

Dancing With Ghosts:

Birthmother Loss and the Adopted Child

By Jean MacLeod

At some time in their young lives, every adopted child will realize the losses he or she has incurred to become a happy member of their present family. An internationally adopted child will have lost her country, her native language and her family heritage. Most painful of all for a child to comprehend: she will have lost her birthmother.

Some adopted children will manage to cope with their “adoption losses” equably, but some will need a parent’s help to sort out the pain they feel from the ultimate rejection, and from the aching sense of missing an unknown mother.

These children in pain over adoption, or birthmother loss are generally happy within their adoptive families, and love and appreciate their adoptive parents. What they are looking for is a way to process and integrate what was lost to them at an early age, a way to live with the lingering ghosts of an earlier life. These children need parents who can listen to the feelings that the child is expressing and who can provide support for the child’s life-long adoption experience.

How can a parent help a child work through the complex emotions associated with their pre-adoption childhood? Dr. Jane Liedtke, of *Our Chinese Daughters Foundation*, talks about the importance of giving an internationally adopted child a “cultural toolbox” to use and fall back on when dealing with issues of his or her birth country and sense of self. In addition to Dr. Liedtke’s cultural toolbox, parents need an “emotional toolbox” to help themselves to understand their child, and to enable them to guide the child to a strong, healthy self-awareness and a peaceable co-existence with their past.

What’s in an “emotional toolbox” for parents? What tools can parents use to help a child “stuck” in birthmother loss, adoption grief or anger? Psychologist Doris Landry instructs parents to use the “four fundamentals” as basic relationship tools to support an adopted child: education, understanding, awareness and acceptance. These four fundamental tools require a parent to understand that both birthparents and adoptive parents are *equally* important to an adopted child, and they oblige a parent to acknowledge and incorporate the extra layer of history an adopted child brings to a family. Helping a child become comfortable with their missing birthparents and loss issues means a parent must be comfortable with these issues, too.

Parents can begin to facilitate a family’s comfort level and healing process by utilizing the following “emotional tools” on a regular basis:

- 1) **empathy**-- realize that as a parent you can't "fix" the pain your child is experiencing with your love, but that with empathy you can validate your child’s feelings.
- 2) **Holding Time**-- provide a safe, secure loving "place" for a child to express his grief or anger, without him having to fear alienating, or hurting the feelings of the adoptive parent (refer to the book "*Holding Time*" by Dr. Martha Welch).

3) **permission**--give your child permission to love two mothers, one who gave her life and one who will take care of her and love her forever. You can also give your daughter permission to feel anger at the choices a birthparent made for her (abandonment may have been the birthmom's only choice, but even if a child understands this intellectually, it still hurts and the hurt needs to be expressed). Your child may even need permission to be angry with *you*—for not being there when she was a baby and needed you, or for “stealing” her away from her birthmother and country.

4) **Lifebook**-- use alternative materials to re-create an honestly surmised history for a child who has few details about his early life. A Lifebook can provide your child with a tangible piece of his pre-adoption story, and can contain the child’s own words and pictures (see the two excellent new books on creating a Lifebook by Cindy Probst and Beth O'Malley).

5) **symbols**-- include the birthmother in conversation with your child. Celebrate adoption day, your child's birthday and Mother's Day with an honoring ceremony the day before (“Mother's Day Eve”) that the child helps design: letter writing, picture drawing, cake-baking, moon-wishes--all dedicated to the birthmother.

6) **ownership**-- your daughter may be musical, graceful and very smart. She may have thick, luxurious hair, long fingers and bright white teeth. Tell your daughter that you attribute these things to her birthmother, and that her birthmother must have taken good care of your daughter while she was growing inside her. Obviously, your daughter’s birthmother must be a beautiful and intelligent woman, because your daughter is, too! (*note: you can always include the birthfather in these conversations, but it is usually apparent that it is the birthmother that figures most prominently in a child’s early thoughts about adoption).

7) **time**-- loss issues don't ever get cured and go away. But time and honest talking will help a child process loss, and teaching a child to use coping skills will help him to become a very centered, strong individual.

8) **professionals**-- most moms and dads did not grow up to know intrinsically how to "adoption-parent", and have few realistic models to fall back on. A therapist specializing in adoption issues can be a great resource to consult, especially if a parent is dealing with understandable, but unfamiliar issues.

Some of these emotional tools are difficult for parents to use, and some are even heartbreakingly painful. It’s easy to read about “having empathy” or “giving permission to love two mothers”, but so much harder to do in real life when it feels like your child’s loss issues are a side-ways rejection of you as their parent. Tool numbers 9 & 10: Don’t take it personally! Teach your children to dance with their ghosts, and to gain strength from taking charge of their pain and loss. There *is* room for two mothers: realize there is world-expanding potential in all-inclusive love and acceptance, and seize the unifying opportunity to go forward and grow as a family, hand-in-hand with your adopted child.