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The Healing Power of the Adoptive Family

By Rick Delaney, Ph.D.

Understanding “why” a child behaves as he does sometimes requires taking things a step further. Adoptive parents may need to look beyond the apparent reasons for a specific behavior problem to the larger issue of the child’s early role within his maltreating family. There are five common historic roles children have played and may cling to:

The super-compliant child: This child may be overly submissive and passive. The child avoids expressing any negative feelings and obeys “to a fault.” To help this child the adoptive family needs to reassure the child that he/she is safe. The parents may need to track and observe how often the child misses golden opportunities to voice frustration, wants, and disagreements. Encouraging the child to voice feelings, needs and opinions assertively may help.

The care-giving child: Frequently called a “parental child,” this youngster makes few demands of the adoptive parents and may attempt to take care of the parent or other children. The adoptive parent should be careful not to fall into a mode of punishing the child for doing “his job,” i.e. playing out his historic role in a family. Instead, find reasonable ways to channel the child’s care-giving tendencies in acceptable ways. Placing the child in charge of care-giving for a pet may help. Asking the child to assist the parent in certain tasks may give the child a sense of purpose.

The coercive child: This child makes it impossible to not pay attention to him/her. The child may clamor loudly for attention or may act so inappropriately that the adoptive parent can’t help but correct him/her. It’s important for parents to not fall into a negative attention trap. Instead, it may help to provide the child with ample positive attention before conduct problems force negative attention. Equipping the child with the language to directly ask for positive parental attention may forestall negative attention seeking.

The helpless child: This child may capture caregiver attention by exaggerated helplessness. This may amount to coercing parental attention through weakness or feigned illness. The child may respond to approaches which allow him, for a time, to be treated like a younger child. (con’t on pg 3)

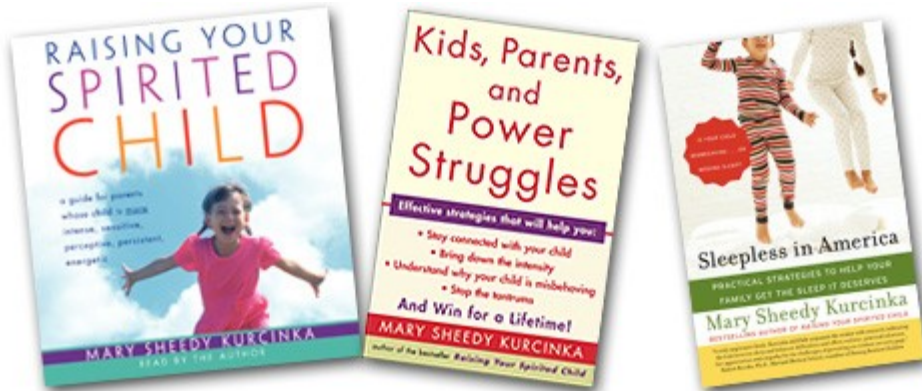
Community News and Events

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MARY SHEEDY KURCINKA

***Discovering Who Has Come to Live with You:
Discipline Strategies That Fit Each Child***

Monday, March 22, 2010, 6:30–8:30 pm
Glaser Center, 547 Mendocino Ave Santa Rosa
RSVP by calling Liz Jimenez 707/303-1509



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The disorganized child: This child may send quite confused signals to the adoptive family. He may desperately need, yet strongly fear, involvement with others. The adoptive parent should observe to see how much undiluted positive attention the child can handle without feeling anxious. The parent may have to mete out love and attention in small, low-key doses.

In a nutshell, good relationships in an adoptive family can repair early emotional damage. While psychotherapy can be helpful, the central, curative relationships of the youth should be with the adoptive parents, who may have the most positive, enduring impact in the child's life. It is the healing power of the adoptive family that can provide a protective milieu in which the child can grow, learn, and succeed. Helping their troubled adopted child often requires understanding the child's behavior problems and the underlying reasons for them. It may also require understanding what historic role he played to survive. It is important for adoptive parents to acknowledge what the child has been through in the past, all the while convincing him better times lie ahead. In the words of Yogi Berra, adoptive parents must convey the message that: "The future ain't what it used to be."

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PAS Coordinator Liz Jimenez, MSW can be reached at 707/303-1509

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