

# *Oh, The Behaviors!: Developing "Value" Competency in Adoptive Families*

Frequently, adopted sons or daughters—adopted very young or older, internationally or domestically—develop or enter the adoptive family with a lengthy list of behavioral difficulties. Lying, stealing, aggression, destroying household objects and toys, bedroom floors cluttered with candy wrappers, hoarding food under mattresses or in a closet, name calling, profanity, repetitive incomplete homework assignments, lack of personal hygiene, bed wetting, smearing feces, hiding urine soaked clothing, and so on are some of the challenges that adoptive moms and dads must deal with—daily!



This article is about “value competency.” Value competency is a most important quality that adoptive parents must develop when their adoptee arrives with a history of trauma. “Value competency” is the ability to live—long-term—with children who, due to their traumatic histories, have developed values that are at discord with those of the adoptive family. Values drive behavior. So, a family member possessing a distinctly opposing set of values doesn’t always act in a manner preferable to moms, dads, brothers and sisters.

## ***“Why” Different Values?***

Overall, it might seem that nurture would lead to healing all past hurts experienced by any child. The adoptee would move in and “love would be enough.” Yet, providing nurture to a child with [complex trauma](#) goes beyond the typical ways of expressing love. Nurturing the adoptee who has experienced abuse, abandonment or neglect involves maintaining empathy and being tolerant in light of difficult and demanding behaviors and other trauma residue (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme and Cuddeback, 2006).

Changing behaviors takes time—more time than can be imagined pre-placement. In fact, it is no easier for children to change their habitual negative behavior than it is for adults. We have all had the experience of making New Year’s resolutions. We pledge to diet, to exercise, to stop smoking, to eat healthier, to spend more time with family and friends, to develop a hobby and the list goes on. Some are able to accomplish

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their resolution. Many are not. February arrives (and it has!) and the resolution has already gone by the wayside!

Actually, many of these children's behaviors were developed to survive the abuse and neglect they experienced. So, the child who suffered trauma believes that his behaviors kept him alive. Giving up the behaviors is thus perceived as giving up the very things that saved his life, the lives of his siblings or even his birth mother. For example,

*Yesenia and Tania resided with their birthmother and their three older birth brothers. Their birthmother would leave the children alone, sometimes for several days. The children became adept at rummaging through garbage cans in order to eat. The garbage also contained broken toys and tattered clothing. These items were treasures to these five children. Upon being adopted, Yesenia, age 6, continued to pick through the neighbors' trash. On the neighborhood's assigned garbage pick-up day, she would delight in going from home to home digging through each trash can. She would excitedly arrive back at her own home with pictures, small pieces of furniture, toys, clothes, cardboard boxes and so on. She thought these items were valuable contributions to her adoptive household.*

***Yesenia continued to believe that she needed to provide for the family. She felt her "value" was in what she could bring to the family.***



As another example,

*Toby's birthmother had serious mental health issues. When angry with her children, she withheld food. Toby reported that his birthmother was angry "a lot." When food was provided, there was little, and it was thrown on the floor. Toby and his brother had been forced to scavenge around on the floor to retrieve the food. Food was plentiful in his adoptive home. So abundant in fact, that Toby would eat until he vomited. He always made sure to awaken in the middle of the night to raid the pantry. On his way back to his bedroom, he carried as many snacks as he could.*

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***Toby was determined never to be hungry again. Toby's "value" was on food, rather than on trust that his adoptive mother and father could provide for him.***

Lastly,

*Kurtis was placed in foster care at birth as his birthmother had been incarcerated for theft and possession of narcotics. Kurtis was shuffled through five foster homes and then, at age 10, he moved to his adoptive family. It seemed that each time he moved few of his clothes and toys followed him. In fact, he usually reached his new destination with one garbage bag of items. Vivian, his adoptive mom, was shocked with Kurtis' never-ending carelessness. New mittens were lost. Jeans were riddled with doodling in magic marker. Brand new toys were broken within minutes. School books disappeared. Dishes shattered if he was asked to clear the table.*

***Objects had little meaning to Kurtis. There would be more at the next house. He had no ability to "value" the hard work that his adoptive mother had to put forth to ensure that Toby had nice clothes and the latest toy or electronic device.***

It is fairly easy to appreciate the development of various behaviors when we connect the behavior to its origin. However, living day-to-day with children who lie, steal, cheat, destroy property, swear, and so on is demanding, grueling and challenging for parents, brothers and sisters.

Pre-adoption, adoptive parents may expect that the child they are adopting will have similarities and dissimilarities from the other family members. However, the family often anticipates that the differences will be more in the areas of food preferences, clothing and hair style, or hobbies. We all have relationships in which these differences exist. How often at the mall do we see the men sitting outside of the store waiting for their wives? Women want to look through the sales racks and men often do not. Or, during a shopping trip, the family splits up. Mom and the daughters proceed to the shoe stores. Dad and the sons go directly to power tools. Most families have more than one television. Everyone gets to watch his or her favorite shows.

Adoption brings with it such disparities. However, adoption may also mean attempting to form a relationship, obtaining a "psychological fit," with a person who has a very different value system. Over time, the child's behavior can be perceived as a direct affront to the mother and father's good parenting and their efforts to help them become a successful human being. Parents begin to make statements such as,

"He steals instead of asking."

"He hoards when we provide more than enough to eat. For Pete's sake, we aren't going to run out of food. We aren't his birth family!"



"I work hard and he breaks everything he gets his hands on. Who does he think is going to replace this stuff? Money doesn't grow on trees!"

"I can't believe the things he says to me. I would have never talked to my parents that way!"

It is also not uncommon to hear,

"I love him, but I really don't like him anymore."

"There are days I simply don't want to live with him any longer."

Empathy has turned to anger. Tolerance has vanished as well. Feeling that all of their good intentions have been rejected, the parents begin to withdraw from the child. What is the point in giving when it does not seem that it is received? Guilt heaps higher—"What example is being set for our resident children?"

Part Two of this article offers some ways to re-group and proceed in a new direction. There are solutions for steering your family to more calm and peaceful interactions. Now, there's something we can all value!

## *Oh, The Behaviors! Developing "Value Competency" – Part Two*

Welcome to part two of my article about "value competency." As Part One explained, trauma causes children to develop values that are often at discord with those of the adoptive family. Thus, "value competency" is the ability to live—long-term—with children who, due to their traumatic histories, have a different set of values than the adoptive family. Values drive behavior. So, a family member possessing a distinctly opposing set of values doesn't always act in a manner preferable to moms, dads, brothers and sisters.



The end result of living with children whose values are very different is that parents become worn down. The home environment is often riddled with conflict. Statements and questions like, “Mom, he stole my cell phone again!” Or, “Why did you eat a whole bag of candy?” quickly escalate into loud, unpleasant arguments. The family atmosphere becomes heated, and the cool down period can be hours or days long! No family member benefits from this type of interaction.

So, following we offer some solutions to become a “value competent” parent. You can learn to live more peacefully while waiting for the value system of your adopted son or daughter to catch up to that of your other family members:

### ***“What” to Do to Develop “Value Competency:”***

***Ensure a Strong Male Presence or a Father and Child Relationship.*** Overall, fathers can influence their children’s values and success in many areas. For example, during the grade school years, the father’s influence is important for academic achievement. In adolescence, closeness to fathers is related to the postponement of sexual activity among adolescent daughters—this is critical for all daughters but even more essential for the daughter who experienced sexual abuse prior to her adoption. Adolescents’ attitudes about alcohol are more like those of their father. Fathers may be the primary role models for adolescents because drinking is more prevalent among males. Fathers may have a greater impact on their adolescents in areas where they are more involved than mothers or where they serve as the primary role models. Children are stronger in moral development and empathy—concern for others—when two parents or a presence of two parenting figures are psychologically present.

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***Make Time to Eat Dinner Together.*** Basketball practice, grocery shopping, play dates, therapy, laundry, attending special occasions, psychiatrist visits, home work and so on—where does the list end? With this whirlwind of appointments and after school participation in sports and clubs, a family activity that has been particularly compromised is family dinner. Yet, there is clear research that families who eat together—regularly—have kids that are *less* likely to smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders, consider suicide, and the *more* likely they are to do well in school, and they delay having sex. An array of positive values occurs when families are able to sit together at the table and enjoy a meal and time with each other.

***Apply Skills Learned at Work or Through Community Participation.*** As adults, we have been exposed to co-workers, fellow church parishioners, family members, etc., whose values are different from our own. We learn to navigate these relationships to maintain our job, participation on a committee, or a relationship with our brother-in-law. Reflect on the skills you use to manage in these situations. Can you apply any of these skills at home in your interactions with your troubled adoptee?

***Examine Expectations*** Keep in mind that developing values is a process—a long process! If you reflect on your own childhood, it is likely that honesty, integrity, benevolence, compassion, commitment, a work ethic, understanding the value of a dollar or an education, didn't fully occur until young adulthood. "Normal" moral development is initiated during the "terrible twos" and isn't complete until well into late adolescence. During adolescence, in particular, teenagers try on the values of their peers for a time. They want the latest clothes, hair style and music. In these years, parents are left wondering, "Who is this child?" However, as adolescents become young adults, the parental value system returns and these kids go on to be "just like their Mom or Dad." As a society, we are pushing kids to achieve more and more. Yet, Mother Nature still operates at the same pace she did when we were growing up. So, we must align with Mother Nature and keep our expectations realistic as to the depth and array of values any child possesses during the growing up years.

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**Involve the Child in Restitution.** Many traumatized children develop a pattern of saying "Sorry." This apology is accepted. Hours or days later, the negative behavior occurs again! "Sorry" really needs to be, "I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you?" We must have the child who has stolen from our purse, hit a sibling, or called a parent, brother or sister a name, make restitution for these acts. Children with a history of trauma don't always move into the family and simply internalize the values and morals of the family. We must help them. When they are "mean", they must then do something "nice." In this manner, they will finally learn that "I'm sorry" means, "I hurt your feelings and I won't do that again." A thief needs to pay for the stolen item or give something of equal value. For example,

*Mike is now 14-years-old He was adopted when he was 2-years-old. Even as a toddler, he entered bedrooms and took jewelry, CDs, loose change and so on. At present, he is adept at stealing from Linda, his mother. If she leaves her purse unattended for a moment, likely her cash will disappear. If she leaves her cell phone on a charger, it is gone. Most recently, her favorite necklace disappeared.*



*The weekend following the theft, Mike and Linda were at the mall. Mike wanted an expensive pair of jeans. Linda's response was, "I would like to buy you those jeans. However, today I am going to replace my necklace." Off she went to the jewelry department with Mike trailing behind.*

This is a perfect example of restitution! Overall, keep restitution short and simple. You want to make a point, yet not belabor it. No one learns when a point is carried on and on! You also want to make restitution easy on yourself. Hitting a sibling can result in folding that brother's laundry, making his bed or carrying his backpack to his bedroom. Referring to Mom as "stupid" may mean helping Mom in the kitchen for a meal. Again, acting "mean" needs to be followed by something "nice."

**Work to Maintain Empathy.** Empathy is the understanding of another person's feelings by remembering or being in a similar situation. Without empathy, we will see the child as only an ongoing array of problems and needs. We will lose sight of the person.

Empathy will also help you, as parents, through the hard times. When you are overwhelmed with the behavior, when you become frustrated at how hard you have to advocate for services, when you are angry and exhausted due to the child's transfer of emotions to you, when you wish you could have a break and there is no one available to provide respite, when your typically-developing children want to send her back, when you feel guilty for how you believe the brothers and sisters are being impacted, it is empathy that will help keep you going. It is saying to yourself, "She didn't ask to be beaten, raped, moved, abandoned, placed in an orphanage and separated from her siblings. Yes, she needs to learn to function in a manner acceptable to society. However, becoming whole is difficult when you missed the early pieces so necessary for healthy development."

This task will be emotionally painful. It is difficult to think about a child lying in an orphanage with no one to soothe her crying. It is heartbreaking to think about a child being sexually abused, bruised, hungry, cold, dirty and alone. Yet, at some point you must think about these things—for yourself, the children you already parent and the child you adopt.

If you are ready to experience some empathy right now, ponder the *powerful lyrics* to the song, "[The Eleventh Commandment](#)" written by Lisa Aschmann and Karen Taylor-Good, and recorded by Collin Raye.

***Make Use of Available Tools.*** Sandra McLeod Humphrey authored, "[If You had to Choose, What Would You Do?](#)" (school-age children)—and Barbara Lewis created, "[What Do You Stand For?](#)" (teens.) These great books present all kinds of real-life scenarios in which a moral decision is necessary. The discussion questions that follow each example offer the opportunity to develop a process by which to make good moral choices. After sharing your day over family dinner, move on to share a discussion about making sound, conscientious choices. All of your children will benefit from such conversations about creating a strong moral code of ethics!

***Utilize Therapeutic Intervention if Necessary.*** Trauma interrupts "normal" developmental processes. Attachment Therapy is designed to facilitate developmental growth. If you are just now seeking therapy for your adopted child, or you want a therapy that will help your child internalize a positive set of morals and values, visit the [Association for the Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children \(ATTACH\)](#) to locate an adoption and trauma-competent therapist today! You'll "value" the assistance of the highly trained professionals registered with ATTACH.