

Why Won't You Believe Me?: Splitting In The Adoptive Home

By Arleta James, PCC

Derrick is now 16. His parents, Ellen and Roger, adopted their two nieces, Jill and Joyce, when Derrick was 11 years old. Jill and Joyce are now also in their teens. Joyce has integrated into the family nicely. Jill, on the other hand, has been very hurt by the trauma she endured in her birth home. She struggles to accept and attach to her aunt and uncle's family. Actually, Jill, Ellen and Roger have engaged in conflict from the day Jill moved in.



Derrick stated,

"Family meals have always been important to my parents. No matter what, we sat down to dinner as a family. Then, along came Jill. Mom would get on her about eating with her mouth open and not using a fork. Dad would yell at Mom to stop picking on her. The next thing, Mom and Dad were fighting. Mom felt Dad didn't support her. Eventually, I would take my plate to my room and turn on my television. I'm not even sure they noticed that I was gone to my room most of the time. I just wish they would stop fighting."

Jill's behavior in this family has created the phenomenon referred to as *splitting*. Often, the child with a history of [complex trauma](#) (i.e., abuse, abandonment, institutionalization, etc.) creates conflict between her parents. She is kind and respectful to one parent, usually the father. The mother experiences a child who is callous and uncooperative. The father begins to blame the mother for the problems the family is having with the child. The mother is devastated by this lack of support on behalf of her spouse.

This pattern of family dynamics is a result of the child's ability to "split" adults. The adopted child feels very let down and hurt by her birthmother. She was supposed to protect her and keep her safe, and the birthmom did neither. These emotions are vented onto the mother who is present—the adoptive mother.

Splitting leads to extensive marital tension. The core of the marital strain is that one parent, usually the father, receives less of the adoptee's negative behavior than does the other, usually the mother. Because he does not see the behavior, one parent perceives the other to be the problem. Criticism then follows.

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"You are too hard on him."
"Why don't you lighten up?"
"If you would just leave her alone more, she'd be better."

This criticism is translated by the wife as, "You don't believe me. I have been your wife for many years. Since she came to live with us, you think I'm lying and that I can't parent." The damage to the marital relationship is obvious. Marital discord is like an oil spill. It spreads out, affecting everyone in its path—all the children!

Splitting is a difficult phenomenon for a couple and family to recover from. Sometimes, years pass before both parents are "on the same page"—the adoptee's behavior is considered a problem by both parents. However, some solutions that may lend to resolving splitting include:

- It is common to say to adoptive dads in therapy, "Was your wife a liar before you married her?" Odds are, the answer to this question is an emphatic "no." At this point, the dad reflects upon his wife and begins to ask himself, "Why am I so reluctant to believe my wife?" He begins to explore his rationale for engaging in splitting in the first place. Typically, the dad is struggling with his own grief regarding the fact that his son or daughter is not able to participate in life as fully as age-appropriate peers. Or, the dad expresses his fears about the financial impact a child with a history of trauma may have on the family. Or, the father is being avoidant as he feels such a loss of control—of his home, of his ability to have his wife respected in his home, of his capacity to manage his children's behaviors. Understanding the father's perspective helps bypass marital conflict. The marriage is spared years of stress and strain.
- Fathers need to be invited into services. They can't understand the problems if they aren't involved in the therapy, IEP meetings and so on. Fathers themselves report that professionals often treat them like second class parents. Thus, accepting news of their child's issues is made more difficult. Dads also convey that it is hard to obtain information from doctors, and often they find out about their child's difficulties after their wives have been informed.
- Adoptive mothers need to ask themselves how they view their husband. Do you allow the father to make his own mistakes thereby navigating his own relationships with his children? Do you allow the father to be a full parenting partner? I have worked many cases in which the adoptive mother will not allow the father time alone with the children. Certainly, in some instances, there was a true safety issue. However, often this is simply because the dad won't parent in the same manner as she. He will allow more cookies, later bedtime and so on. Yes, this is likely to happen. Mothers and fathers are to complement each other, rather than be cookie-cutter images. In his book, [Fatherhood: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child](#), Kyle Pruett explains the positive contributions to child development that occur from the differing parenting styles of men and women. Professionals can emphasize splitting during pre-adoptive education classes. Stressing splitting prior to the adoption may help many couples recognize it more quickly when it occurs in their home. This is important. Frequently, the child doesn't enter therapy until both parents agree for the need. Valuable time is lost obtaining essential services for the adoptee with a history of trauma.
- Professionals can reiterate the concept of splitting during home visits. Post-adoption social workers need to be on the alert for splitting as they conduct their required post-placement home visits. Repetition is often the key to helping new adoptive parents. Adoption brings with it more laundry, trips to the store, etc. Adoption also brings along familiarizing oneself with an entire body of knowledge related to trauma, therapy, Sensory Integration Disorder, special education services and so on. As professionals, we must remember how long it took us to gain our knowledge base. Restating key factors that lend to successful adoption outcomes should be a routine part of working with newly formed adoptive parents.
- Post-adoption, seek mental health services from an adoption-competent professional. This counselor, therapist, psychologist is well versed in the types of dynamics that occur when we import a traumatized child

into a healthy family system. A list of such professionals is located at www.attach.org. Even if this professionals means a drive or a flight, the trip will be worth it!

- [Anger and conflict only exacerbate the negative behavior of a child with a history of trauma](#). A home environment replete with arguments serves to drive the typical kids to their rooms or their friends' homes. No child benefits from tired, mad, stressed out, overwrought parents. Before you engage in another battle with your spouse, think about your children's needs.

In conclusion, splitting is not always contained to the adoptive home. It can occur between adoptive families and school professionals, extended family members, friends and so on.