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# A Family for Every Child

So...what is adoption really like?

## The Truth About Adoption: One family's story

By now I'm sure you all have scoured the Internet, read every book you can get your hands on, and attended every webinar you have time for, trying to learn about the various challenges that you will face when you bring your adopted child home. You've spoken to veteran adoptive parents, your worker, and read your matching assistance how-to emails. So you are feeling really prepared and ready to take on anything!

Then, you get THE Call. You know, the "you've been selected as the adoptive parents for so and so" call. The one we all pray we get every night before we go to bed. The one that makes this 2+ year process worth it. You're ecstatic, and start moving forward with all the legalities associated with adoption. You do visits and phone calls with your future child, and everything is going well! You set a move-in date, and start counting down the days until your new family member arrives.

But what happens after your child moves in? Below, you will find the story of one adoptive mother on her experiences after she adopted two children from Ethiopia. As she says in the start of the story, the themes in her story can be echoed in all types of adoption.



## The Truth About Older Child Adoption

I get asked all the time: "What is adoption really like?" Well, sit down, because I'm going to walk you through the first year of adoption, with only a moderate amount of hyperbole. Of course, our story is not everyone's story—we adopted unrelated five- and seven-year-olds from Ethiopia, with no major health issues, after we already had three biological children. But whether you're adopting from foster care, from another country, adopting children with severe needs, or don't have other kids at home, some stages are universal.

### **PRE-STAGE: Waiting for Your Kiddo**

This stage bears virtually no resemblance to any phase that follows. This is the hungry, manic process of paperwork, court dates, and travel, as well as unforeseen interruptions and an obliterated "timeline."

Here is the upside: This is the stage at which you realize God can put a vicious fight in you for a kid who doesn't have your blood coursing through his veins. Those early doubts about loving a child without the instincts of biology are put to rest. You don't know this kid yet, but you love him in your heart, in your bones. You'll fight like hell to get to him.

### **STAGE 1: Honeymoon (the first 4 to 6 weeks)**

She is home. You can't believe it. It's been months or years since you started this process, and here she is, sitting at your dining room table. Look at her sitting there! Look at her eating eggs! Your bio kids are treating her like a pet and are more helpful than they will ever be again. People are dropping food off on your porch. This is Fake Life, and everyone is smiling.

Your new one seems compliant and easy-going, and, Dear Ones, this is because she is about to have the Most Epic Freak-Out of Her Life. For her, this is like the part of the sleepover when you just get there, and the games and toys are awesome. But then, all of a sudden, it's bedtime, and you realize: Wait a minute. This is not my bed. That is not my mom. This is not my space. Good feelings are gone.

### **STAGE 2: Spaz Out (4-6 weeks to 3-4 months)**

Who knows what the straw that breaks the camel's back will be—one more food he hates, one more conversation he can't decode, a moment of discipline—but something will happen, and your little one will finally lose it. Once the dam has broken, the flood will last for months.

There will be screaming, kicking, and full-out meltdowns. You may chase your beefy eight-

year-old into the middle of the street, where he ran, barefoot and screaming, throw him over your shoulder, and lug him back home. Then the two of you will hunker down for two hours, drenched in sweat, as you hold him tight and whisper love into his ears, and he will thrash and yell until he passes out. Your child is grieving. It is visceral. It is devastating.

You and your spouse are haunted, unshowered, unhinged. You stare into each other's eyes, each begging the other to fix this: What have we done? What are we going to do? Your biological children are huddled in the corner, begging grandparents to come and rescue them. You can't talk to anyone because everyone is still beaming at you, asking: "Is this just the happiest time of your life?" You scour adoption blogs and Yahoo groups, desperate to find one brave person to say how hard this is. You've ruined your life. You've ruined your kids' lives. Your marriage is doomed. Your adopted child hates you. You want to go back to that person pining away in the Pre-Stage and punch her in the liver.

### **STAGE 3: Triage (4 months to 8 months)**

Somewhere around the fourth or fifth month, you realize that the fits last less than 10 minutes and happen only every fourth day. This alone is reason to live. You're out of the weeds. Evidence of her preciousness, her real self, keeps peeking out. She is feeling a teeny bit safer, and is beginning to trust your love.

As for you, you're coming out of the fog. You start returning phone calls. You brave a Date Night. You look at your bio kids and say, "Oh, hi there. So how have you been the last seven months?" You color your two inches of gray and get a haircut. You step on the scale and realize you've either lost or gained 10 pounds from the stress. OK, gained. I'm just trying to give you hope.

### **STAGE 4: Rehab (8 months to 12 months)**

The meltdowns are over. Your new son is telling jokes in English. He is reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by himself. He is a soccer phenom. You start grooming him for the Olympics. (No, you don't.) (Yes, I do.)

You start dealing. You start a lifebook and research creative ways to honor his birthparents and birth country. You get serious about addressing his brooding and manipulations or whatever coping skills he's trotting out. You're no longer resorting to things like, "Um, I really like the way you buckle your seatbelt. Totally nail it," in order to praise him.

You remember how your social worker told you on your three-month visit, as she looked into your bloodshot eyes and you burst into tears, that attachment takes time...for everyone. Biology helps us love that screaming, non-sleeping baby madly, irrationally.

But in adoption, it takes everyone time to fall in love. And that's OK. So in those first few stages, you might feel like you are raising someone else's hysterical kid. You might be full of resentment, disappointment, and regret. Love may feel elusive, even impossible, for a while.

Normal, Dear Ones. So very normal. You are not a terrible person, nor is your new son or daughter a lemon. There is hope for everyone.

I've never forgotten what Melissa Fay Greene wrote about the first year of adoption: *Put Feelings on a back-burner. If you could express your feelings right now, you'd be saying things like, "Oh my God, I must have lost my mind to think that I can handle this...I'm way way way over my head. I'll never spend time with my spouse or friends again; my older children are going to waste away in profound neglect; my career is finished. I am completely and utterly trapped."*

You see? What's the point of expressing all that right now? Put Feelings in the deep freeze...Let your hands and words mother the new child, don't pause to look back, to reflect, or to experience emotions.

Here is the good news: Eventually, you can pull Feelings from the deep freeze, and you'll discover genuine love sneaking up on you for this kid. You'll find out: Oh! He's funny! She's sassy! He's good at science! She is passionate! I had no idea!

Is adoption easy? No, it is not. Is it simple? Nope. Complicated and long-term. Will bonding be immediate and seamless? Maybe, but probably not. Is adoption worth it? Yes! And anything worth fighting for is worth fighting through.

Jennifer Hatmaker, an author and speaker, is a mom to five through birth and adoption. She blogs at [jenhatmaker.com](http://jenhatmaker.com), from which this piece was adapted with permission.

[Source](#)

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## **You Scared Yet?**

Don't be. It's true, adoption is no picnic. From the start of the process to the day of placement and beyond, it can seem like a never-ending battle. You'll have your days of doubt, your days of wondering where you went wrong when you've done everything right. But the one thing you need to remember, is that you cannot give up on your child. They are testing you. They want you to give up on them; they expect it. They want you to send them to another home, where they can be sent to another one after that just like they have for most of their lives. But you need to prove them wrong and show them that you will love and care for them no matter what. It may not be easy, but when is loving someone easy? You

have to take the good days with the bad. Celebrate the good days, learn and grow stronger from the bad.

Parenting is never easy, and becoming a parent to someone else's child has to be the biggest challenge yet. Having a strong support network is key. Your support network should consist of your adoption worker, nearby family members, friends, and your community. If possible, keep in touch with the child's foster family-they are the ones who recently raised your child, and have dealt with all of the challenges you will inevitably face. Learning about how they handled certain situations and what methods they used will help you navigate the uncertainty that will abound in the first year of placement.

Finally, gathering as much information about your adopted child from the get-go will also help. It may not always be possible, but pressing the caseworker and foster family for as many details as they can give you about the child will help you prepare.

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## Share Your Story!

Have you adopted before? Share your story with other families seeking to adopt a child in the MAP Family Forum. You must be a member of our [Matching Assistance Program](#) in order to view and participate in the forum.

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