

One to Five: A Continuum of Healing the Adoptee

By Arleta James, PCC

Ronnie arrived for therapy in a good mood. The family had just been to see the Karate Kid at the movie theater. He was eager to talk about how much fun he had in watching the “bullies” in the movie being “overcome.” This offered the ideal opening to talk to Ronnie about the fact that he is considered the neighborhood bully. Instantly, when the focus of therapy shifted to Ronnie and his problems with anger, he became livid! Next, he became sarcastic! He rudely commented on his therapist’s personality, clothing, etc. and he also verbally attacked his Mom!



Ronnie went from 1 to 5 in a heartbeat! In a nutshell, this is the core of Ronnie’s problems. He reacts to almost every situation with an intense anger that is disproportionate to what is actually going on. He has no continuum! He blows up—on and off all day!

The actual source of the anger is his abandonment and subsequent 18-month orphanage residence. From these experiences, he interpreted that he is unlovable. He believes that he was somehow born “bad” or “defective” and this is why his birthmom chose to leave him at the hospital. Living in an orphanage only served to reinforce this negative self-perception. The care givers—two for 16 infants/toddlers—were too busy to give Ronnie much psychological stimulation. He wasn’t held or told what a beautiful baby he was often enough to gain any positive image of himself. Eight years in a very healthy adoptive family has done little to offset these experiences. This shame about sense of self is common among adoptees—domestic and international—arriving as infants or at older ages.

Day-to-day, this negative self-concept is triggered. For example, Ronnie goes to the neighbor’s home to ask if Cathie can come out and play. Cathie’s mother informs Ronnie that the family has other plans. Rather than accept this answer, Ronnie immediately believes that Cathie doesn’t like him, and doesn’t want to play

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

with him. He becomes furious! He insults Cathie's mother. Later that day, he sees Cathie and he states, "If you don't play with me, I'm going to hit you!" Scared, Cathie runs home! Likely, the next time Ronnie wants to play with Cathie, her family will have plans! Really, Ronnie has created a vicious cycle for himself. He has alienated the neighborhood parents and kids! Summer is passing and Ronnie is having little fun. Worse yet, he has validated his irrational thinking—"No one wants to play with me! I am 'bad' and 'unlikable.'" Therapy is helping Ronnie put his pre-adoptive experiences in perspective. Gradually, this will help Ronnie come to understand that the traumas he experienced had nothing to do with him. So, he will feel better about himself. In the meantime, we need to give Ronnie some other ideas.

Working with kids on 1-5 is one way to help them see life differently. In therapy, we use 5 sheets of regular printer paper. We draw the number 1 on one sheet of paper, 2 on a second sheet of paper, and so on to five. We lay them on the floor in order from 1 to 5. One equals "annoyed." Two equals "irritated." Three is "mad." Four is "angry" and five is "furious." In essence, we are giving Ronnie a continuum. We are giving him a new way to look at his anger. We are working verbally and via a means he can "see." Traumatized children need both "words" and "images" to heal.

Ronnie stands in front of the numbers. He is then asked,

"How angry should you be when Cathie can't come out and play?" He immediately moves to the number 5! He is instructed to move to the 2 instead. Then, he is provided an explanation as to why a 2 is a better response. He is reminded that while his family was at the movie today and therapy, the kids next door couldn't play with him. Sometimes, families do things together, and sometimes kids get to play with other kids. This is how life works in a family. It is "irritating" when friends can't play, but it is a "normal" part of life and nothing to get "furious" about! And, it has nothing to do with him.

"How angry should Cathie be when you threaten her?" Ronnie moved to the 1! In his mind, he is justified in his actions. Ronnie has a strong belief that intimidation is the way to solve a problem! This allowed for a conversation about other ways to solve this matter. In essence, Ronnie was informed that "bullying" is like "making toast in the refrigerator!" It is *never* the way to solve the problem! You will never have toast if you put your bread in the refrigerator, and you will never have friends if you threaten them! A few minutes are spent helping Ronnie see alternative solutions. He could ask Cathie's Mom or Cathie when she would be available to play. Or, his Mom could call Cathie's Mom and arrange a playtime.

"How angry should Mom and Dad be when you intimidate other children?" Again, this resulted in Ronnie moving to stand by 1. Mom was quick to stand up and move to 4. She stated, "I am happy you didn't actually hit Cathie, but in our family we don't threaten to harm others either." We then moved on to brainstorm appropriate restitution for Ronnie's actions. Ronnie learned that this behavior was very unacceptable in his family. He was offered the ongoing opportunity to understand that when he is intimidating or actually violent, his parents will have strong feelings about such behaviors and there will be a consequence. His actions affect his parents, and in return him adversely. It is an important lesson for Ronnie to comprehend that his behaviors affect others, and that his consequences are a result of his actions. He doesn't get disciplined because Mom and Dad are "mean" parents.

"How mad can you be about being abandoned?" Ronnie moved to the 5. He was validated that 5 was a good choice. It is infuriating to be rejected. It is okay to have strong feelings about the event and the birthmom. "Talking about those feelings" is a better way to deal with those emotions than is delivering insults, being sarcastic, making threats or being aggressive. One to five is a great way to help kids connect

to the strong feelings we can see they have. "Yes, you can be a 5 mad with your birthmom." "Yes, you can be a 5 mad that you lived in an orphanage." "However, there is no reason to be a 5 mad that a friend can't come play, or a toy gets broken, or that Mom didn't cook your favorite meal for dinner. These things are 1's, 2's and 3's."

The list of questions that can be covered by playing 1-5 is extensive. Certainly, readers can come up with many scenarios and queries unique to their own child's needs. As Ronnie's story helps us see, we can include problem solving, discipline, empathy, etc. We can also re-frame the past and offer kids ways to discern their pre-adoptive experiences from present situations.

Parents can make 1-5 a daily part of life. Consistent use of 1-5—over a period of time—will help traumatized adoptees internalize a continuum for a way to act and a way to deal with feelings. Posting the 1-5 in a conspicuous place is recommended. Again, children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and institutionalization need "visual" cues to make lasting changes.

One to five has many other applications as well. We often use 1-5 to help kids and parents prioritize which behaviors they must cease first, and which the family can live with temporarily. Together, the parents and all the children in the family weigh in on which behaviors warrant a 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. (We put the behaviors that cause safety issues at 4 and 5 (4 = hurting or stealing property and 5 = hurting people and animals.)) Then, we say to kids, "You must give up your 4's and 5's. You can keep your 1's, 2's, and 3's for a while. This helps each family member keep the priorities clear.

Give 1-5 a try today! Let us know how it works out!