

## **The Power of Unmet Expectations**

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**By Jayne Schooler**

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way!” That statement could be the title of a book written by almost anyone who has confronted unmet expectations. It may be a job experience or other events that didn’t turn out the way one had planned or hoped.

Every parent has expectations, hopes and dreams, whether their child joins the family by birth or adoption. It is a normal and natural part of parenthood. We expect our child to walk and talk at the right time. We expect our child to be more than ready for kindergarten and beyond. We dream of a child who excels in school, in sports, or the arts.

Occasionally, based on their child’s pictures or their own imagination, adoptive parents create an image of the child they hope to adopt. They enter the relationship with high expectations of performance and behavior for themselves and the child. When those expectations go unmet, parents may find it difficult to invest in the child.

However, what happens when the surprises are viewed as negative or undesirable? What if the child’s temperament and characteristics are a mismatch for the family? What if the child’s behavior or accomplishments don’t measure up? What if the child’s needs are beyond what was planned for? What happens then? Why is it important to raise the subject of unmet expectations?

Unmatched or unmet expectations about the child often create unyielding tension on

the newly formed family system. The ground underneath the adoption commitment begins to shift.

Parents who don't adjust their expectations of themselves, the child, their birth children, extended family and adoption agency, will find themselves cornered in a maze of frustration, without resources to find their way out. They may find themselves broad-sided by shattered assumptions.<sup>i</sup>

What happens when adoptive parents' expectations fall short—for the child, the relationships, and themselves? We don't want to blame the parents for struggling with their unmet expectations. Rather, our goal is to create awareness of potential pitfalls, even land mines, related to unmet expectations. We will look at three expectations often found, consciously or unconsciously, in the new adoptive family and we will offer proactive strategies to manage disappointment or disillusionment.

### **Three Expectations About Adoption:**

#### **(1) Our love will be enough.**

Tony and Krista walked out of the orientation meeting for adoptive parents with excitement. During the session, the pictures of children available for adoption were shared. One particular little girl, Autumn, age three, caught their eye. They read the brief description about her with great interest and fell in love with her on the spot. All the way home, they both said to each other, "I know all Autumn will need is our love, and we can do that." They called their caseworker in the morning, eager to begin their homestudy right away. Their caseworker, Jackie, responded with equal enthusiasm, but with a note of caution in her voice as well. "Let

me come over and share more of Autumn's story," she said. "There is much more for you to hear and understand. Yes, Autumn needs love, but she needs much more than that."

With wisdom and sensitivity, Jackie told them that when Autumn was thirteen months old, she had been found left alone in her crib in a very dirty apartment. It was evident that she had been alone for an extended period of time, perhaps as long as a day, maybe two. Empty spoiled milk bottles were scattered on the floor. Autumn entered her first of four foster homes. Her disruptive and erratic behavior as a toddler prevented any sense of attachment with her foster parents. She lasted just three or four months in each of her first three foster placements. Her most recent foster parents struggled with her behavior, but because of their experience, they refused to give up on her.

"You see," Jackie explained, "there is no question that Autumn needs love--and much of it. She will also need parents who truly understand what happened to her and how that will impact the relationship."

Many adoptive parents who fall in love with a picture of a child begin a fantasy journey of what life will be like. They believe that love will heal all wounds. With that belief, they fail to hear the child's story and aren't open to the potential of how it might affect their family.

**(2) We (I) will feel love and connection to this child quickly.**

"When we planned to adopt, I never questioned whether I would feel love for this child. There wasn't a child who couldn't be loved," said Katie. "However, what I felt totally surprised me. It was something I couldn't tell anyone, I felt so guilty about it. There were days that I dreaded getting up in the morning. I felt absolutely no connection to this child we brought home from Russia. I felt anger and remorse over bringing her into the family. I beat myself up daily

and told no one. Something had to be very wrong with me that I didn't feel any love for or connection to Sarah. I wish someone had told me that it might be that way."

Katie's experience is similar to a number of adoptive parents who have been broad-sided by how they feel about their child. They are caught by surprise at the lack of connection with their child and the negative emotions they feel. They wonder what is wrong with them.

Some of Jason and Bekah's friends told them they should feel the same way about their new daughter as they did their biological child. "Natalia had only been home for three months, and we didn't feel the same way," says Bekah. "We were concerned about mentioning that to anyone, so we didn't. It has been a full year now since our daughter came home from Kyrgyzstan. We can say now that the love and connection are there, but it didn't happen as we envisioned it. It took much more time."

**(3) I will never feel any regrets or ambivalence in adopting this child with a traumatic past.**

In the 1995 spring issue of *Roots and Wings* magazine, June Bond first coined the term "post-adoption depression syndrome"<sup>ii</sup> that is still applicable for some families today. Symptoms are very similar to post-partum depression and the causes can be many--from unmet expectations to a sense of loss of control of one's life.<sup>iii</sup>

*I dreaded getting up in the morning and facing the tasks of the day.  
The honeymoon period with Katie and Callie had dimmed. I was  
exhausted and overwhelmed and I gradually grew resentful of them.  
But I kept my fatigue, depression and anxieties hidden. I kept asking  
myself, "What have we done?" Of course, it wasn't the girls. I had*

*neglected to communicate my own needs. That was the wrong approach. I just didn't want to appear to be a failure.*

“It is important for adoptive parents to know that these feelings are normal and common,” explains adoption expert, Karen Foli. “Experts agree that stress, depression, ambivalence and anger are emotions they frequently see, and part of the assistance they offer to parents is to help them realize these feelings are normal.”<sup>iv</sup>

Expected and unexpected feelings, as well as the many joys and satisfactions of parenting, can occur in healthy adoptive families, just as they can occur in healthy biological families.

### **Readjusting Shattered Assumptions**

The question is not “*If* parents experience shattered assumptions, what will they do?” but rather “*When* parents experience shattered assumptions, what will they do?” Of course, the experience of unmet expectations will fall on a continuum from mild disappointments to severely shattered dreams. So when expectations encounter reality, what can parents do? The following are four ways to manage expectations:

1. Recognize that feeling ambivalent is a part of the attachment process.
2. Adjust your expectations of each other and other family members.
3. Keep communication open and honest as the responsibilities increase.
4. Work at keeping the family system open and flexible in responding to unmet expectations.

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<sup>i</sup> Jayne Schooler and Thomas Atwood, *The Whole Life Adoption Book* (Colorado Springs, CO:NavPress, 2008), *PAGE*. 80

<sup>ii</sup> K. Foli and J. Thompson, *The Post Adoption Blues: Overcoming the Unforeseen Challenges of Adoption*, (New York: Rodale Publishers, 2004), 197.

<sup>iii</sup> Foli and Thompson, 198.

<sup>iv</sup> Foli and Thompson, 20.