When It’s Not Going So Well . . .

All parents have dreams for their children and are capable of influencing the person that their child becomes. It can be devastating when the dreams that you have for your children cannot be fully realized and the circumstances are beyond your control. Parenting is not an easy job, but adopting a child often adds another level of challenges. Sometimes children who have been adopted have experienced trauma because of abuse and neglect, multiple placements, or have spent time in an institutionalized care setting.

The sum of those experiences can lead to challenges down the road that no parent could ever truly anticipate. If it feels like your world is being turned upside down, adoptive parents are certainly not the only ones who experience these feelings. But it can feel like there is more pressure on you and that you are held to higher expectations as an adoptive parent.

While you were going through the process of adopting, you had to prove yourself over and over again. First, that you were safe and capable to parent, and then that you and your family would be a good match for your child. Hopes were high and the anticipation of being approved for adoption and growing your family was exciting. When your child is finally in your home and part of your family, it’s such a relief to start to create normalcy for the family.

Families may spend months in the honeymoon period, during which it may feel as if the transition is progressing well. So, it can be surprising to be met with additional hurdles to overcome even several years later, especially when these challenges need to be met outside of your home.

What Can You Do?
Call early and often!

When you need help, reach out. When agency staff approved your home study, they didn’t expect you to have all the answers and be able to take care of anything that comes up without assistance. Reaching out for help early on will allow you and your child to take advantage of the most opportunities available to you. Take advantage of the Post Adoption Resource Center in your area. For a list of centers, visit our website.

If you are working with a therapist or another service provider and there doesn’t seem to be improvement, trust your instincts. Don’t be

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afraid to ask your therapist for a referral to another provider who has a different style or who uses different techniques.

Not every therapist will be able to connect in a meaningful way with every child and each family’s unique challenges. For more information about how to select a therapist, you may be interested in our tip sheets, *Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Youth in Care* and *Uncovering Myths about Therapy*.

**Post-Adoption Placements**

If it’s clear that your child needs to go to a post-adoption placement like a residential treatment center or a treatment foster home, you may feel like you haven’t succeeded. Dealing with that has its own challenges. You may have feelings of grief and loss while your child is away from your home. You may question your ability to parent or even feel guilty about your decision.

These are normal feelings to have. It does not mean that you aren’t a good and competent parent. Seeking support for yourself and the rest of the family can be helpful. Reaching out to other adoptive parents who have been in similar situations or even speaking to a counselor can allow you to see things from a different perspective.

Asking for and receiving help should not be viewed as a failure. Often all parties involved—you, the social worker, therapist, extended family, etc.—feel that they have let your child down. It seems as though someone could have been able to do something to prevent it. At a time when working together is critically important to ensure your child’s return to the family, it can be hard to face each other.

The following are things to remember when doing the hard work of determining when your child needs to leave for a period of time and making decisions while he or she is away:

- Analyze the facts.
- Be honest with one another.
- Reach out to anyone who may add a missing piece to the puzzle. (For example, your agency staff, religious or spiritual leaders, neighbors, and teachers.)

**Away From Home, But Still Part of the Family**

Sometimes children are best served in a post-adoptive placement, but you can still help them feel included in your family. For example, they might be feeling abandoned, but you can bring them a sense of hope by assuring them that you are committed.

You can do this by being involved in the placement and learning about your child in this environment and how to best intervene when tough behaviors become hard to manage. This post-adoptive placement is an opportunity for your child to receive more intensive treatment.

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and does not mean that your child will not return to your home. The majority of children who were adopted and who have spent time in post-adoptive placements do return to their families.

When Being Away from the Family Become Permanent

There are some instances when it becomes clear that the safest and healthiest decision for the whole family is for the child to permanently leave the home. This is an extremely hard decision for any family and the impacts are enormous. However, there are things that you can do to help your child thrive in his or her new placement.

- **Be informative.** Share any and all information on health history, likes and dislikes, triggers, most challenging behaviors, etc.
- **Build a bridge.** If possible, allow the child to visit the new placement and gradually increase the length of time and frequency of those visits.
- **Support the new placement.** Moving isn’t a punishment—it’s a change to get necessary help and keep everyone in the family safe.
- **Reach out to your agency staff.** Share with them what went wrong and what resources or support could have been helpful. Share the early signs that there were serious problems—this can help the agency better prepare staff to prepare families.
- **Consider your new role in your child’s life.** Could you be a respite provider? Are there other ways that you can support the new permanent placement?
- **Take care of yourself.** The circumstances leading up to this decision were undoubtedly stressful, as will be what comes next. Find support where you can.

When raising children, there are no guarantees that there won’t be a variety of challenges ranging from simple and easy to handle to more complex and complicated to tackle. Every child and parental experience is unique and comes with its own trials.

Adoptive parents tell us the following things can be useful to remember: be flexible, ask for help, take breaks, and find humor in the simple things in life. You will still be a wonderful parent.

### Resources

#### Books

- *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, by Arleta James
- *When Adoptions Fail*, by Kim Phagan-Hansel
- *Adoption & Disruption: Rate, Risks, and Responses*, by R. Barth & M. Berry
- *An Unlit Path: One Family’s Journey Toward the Light of Truth*, by D. L. Hannah

#### Other Resources

- “Displacement or Post-Adoption Placement: A Research Note” by Trudy Festingera and Penelope Maza
- “What to do When Your Adoption is Failing: A Parent’s Guide to Adoption Disruption & Dissolution” by Nancy Ashe