under dangerous conditions. Still, even the very

youngest of infants has experienced the feeling of the new unfamiliar voices of adoptive parents, and felt the loss of that voice that comforted them in the womb. As adoptive parents, occasionally we need to level the playing field by coming infield when our child is begging us to go chase the fly ball.

Looking Beyond the Meltdown

It's a skill that is developed through intuition, education, and really trying to see life through the eyes of a child. Leah's overreaction to an uncomfortable car ride was sending me a big red-flagged message--one that would have been easy to miss if I had simply drawn the discipline line in the sand and not thought through the *reasons* for the behavior. It was also a repeat performance...but over time, each meltdown had grown less physically intense and had become more a battle waged with words and emotions. Slowly but surely, we were making progress.

So I didn't let Leah sit in that booth by herself at McDonald's. It would have been somewhat of a relief to slide over next to one of my other three kids and let her have her own space. After all, I could have used a break from the moodiness, and she was verbalizing her need to be alone so very well. Instead, I trusted my gut instinct and gave her a message that I hope she is someday able to internalize well enough to eliminate the meltdowns altogether.

“Honey, even when you are having a bad day, I *want* to be near you. That's what moms are for. I *want* to be with you to help you through the times when you are happy *and* the times when you are sad. I'm so sorry that I couldn't stop on the highway for you to use the bathroom. It was just too dangerous to do that. I'm sorry that you're still feeling sad now. But even with you all sad and grumpy, I'm glad that I can sit here and just be with you. This is where I *want* to be--with you.”

Big chocolate brown six-year-old eyes stare back at me. Eyes that had cried out for a mama for almost five years, now brimming with tears once again. This time, though, they are tears of healing and relief. “Why you want to be with me when I'm sad and grumpy?” comes the question in her almost-perfect English. “Because I love you, and nothing that you do or say can ever change the fact that I *want* to be with you. You will always be my daughter, and I will always want you in my life.” Silence as those eyes take in my answer.

“Leah, I will love you when you are mad, glad, sad, bad, or just plain goofy.”

Humor always gets her to smile.

She finally begins to warm up to me. Once again, she has weathered a storm and came out ahead. Only this time she took a leap of faith and trusted outside her own heart. Score: Attachment 1, Abandonment 0.

We're winning this game, Leah and I. It's a long one with many innings, and coaching her is sometimes challenging, but we're winning. We're attached to a wonderful team called Family. And Family is Forever.

Strategies to Deal with Major Meltdowns

The process of attachment and knowing when to draw near vs. moving away from a child is a difficult one. It's often challenging to know what's best--especially when a child does not give verbal feedback such as what I got from Leah. Here are some tips that may help you determine how to respond when your child seems to overreact to circumstances beyond his control:

1. Stay calm. This is hard to do, but realize that you may be dealing with underlying issues that may not immediately be apparent. You may have to think the situation through carefully to realize what's going on in your child's head. Sometimes using a very quiet voice (which is the polar opposite of what you most likely *want* to be doing) helps to prevent a meltdown from picking up steam.

2. Consider using "time in", and modify your technique for "time out". Again, our adopted children have been dealt a hand from a slightly different deck of cards. The traditional "Go to your room" may not always send the message that you hope to convey. "Time out" does not have to mean exclusion from other family members or separation from a parent. It can often be delivered to a child effectively by telling her that she is in "time out" and then by ignoring her negative behavior completely until it stops. The second that there is a break in the action, tell your child that she is making a good choice by stopping her behavior and turning things around. Praise her for getting back on track, and immediately bring her into your current activity by giving her "time in". This gives her the guidance and structure that she may need to make better choices, and allows her to practice a positive alternative that is incompatible with the negative behavior. It also communicates the message that you are not sending her away, and you are not leaving her. Powerful stuff.

There are two things critical to the success of time out and time in. First, explain the procedure to your child *before* it is needed and make sure he understands that it will help guide him in making good choices. Second, make every effort to praise and connect with your child throughout the day when he is doing what you want him to do. He needs to see the stark difference between "time out" and "time in"--and he won't see it if you don't provide an encouraging environment outside of the moments that you need to dish out discipline.

3. Put yourself in your child's shoes. Why might she be pushing you away? Could her behavior be connected to you not meeting a primary need? It is normal for a child to whine or complain if she is hungry, thirsty, tired, hurting, or in need of a bathroom--but if your child is hysterically crying and not stopping, something else might be coming into play. The sad reality is that for some of our adopted children, we don't know exactly what they experienced in the early part of their lives. Maybe she was ravishing hungry, or wet and afraid while waiting to be found. Perhaps he felt cold, frightened and alone, and hours went by before someone responded to his cries. Although these abandonment experiences occurred early in life, they may have left an indelible memory that your child does not consciously understand or process. Your child may not be able to articulate the reasons for the intensity of her feelings during a meltdown, but she may have an awareness of their overpowering nature. Abandonment feelings can run deep. She may need to have you nearby simply to make the world feel a little less confusing and a bit more secure. Pause and take a moment to absorb life from her perspective. Acknowledge and respect

her past. As parents, we tend to put the possibility of sad scenarios out of our minds, as it is painful to think of our dear children suffering. While we all hope that hardships didn't happen to our children, we owe it to our kids to be equipped to handle parenting just in case they did.

4. Look for the teachable moment. Although none of us want our kids to feel pain from abandonment, residuals from the past can be turned into valuable lessons. At one time or another, we have all been in situations where our primary needs were not met in a timely manner. Was it uncomfortable? Yes. But being adults, we had the background experiences to realize that in most cases, our situations were temporary. A rest stop is coming up soon, it's only an hour until dinner, and we'll catch up on sleep over the weekend. Time, however, runs a little differently through the eyes of a child, and minutes may as well be days from their limited perspectives. While you may need to stay close and guide your child through a meltdown, the benefits are worth the effort. In the end, you will be satisfying his primary need for care and love. In doing so, you are creating positive memories which, when delivered consistently, will help to override any negative experiences from your child's past.

5. Listen to your gut instinct. All children like to push buttons occasionally and test the limits imposed by adults. It's sometimes hard to distinguish between limit-testing behaviors and attachment-related meltdowns. Generally, a child who is simply challenging the limits may exhibit an unwanted behavior, but will not cry hysterically for an extended time when told to stop or when given a consequence for the behavior. The manipulative child is more likely to accept consequences or limits, or put up a verbal argument for his behavior. The child who is still weaving an attachment with a parent may dissolve into tears over what seems like no big deal, and may appear grief-stricken. He may take a long time to regain control of his emotions.

6. Understand and use the gift of time. Kids have their own timetable when it comes to de-escalating from a crisis. Try as we might, it's hard to resolve behavioral issues until a child has calmed enough to listen and respond. Think of attachment as a process, kind of like building a house in stages. First, you need to prepare the land and lay a solid foundation before a strong frame and walls can be built. Each time you successfully weather a meltdown, you are strengthening that foundation on which your child will grow. Most likely, the meltdown experience will repeat itself, but persevering through the hard times with your child will give her support and will strengthen the attachment relationship.

7. Address what the child *needs*, not what he says he *wants*. Move in, get close, and give him the message that you are with him through the good times and the bad. Send him the clear message that you love him unconditionally. You may not like his behavior, but you love him and you want to be with him no matter what he does. Tell him that you will help teach him to make good choices, and make it clear that you care about him and that you want what is best for him. Don't take for granted that your child knows this--tell him, and tell him often. Always, always, convey that you love him.

8. Lighten your load with humor. When you're speaking from your heart, the conversation gets heavy. It may be hard for your child--and you-- to bear. After you've conveyed your message and you feel that your child has understood it, consider adding a twist of humor to the conversation.

This will give your child an easy “out” from what might feel like a pretty intense emotional scenario.

9. Praise your child as she is transitioning back to her old sweet self. Find something positive--however little it may be--and comment on it. Helpful statements will guide your child back into the behavior that you'd like to see: “Oh, I like the way you're taking calm breaths now. You are doing a great job of getting yourself back under control.” or “I can tell that you are trying really hard to make a good choice now--you are sitting quietly. Good for you!”

10. Know that it is not uncommon for the child to attach to you like glue for the rest of the day once the meltdown gets resolved. Patience is key here. You have just given your child the message that you will not leave him, no matter what--and he is going to make darn sure you make good on your promise. Just continue with the mantra, “This, too, shall pass.”

11. Expect a repeat performance. Meltdowns are rarely a one shot deal. They should become less frequent and less intense with time. If they don't, it may be time to seek the guidance of a qualified professional counselor.

Take some time to reflect on meltdown situations once you've gone through them. Are *you* at peace with the way things went? Do you feel any closer to your child as a result of working through the crisis together? Does she seem more connected to you now? Over time, have you seen a decrease in the frequency or intensity of meltdowns? If so, you're doing well, and you're one step closer to completing that strong foundation that your child depends on to succeed.

Author Information:

Special education teacher Patricia Gillule is a parent to four kids, including daughters from Korea and China as well as two biological boys. She and her family reside in Smithboro, NY.