# Adoption and the Holidays

For most families and children, holidays are a time of joy and excitement. There are parties, gifts, and most importantly: time with family. However, not everyone feels the excitement and happiness this time of year, especially adopted children. Holidays can stir up memories of their past, which may have involved instability, trauma, a lack of presents, and no family to spend it with. Every year at this time, I have adoptive families tell me that they want a child placed with them before the holidays. While this is not possible sometimes from a logistical standpoint, they also don't factor in the trauma and negative feelings that the holidays can trigger for a child. While their heart is in the right place-they want a child to feel loved and have a family to celebrate with-it doesn't always work out in reality like they envisioned. As the child's parents, you need to understand where your child is coming from, what their past holidays were like, and be willing to be flexible with your own traditions and holiday plans.

## 'Tis the season to be...sad?

Children who were removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect may have negative memories associated with the holiday season. They may have experienced traumatic events this time of year, which may surface during the holidays and make the child feel anxious, defiant, and sad. Your child may also have low expectations for the holiday season, and will not get excited about the fun activities you have in store. Negative behaviors may increase, and more melt downs may occur. Visits or contact with biological family can exacerbate these feelings, especially if the child is still emotionally attached. Your child may also feel overstimulated with the decorations, the influx of family members at the house, and by the food on the table, causing more outbursts. If your child was recently placed in the home, trying to adjust to a new family can add to their stress.

This can all be very confusing to parents, who may have anticipated that their child would be excited and happy. Parents can end up feeling hurt or rejected by their child. Understanding the reasons behind your child's behaviors and where the disconnect is can help you and your family have a happier holiday season.

## Reducing holiday stress and anxiety

The following are some steps you can take to reduce the anxiety and stressors for your child that revolve around the holiday season:

**Understand where your child is coming from-** Figuring out the root of your child's pain and anxiety can help you understand why your child is feeling the way he/she is, and what you can do to remedy the situation. For example, your child may get upset hearing the old adage that Santa is watching, and if they don't behave they may not get presents and will get coal instead. This may stem from the fact that the child never received presents from their biological parents because they were told they were "bad". As the child's parent, assure them that they are not

"bad" and that Santa will leave them presents under the tree.

**Talk to your child about their feelings**- The holidays can bring up a mix of emotions: from joy and happiness, to sadness and grief. Talk to your child about how they are feeling, and why they feel that way. Acknowledge that this time of year can bring up a lot of feelings, and that its ok to share them. Children may also worry about their biological parents. Encourage your child to send positive thoughts to their other families-both biological and foster- by saying a prayer, writing a letter, lighting a candle, or sharing stories.

**Be flexible with your traditions**- Your family may have set traditions for the holidays, but don't expect your child to want to participate in all of them. Understand that they may have set their own traditions with their biological or foster parents, and work to incorporate some of them into your family. This is especially important if your child practices a different religion. Serving different foods, listening to different music, and allowing your child to practice some of their religious traditions are a great way to help your child feel like they are part of your family. Old traditions are good, but making new ones together as a family is even better.

**Be flexible with your holiday plans**- The holidays are often a time when all your extended family gets together. If your child has just been placed in your home, meeting all of the aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and close family friends can add to their stress. They are trying to get to know you and adjust to their new family, so adding more people to meet is simply overwhelming. For your child's first holiday with your family, consider skipping out on the huge relative get-together. Instead, just celebrate the holidays with your immediate family, and/or one or two close relatives like the grandparents. Plan on getting together with the rest of your extended family during a non-major and more relaxed holiday, like Memorial Day or Fourth of July.

**Ask your child how they want to celebrate**- Traditions aside, children may have other set visions of how a holiday is supposed to go. Talk with your child about a few things they may want to do. This could be driving around to see the neighborhood houses all lit up, going to church, baking a certain dessert, etc.

## Educating extended family

If you choose to introduce your adopted child to the rest of your extended family, be mindful of the potential accidental slip-ups and insensitive remarks that may occur. While you may understand that your child's behaviors are related to his/her past, your extended family may not. If your child is of another race or culture, this may bring up even more questions and potentially hurtful comments. As the child's parent, it is up to you to educate your extended family about your child's adoption. Obviously you don't have to share every detail, and you can make it clear that your child's full story is private and that he/she will share it when they are ready. The following are a few ways you can make connecting your adopted child with your extended family go a little smoother:

- Explain to your family that your child's behaviors and mannerisms are related to their past experiences with their biological family and foster family. You don't have to go into intimate detail, but just give them an overall idea of why your child may act the way he/she does.
- Educate your family about your child's culture and/or religion. Explain to them some of the traditions your child has introduced to your family, and why it is important to you to

incorporate them into your traditions.

- Educate your family about using adoption-friendly language, and to avoid expressions such as "real parents", "given up for adoption", "surrendered for adoption"
- Offer to provide your family with some books and other resources that they may check out to learn more about your child's past and their needs.
- Remember that YOU are the child's parent. While your family may have well-intentioned (and possibly unsolicited) advice about how you should raise your child, be firm in your choices. Politely thank them for their suggestions, and kindly let them know that your child's situation may be a little different than anything they've experienced, and you are working on doing what is best for your child.

## Resources

For more information and ideas on how to have a happier holiday season, check out the following articles, blog posts, and webinar. Please note that while we have not attended the webinar before, we want to give all our adoptive families support and opportunities to expand their knowledge, both before and after placement.

C.A.S.E. - The Holidays: An Opportunity for Healing by Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

C.A.S.E. - Holidays with Extended Family: An Opportunity for Connection by Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

C.A.S.E. - Ask Ellen: The Holidays: Challenges and Opportunities for Adoptive Families with Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

*Adoptive Families* - Holidays Can Bring Up Lots of Emotions by Lois Melina

*NY Times* blog - Adoption and the Holidays by Joshua Sparrow, M.D.

The Vaughn Firm Blog - Adopted Children and the Holidays. Tips for supporting your child.

Adoption Goddess blog - How to Survive the Holidays When Your Heart Is Breaking . A guide for parents who do not have children placed in their home.

Adoption Learning Partners webinar - Overwhelmed for the Holidays: An Adoptive Parent's Guide to Navigating the Holidays