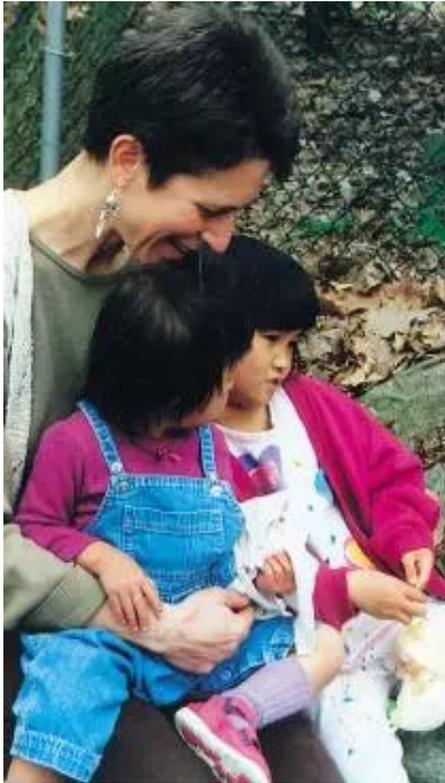


## BONDING

## "What We Wish We Had Known"

A mother and daughter share lessons they learned when adopting an older child.

by Judy Myerson and Sara Myerson



She was the one whose picture we kept going back to, the one whom we couldn't turn away from of the hundreds of waiting child pictures we studied for months. She looked out at us, unsmiling eyes shadowed by heavy bangs.

My son, Daniel, then 11, called her “the sad one” and said, “Take her, Mom, please.” I said, “But she’s older than we planned. She’ll be eight or nine by the time she comes home.” He replied, “Take her.” So we did.

**Adopting an older child**, one who comes “ready-made” with a distinct history and personality, is a decision that ultimately comes from the heart. The journey of adopting an older child sight-unseen is a leap of faith on the part of the family and of enormous courage on the part of the child. It is also a journey we entered into, like many well-meaning parents, somewhat naively.

Prior to Sara's adoption, we were a family with two parents and two children — 12-year-old Daniel (biological) and two-year-old Mia (adopted from China as an infant). Now, four years, one **marital dissolution** and a lot of turmoil, tenacity, reading, professional help, hard work, and heart-opening later, we are a family of five, with a different configuration.

Sara is my very own daughter and I am, as she recently told me, her “real, not pretend” mother. Of all my children, she is the one who has caused me to stop, look, and stretch myself the most. I would not take back any of our last four years; however, there are things that we both wish we had known before her adoption, things that might have made the journey easier.

### I needed help!

Not only did I need help, but there was nothing wrong with me because I did. Parents are often ashamed to let others know that they might be having trouble in a family arrangement that they wanted so badly.

I did not call my agency or social worker when I began to realize we were in “uproar.” As a clinical social worker with expertise in working with adolescents and eight years experience in a psychiatric hospital, I should have known what to do. Finally I sought help, and, thank

goodness, it wasn't too late.

## **I did not really have a chance to say yes.**

*When they told me there was a family from America who wanted to adopt me and asked if I wanted to be adopted, of course I said yes. When they gave me photos of my new house, family and friends, everything looked so nice. I felt special; everyone treated me differently and paid attention to me.*

*When my new family came, I was excited and scared. As soon as I met them, I left with them and was adopted. Other children had gotten to visit with their new family, then the family left and came back again the next day.*

*I thought that was going to happen to me too. But I never had a chance to go back, think, and talk to my friends about it. I never really got to know this family, to say no or yes to this adoption. I would have said yes, but I would have liked to have been able to choose.*

Children in placement and in orphanages are kids whom things happen to. They have been abandoned, neglected, and mistreated. They've been removed from families, sent off with new ones, placed in orphanages and group homes by adults, usually without explanation, preparation, or warning. They do not get to choose much of what happens to them, often growing up feeling powerless.

To Sara, her adoption was merely one more thing that happened to her. We should have insisted that Sara have several visits with us prior to adopting her. At the very least, we could and should have allowed Sara the opportunity to say yes (or possibly no!) to us.

## **Initial bonding with an older child is extremely important.**

Any child who was in an orphanage or foster care will have had major interruptions and disruptions with primary caregivers, and at worst, never had an adult with whom to bond.

We were lucky. Sara came to us with a memory of strong primary attachments to both her birth mother and birth father. She also came with the history of having been abandoned by those parents, with no explanation of why she had to go or why she was the one so chosen. In her four years at the orphanage, she did not find one adult who took care of more than her physical needs.

She was not about to trust that we would truly be there and remain. She had also perfected a number of survival skills — a defensive prickliness and pushing-away behaviors — that could make it hard for someone to want to bond with her.

When I watch Sara's adoption video now, several things jump out at me. The first is how often I allowed Sara to walk with, hold hands with, be given things, and be comforted by our guide, rather than me or her father. The second realization is how my energy was focused on

caring for two-year-old Mia, not Sara.

We should have been doing all the care-taking. I should have been holding Sara's hand, not a shopping bag. Mia could have been cared for by her brother. Those first moments, when Sara was most afraid and vulnerable, were golden opportunities to establish us as the ones she could turn to, and to establish me as her mom.

## **I wish Mom had known how much I needed her.**

*Even though I was nine and had taken care of myself, I wanted Mom to do things for me, like pick out my clothes. Instead of getting annoyed when I got mad and said, “No, you pick,” she should have understood that there were too many choices. I'd taken care of myself too much.*

School-age children can show a confusing mixture of over-independence and neediness. Their “age-inappropriate” requests can be signals of their emotional state. Responding to their emotional needs decreases their anxiety, makes them feel secure, and facilitates attachment.

The more opportunities, the better. This includes rocking, singing lullabies, drinking from a sippy cup and sometimes even bottle-feeding. Parents are often fearful that if they allow or encourage regressive behavior, their children will stay young forever. But I've found that providing children with what they need allows them to move through that place, not get stuck there.

## **I should have set clearer rules and expectations.**

In Sara's first few months with us, I did not address certain negative behaviors I knew came from her past experiences or current fears. For example, I did not establish clearly the idea of “mine” and “shared” property, and I allowed Sara not to share because I knew that she needed to have things that were hers alone. This exacerbated 12-year-old Daniel's feelings of anger, displacement, and territoriality.

Once bad behavior had been allowed (“You never said or did anything about that before!”), it was harder to address later. I was the bad guy and Sara the victim. Just clarifying rules and expectations for your child will help him meet those expectations and fit into your family structure. This will help increase your child's sense of security, and will keep you, the parent, from losing your mind.

## **I wish mom realized that I never had slept alone.**

*I was given a bed in a room all by myself. I had never slept in a bed without someone else in it, much less a room. I was used to the lights and sounds of the city. Now I was alone in a big quiet room in the dark. I kept all the lights on, but I was scared.*

Children from other countries often sleep with their parents and, as they become older, with their siblings. In many orphanages children sleep two to a bed, head to feet, in a room filled with children.

Children in placement seldom have a room to themselves. Sleeping near or with a parent creates a sense of safety and encourages trust and bonding. I believe that, of all the things that I did, allowing Sara to sleep in my bed brought about a major shift in her sense of security.

## **The hard times are the most important ones.**

Parenting a child with a history of loss, trauma, and neglect is not smooth sailing. Such children test and push limits to see if these parents will also send them away. Sara came with abandonment and trauma issues, and she acted out in ways that I did not like or initially understand.

She pushed buttons that I didn't know I had, and tapped feelings in me that I thought unthinkable. What helped me was realizing that when I experienced anger or helplessness, this was what Sara was feeling as well. This helped me to connect with her than rather than simply reacting to her behavior.

Attachment is about more than bonding. It takes place best when a parent stays with their child through the hard moments and remains there afterwards. For Sara, those moments were when she began to integrate her emotions, past experience, and present actions.

By helping her name, express and understand her feelings over time, she no longer feels as controlled by them or that they or she are “bad.” By coming back, talking, laughing, and sometimes apologizing when I have been angry, Sara has learned that neither her anger, nor mine, means she will ever be abandoned again.

Sara, at nine years old, came to us with a clear, strong sense of individuality. Our temperaments were not a natural “match,” and my own patience and objectivity were, I'm sure, hampered by illness and marital stress. Sara was and is gentle, loving, giving, and forgiving. She is bright, talented, creative, funny, and insightful.

Her strength, will and holding power have taught me what it means to stay in a relationship without sacrificing truth. Her way of letting feelings go once they have passed has been a lesson for me. Most of all, Sara has shown me my own capacity for commitment and love. While there are many things I wish I had known before Sara's adoption, the one thing I never could have possibly known is how much I could love her and hold her in my heart.

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