

# Open Page

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## *Openness as an attachment enhancer: Finding and strengthening your connection.*

by Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, CGE

**Attachment.** No other concept or word is uttered more when discussing parenting in general, but particularly parenting and adoption. Do you have a healthy “attachment”? Are you attached to your child, and even more importantly, is your child attached to you? What does the word actually mean? Deborah Gray, a renowned Northwestern attachment therapist and author of *Attaching in Adoption and Nurturing Adoptions*, reminds us that parent and child attachments are in essence – relationships – that will become the template for all future relationships and core beliefs. When an attachment is working well in infancy, a baby learns that he or she matters! And, that his or her needs will be met when they cry. Similar actions repeated for years over time ultimately act as a source of “insulation” for the child. Clearly, it is important, but definitions alone don’t necessarily bring conscious awareness to a process that is deeply instinctual and primitive. The great news - attachment is always capable of growing and deepening at ANY age!

### Introducing Dr. Gordon Neufeld

[Dr. Gordon Neufeld](#) has done a beautiful job explaining how children attach in very specific, concrete terms. He also offers some interesting insights into why openness in adoption is an attachment enhancer. As described in his bio, Dr. Neufeld is a clinical psychologist in Vancouver, BC and has spent much of his professional life creating coherent theories for understanding child development. He weaves together many pieces of the attachment puzzle through his presentation and synthesis of a lifetime of studies of classical psychology, attachment theory, natural science, developmental science, and neurobiology.

### The Neufeld Lens

In becoming familiar with Dr. Neufeld’s approach there are several striking key and salient points for our community that can be immediately beneficial.



*Every human has a deep need to feel close and connected —  
both physically and emotionally.*

**Parents are the answer.** Sounds simple doesn’t it? However, there are increasing numbers of all parents (by birth or adoption) who believe that an expert knows better than they. When confronted with difficulties, they believe there must be some other answer to the issue at hand other than one they intuitively reach. Yes, there are times when professional supports are absolutely required, but when parents seek to deeply understand and meet the needs of their child so much more is possible. OA&FS adoptive parents understand the need for an open and honoring attitude towards the birth family. We salute them for that. It’s equally important for adoptive parents to feel comfortable with, and confident in, their role as the child’s parent and for the child to receive and accept that care. When parents fully claim that role, the child begins to feel completely taken care of and secure. Stepping into the role of parent fully doesn’t diminish the birth

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parent's importance or value. In fact, what the birth parent wants, and what the child needs, is for the adoptive parents to form a generous, whole-hearted attachment to the child.

**The provision must be greater than the pursuit.** Dr. Neufeld, and attachment researchers, have long talked about how attachment behavior is "the pursuit of proximity" referring to every human's deep need to feel close and connected – emotionally and physically. This instinct to maintain proximity is what renders parents able to take care of their children – it makes kids want to stay close, to explore and check back as the test themselves, and ultimately to launch knowing they have the safe nest to return to when needed. A major task for ALL parents is to give their kids more than what they are asking for emotionally. This allows for satiation. Dr. Neufeld asserts that when you meet your child's attachment needs your child can "rest," and then tend to the really important business of growing up. This is precisely why children with poor or challenged attachments have so many troubles. Their brains don't have any space to focus on anything else other than getting those unmet needs met or defending themselves against the bitter disappointment of not getting those needs met. A concrete example of providing more than what is



*In cultivating attachment, parents pave the way for healthy development.*

being pursued might be the parent who gets home from work and is preoccupied with the tasks and chores to prepare for the following day. That child may cue the parent in some way if they aren't getting what they need – cries, tantrums, climbing, clinging, or getting particularly demanding if on the phone. "Providing" after such an interaction might look like the parent noting and offering even more. "Let's read three books now instead of just one." Beaming, that child might soon be snuggled in bed, and literally and figuratively "resting" on mom or dad's shoulder, with body relaxed, and offering hugs happily.

**Attachment is like a magnet.** This concept is critical for those involved in adoptions. Imagine a large magnet and the energy surrounding it. Where there is attraction, there is also repulsion. Much like a magnet, kids can only be "pulled" in one direction at a

time. This magnetism explains why a child can be perfectly content with one parent all day and suddenly tell that parent to get lost when the other arrives. It explains why children post-divorce struggle so much as they transition from one parent to the other. Or why day care drop off can be so difficult. Young children can't hold on to two attachments at once. And especially interesting for the adoption community, it explains why adopted people can sometimes feel so utterly divided in their loyalties. With this magnet analogy, Dr. Neufeld daylights why it seems children with a culture of openness in their adoptions are able to form deeper attachments with their adoptive families. These kids don't have to choose. Openness in adoption sends a message that **both** families are important; you can love your adoptive family **and** love your birth family. When birth and adoptive families acknowledge the importance of one another, they are literally on "the same side of the magnet".

## How Children Attach: An Introduction to the Six Stages of Development

One should take note that many theories of attachment focus on the needs and cycles of care in early childhood. But where do you go once your child is three? How can you keep attachment in mind throughout your child's life? Dr. Neufeld's approach is sequential in nature, can begin at any age and is applicable to all relationships - with partners, spouses, your parents, and of course with your child.

In explaining this process more concretely, we are hopeful that adoptive families can become more confident in the connections they are always building with their children. Children want nothing more than to feel like their parents are their providers, and that they are loved by the many people in their lives. Attachment is truly an evolving process and the responsibility and the capacity for building a deep, lasting, and insulating "attachment" resides with the adoptive parent. In cultivating deep attachments, parents literally pave the way for healthy development. Included in each stage is a quote from Dr. Neufeld illustrating the evolution of this process and how deepening attachments allows for growth.

### Through the Senses

*"When your immediate needs are met in terms of physicality, you can venture out more securely."*

Attaching through the senses is the most primitive way of attaching and likely conjures up the many images people have when caring for babies - holding them, rocking them, gazing at them, exchanging coos, expressing delight at their every noise and development. A child needs "to sense" the person they are attaching to - through smell, sight, touch, and sound. Holding, wearing and sleeping with your baby when possible are all great tools. Attachment, when working well, at this stage looks like a beautiful and reciprocal dance between parent and child. Open adoption participants can honor this stage through attentive and gentle transitions between families - through a very "hearty welcoming phase" as our friend and writer Jim Gritter likes to say. Children should be savored during this period, and introduced and transitioned from birth family to adoptive family as slowly and thoughtfully as possible, with attention to replicating familiar sounds and smells.

# Adoption stories: Talking with your child about their adoption.

by Jan Jamieson, BA

Some adoptive and birth parents find conversations about adoption daunting. Even with openness, regular visits, and pictures hanging on the wall of one another, some families somehow miss starting these conversations. Immediately after an adoption, parents are immersed in diapers and feedings, parenting groups and parenting books as well as sleepless nights with fussy babies. Then one day they suddenly realize how much time has elapsed, how old their child is and at that point, the “adoption conversation” seems more challenging. Here is a simple guide to get you going no matter where you are in your process.

## Starting the Conversation

In the best case scenario, conversations with a child about his/her adoption begin the day they are welcomed into their adoptive family. We recommend that adoptive parents tell their child the story of their adoption from the very beginning, not with the expectation that the newborn/infant will understand the story, but that the adoptive parents will become accustomed to hearing the words. By telling the story early and often, the more comfortable and relaxed the adoptive parents will feel. Here’s an example:

“Today was such a huge day for all of us: you, your birthparents Sally and Joe, your birth grandparents and for us. You have so many people around you that love you and many of them were at your entrustment ceremony today. I can imagine that you will have lots of questions for us in the future and you can always talk with us about anything. Sally and Joe are so important to us. We love them.”

## Continuing the Conversation as Your Child Grows and Develops

How does the conversation continue over the years? Bringing up adoption in daily conversation is much easier for a child to digest than sitting the child down for “the big talk.” As the child hears their story and begins to understand the significance of the roles of his/her birthparents, they will see that the door has been opened for further discussion. This will enable them to ask questions, and as they grow they will feel like they have always known that they were adopted.

**The importance of photos and lifebooks.** Infants love to look at faces. Making small photo albums early on to show the child as they listen to their story can be helpful. Adding to these as they grow and revisiting them often is a great way to illustrate the child’s evolving story over time. (See [Beth O’Malley’s website](http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com) [www.adoptionlifebooks.com](http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com) for free articles, recommendations, suggestions, and tips.) Adoptive parents can elaborate on the story as they narrate it, “Shannon was so tired that day after you were born but so excited to finally see you!” Or “I wonder if your birthmother Nicole ever had any cravings when you were in her tummy/uterus. Maybe she craved strawberries and that’s why you love them so much!?” Or “It was so wonderful that all of us could be there when you were born!” It is important to ensure that all of the details that are included are ones that the adoptive parents know to be true.

**Validating similar characteristics, talents and interests.** “It’s amazing how you and your birthfather John have the same curly hair! I bet you inherited that from him. I wonder how John felt about his curly hair when he was growing up. Should we ask him that the next time we see/call him?”

**Making the most out of holidays.** “I always think about Joanne on Mother’s Day, would you like to make her a card or give her a call?” or “I love Thanksgiving because it is the perfect time to think about people and things we are thankful for, and we are so thankful for you and your birth family?”



*Show your child their evolving story by adding to photo books as they grow.*

**Reading adoption-related children’s books.** Another way adoptive parents can open up a conversation adoption is to read adoption-related children’s books to their child. They can start a conversation by asking their child how they feel about various themes in the book. Similarities and differences to their story can be discussed. One adoptive mother told me that her son’s birth grandmother sent her several children’s books that used to be the birthfather’s favorites When he was growing up. What a great connection to share with a child! [OA&FS has a list of children’s books](#) that can be found on our website. A number of other resources are listed at the end of this article.

## Welcoming the Conversation

When the child asks questions, adoptive parents can answer them honestly and simply. Questions will likely be asked more than once as the child matures and develops. Over time, they will gain a more complex understanding of their story as they are provided with more in-depth information, some of which may be difficult to share or hear. A three-year-old is not ready to hear or process all of the details, so starting with a simplified and honest conversation to build on over time is a great approach. Layering helps to meet children where they are as they enter new developmental phases.

## Answer with Delight

"I'm so glad you asked me that/brought that up!" "You can always come to me with questions." Being open and approachable to your child sends a message that the topic of his/her adoption story is



*Talk with your child about their origins honestly and simply.*

nothing to be ashamed about or avoided. Being sensitive to how adoption discussions are being received by the child is also important, and reading their responses can help guide the adoptive parent as they decide whether to continue a conversation or to shelve a topic for a later discussion. Even if they have little to no contact with the child's birthparents, the spirit of open adoption can still be present. Adoptive parents can let the child know that they think about his/her birthparents often. Children can create a birthparent box for pictures, letters or drawings that they want to share with their birthparent(s) the next time they see them.

## Include Birthparents in the Conversation

If possible adoptive parents can reach out to the child's birthparents as their story is shared. Make it a joint effort. Adoptive parents can talk with the birthparent(s) about the timing of sharing sensitive details. This is the birthparents' story too, so it's important to demonstrate respect and empathy for their experience.

## Reach Out to OA&FS and the Adoption Community

One of my favorite aspects of working with OA&FS is re-connecting with families, birth and adoptive, over time. Please feel free to connect with any of the agency counselors if you are interested in discussing this topic further.

## Create a Culture of Openness with these Four Tenets

Open adoption relationships can vary greatly. Regardless of the level of contact, adoptive parents can cultivate a culture of openness within their family that honors the birth family and the child's adoption story with these four tenets.

- 1 All parties benefit from an ongoing relationship.**
  - Reach out to birthparents even if they don't respond.
  - Reach out to extended birth family.
  - Birthparents may not be totally reciprocal – adoptive parents may have to take more of the lead.
  - Create traditions around birthdays, holidays or other mutually important times.
  - Send a card/gift/acknowledgment on Mother's/Father's Day, and other special occasions. (Involve the child in this process).
  - As the child grows encourage them to call, write and email directly, as you would for other relatives.
- 2 The child witnesses the adoptive and birth parents as they honor and respect the value each hold in the others' life.**
  - Display pictures of birthparents/birthfamily.
  - Honor absent birthparents with rituals, traditions, letters and art. (Items made by a child for birthparents can be set aside if birthparents are not present.)
  - Be present for important events in birthparents' life, (weddings, graduations, difficult times, etc.)
  - Comment on similarities between child and birthfamily such as physical traits, talents, interests.
  - Refer to birthparents frequently and positively in conversation.
  - Keep the best interests of your child at heart with what you say and do in regard to their birthparents.
- 3 The child grows up in an atmosphere in which their adoption is discussed openly, honestly and naturally.**
  - Talk about birthfamily/adoption around extended family and friends.
  - Invite the birthparents into your circle where they are welcomed and known to your friends and family.
  - Be a good historian. Document the times spent with birthparents.
  - Create a life book.
- 4 The birth and adoptive families actively access an open adoption community.**
  - Join an adoption play group. Building relationships with other adopted children normalizes the adoption experience.
  - Join formal and informal adoptive parent groups.
  - Attend workshops.
  - Read adoption literature. ■

# Make lasting connections with other adoptive families through groups.

by Courtney Moscariello, MSW

The seminar, Waiting Families groups, annual picnics and holiday parties all provide opportunities to connect with other adoptive families in a more formal setting. We love helping our adoptive families get to know one another and have seen first hand how valuable these relationships can be in the long run. We've noticed that most times however, and it's the self-organized groups that seem to produce the deepest and most lasting supportive relationships.

Here's a fresh view of self-organized groups, with insights on why they're so helpful and tips on how to start your own.



*"I know there is strength in the differences between us. I know there is comfort, where we overlap."*

— Ani DiFranco

## New Friends?

Most of our adoptive parents begin this process with an already rich and supportive community of friends and family, and aren't exactly looking for "new friends," beyond the friendship they hope to cultivate with their child's birth family of course.

There are a few key differences though, between your natural community of friends and the ones you make through the adoption world. Your friends unfamiliar with adoption don't share that bond of experiencing the vulnerabilities of adoption, the amazing moments and challenging times of birthparent relationships, or the small ways that being a family through adoption can feel different in the larger world. They may be empathetic, respectful, and understanding, but sometimes it's just not the same.

Christa Richardson, an adoptive parent, organized a group of OA&FS adoptive parents living in the Olympia area while awaiting her first adoption in 2006. Initially the group met monthly, and though the regular meetings later fell off over the years as people continued adding to their families, Christa still has some "lifelong"

friendships originating from that group. "Having the common experience of open adoption was key in the beginning, but we also have similar values and parenting styles," which she says helped sustain the friendships over time. For Christa, the relationships with other adoptive families are "invaluable." She appreciates "having close friends I can have real conversations with about my kids' birth families, without weird looks or judgment . . . They all get it!"

## A 'Support' Group?

The idea of a 'support group' can bring visions of chairs in a circle, and people sharing vulnerable stories awkwardly, but in reality whether "support" is in the name or not, most of these groups develop organically around the needs and interests of those who come and have a very informal feel.

Bill Soderberg, a parent of two children adopted through OA&FS, has been involved with the LGBT Adoptive Family group for over six years, and has helped coordinate the group during the last three years. The group is open to anyone working with OA&FS, whether they've

adopted already or not,

though most of the regular attendees are already parents.

The group gathers every other month on a Sunday afternoon. People bring snacks, they rotate between each other's houses, and there's usually an activity for the kids, like coloring, though the children play together and devise their own fun too. The focus is on hanging out and chatting. There are no pre-determined topics so people just discuss what they want. Last month, the conversation naturally turned toward kindergarten choices, experiences with teachers and same-sex couples, and whatever else came up organically.

Bill appreciates that it's a great resource for general parenting support, as well as for the open adoption relationships. Bill says it's been "helpful to talk to people who've been in that similar situation, hearing success stories and things that worked for them." To him, the wisdom and advice people give are all the more cherished and



OA&FS adoptive parents Dave (left) and Bill with son Zachary and daughter Gabriella.

useful due to the similar experiences and values of the group with regard to openness in adoption. So how do you decide whether joining a group is right for you? Bill encourages you to check it out if you're at all curious, "you never know, it might be a really good fit."

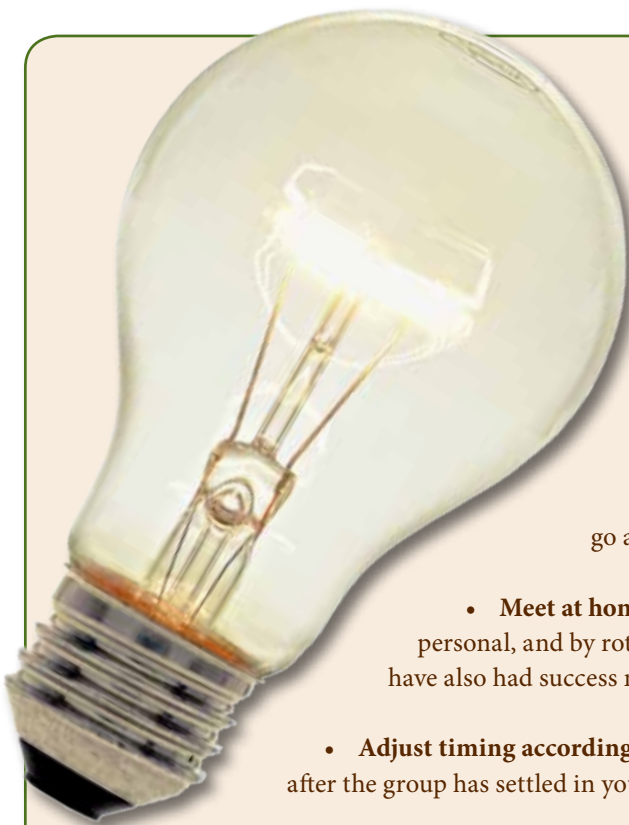
### For the Kids!

At the root of all our adoption-related thoughts and ideas, a good place to anchor ourselves is in the most fundamental question: What's best for the child? Bill Soderberg and the families who gather for the LGBT group know how powerful it is for their children to have a group of peers living in families like theirs. At group meetings kids see their parents liking and supporting one another, while also forming their own friendships with the other children. As they get older, the hope is that the children will be able to support each other and relate to one another as well. Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher, in their book, *Talking with Young Children about Adoption*, discuss adopted children benefitting from these relationships as they provide "not only a feeling of belonging but the clarifying understanding that prejudice and bad treatment are not an individual and private matter but a social issue." Interestingly, adoption professionals have observed that many of the same adoptive parents who are least interested in connecting to parenting groups early on are the same group most likely to look for help and support as their children reach adolescence, (Irwin Johnston, 2008). Let this article serve as a gentle reminder that no matter where you are in your adoption, connecting



OA&FS adoptive parents De (left) and Christa with sons Quincy and Murphy.

with other adoptive families can be helpful, and provides a deeper reservoir of wisdom, understanding, and new ideas from which to dip into when challenges arise. ■



## Get inspired! Start your own group with these simple suggestions.

- **Get a partner.** Though the premise of the meetings is simple, the scheduling and coordination can feel like a lot to take on as one person.
- **Pre-plan for the year if you can.** Schedules get busy, and somehow when an email goes out asking who wants to host next week, volunteers are not fighting for the honor. By pre-planning the calendar and who will host each time, (if you're meeting at homes), everyone knows far in advance where to go and when they're preparing to host.
- **Meet at homes if possible.** The LGBT group has found meeting at people's houses more personal, and by rotating the homes it can give more shared ownership of the group. Other groups have also had success meeting at public libraries and parks.
- **Adjust timing accordingly.** If monthly meetings are feeling like too much, try every other month. Maybe after the group has settled in you'll try meetings near holidays instead, or when events come up.
- **Think about the goal and who to invite.** If the invitation net is cast wide, there may be many different values, parenting styles, etc. If the goal is to have deep, lasting friendships with fewer people, perhaps consider each invitation more deeply first. Think about what you want to have in common with the others, and whether or not you want everyone to have that in common, or if diversity in that area is the goal. ■

# *New affinity group gives teens a place to connect and relate with each other.*

by Katie Woodward, LCSW

To have affinity with someone is to have rapport, a sense of harmony, a feeling of closeness or a shared understanding. At the end of 2013, Nathan Faust, a 17-year-old OA&FS adoptee, contacted the agency with the hopes of starting an Affinity Group for OA&FS teens. He wasn't seeking a place for group therapy, instead, he wanted to create a fun, relaxed environment for open adoptees to get to know one another with the understanding that they all share something unique and special.

buttons, but as each person shared pieces of their adoption story, there was a sense of respect, interest and support.

When asked about the benefits of an Affinity Group, 15-year-old attendee Fiona McInnis said, "I think it's important because not a lot of people are adopted, and most that are aren't [in an] open adoption ... so it can be hard to connect and relate. Sometimes people don't understand." The Affinity Group offers a place to get to know people who do understand. They understand what it's like to have a birth family in their life. They get it when others talk about going to a movie with their birth mom or rooting for



*OA&FS teen affinity group members, (left to right): Alison, Blake, Nathan, Fiona and Zoe.*

It turns out, there were plenty of teens seeking this same sense of connection. The agency hosted the first Affinity Group in January and five courageous, spunky, intelligent, thoughtful teens joined. Most had never met and a couple had played together only as small children, yet there was a familiarity that filled the room.

Blake Peebles, who attended the group, agreed. "Most of the time when you meet new people, you have to start from the ground up, but with this group I was able to immediately connect and skip to the fun part of meeting people." It definitely wasn't group therapy, with talk of music, theater, sports and belly

the football team where their birth dad lives. In talking about her relationship with her birth mom, Fiona shared, "the first time my birth mom came to my choir concert was one of my favorite memories because it made me so happy to see her. It gave me the courage to sing better and perform with a smile on my face."

On the other hand, if someone doesn't know their birth dad or if their adoptive parent and birth parent struggle to get along, this is a group that can comprehend what that might feel like too. Blake added that "[the Affinity Group] is cool because we all have a different story to share about our experience with open adoption."

At OA&FS, we want to support our community in creating additional Affinity Groups where open adoptees can come together. If you are an OA&FS adoptee in your teens or 20s and are interested in starting or being part of an Affinity Group, let us know. If you are the adoptive or birth parent of an OA&FS adoptee, pass the word along or call us to make sure we have your child's updated contact info (if they are now grown and out of the house). We are happy to help host, as we did with the teen group in January, or we can help advertise your event through newsletters and on [our Facebook page](#). It could be something simple like: "Hello to all OA&FS adoptees in their 20s, let's meet up for dinner!" Or it could be more involved, "Hey OA&FS adoptees, let's plan a weekend at the coast!"

Whether you have ideas, questions or you're ready to get started, please [contact Katie Woodward](#), a counselor in our Portland office. Katie and all of us at OA&FS look forward to supporting open adoptees in connecting with one another. ■



Teens find a sense of connection in what makes them unique and special.

## AGENCY NEWS

### Help make the birthmothers' retreat special.

We're excited to honor birthmothers in the OA&FS community with a retreat on Sat., May 17.

We welcome your contributions of poems and quotes about birthmothers to be read out loud at the retreat. Please direct all poems to birthmothers in general, (rather than specifically stating the name of your child's birthmother) and email to [Katie Woodward](#) by Mon., May 12.

Our activity will be making fleece blankets. If you'd like to contribute fleece, [please mail or deliver fabric to the Portland office, or drop off at the Eugene or Seattle offices](#) by Tues., April 29. (Fabric should be 60 inches wide by two yards in length and of any color or pattern.)

If you'd like to make a monetary donation to the Birthmothers Retreat fund, [give online at our website](#), or call Cindy Lee at 503-226-4870.

### Out-of-state placements up.

Our out-of-state placement campaign has really taken off! So far this fiscal year, (which began July 1), we've

completed eight adoptions with birthparents who live outside the Northwest. This is a 38% increase from the prior year.

By creating a national presence, we are not only bringing our pro-choice options counseling and progressive open adoption services to expectant parents nationwide, we're also broadening the adoption possibilities for our families entering and waiting in the pool.

These adoptions have gone smoothly and the expectant parents are pleased to have access to a program that truly meets their needs. We anticipate that this national expansion will continue to grow, increasing our placement statistics.

### Origins Therapy extends to ART community.

Through [Origins Therapy](#), the agency is providing counseling and relationship guidance to individuals and families who were created not only by adoption, (domestic, state, international), but also assisted reproductive technology (ART) — egg, sperm or embryo donors, as well as surrogacy.

We want to offer this burgeoning community our child-centered philosophy and relationship-building support. Our licensed clinical social workers and marriage and family therapists will provide this service. ■





## Through Sameness

*"When we are alike, there is more room for separation."*

At some point, there is a natural inclination for children to want to imitate parents and try to be like them. Children seek to be like those they are closest to. OA&FS birth and adoptive families have long been encouraged to recognize the similarities in one another. For example, "Your curly hair is just like Brandi's!" "Listen to that voice. You sing so beautifully just like John!" It's equally important for adoptive parents to notice and treasure their child's similarities to them. "We both can't stand our carrots touching our potatoes. I get it. You are just like mommy!" "You love to wiggle and shake to music just like daddy!" One adoptive mom who is parenting transracially, said she cried when a friend commented that her daughter walked just like her. "Nobody had even noticed something like that," she shared. Especially in adoptive families where the differences are readily apparent, parents need to solicit details about what is the same when and wherever they can.

## Through Belonging and Loyalty

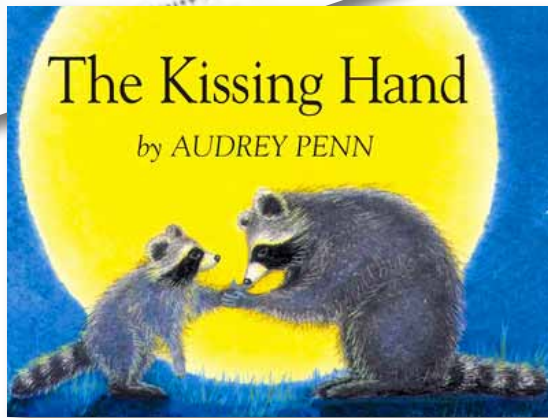
*"When we belong, there is more room for difference."*

This stage often is shown through a child's use of the possessive - "My mommy. My daddy." Neufeld notes that part of feeling close to someone is considering that person your own. When children feel like they "belong", the concept of "loyalty" soon makes sense. Loyalty is what allows a parent to parent. Children want to listen to, please and follow the directions of the people they are attached to. In this stage, wise adoptive parents are highlighting very clearly how their child belongs in their family and how they are also part of birth family. OA&FS adoptive mom Amy Prestia noted this stage can feel tricky as it is important to balance this for kids — making the child feel abundantly clear they "belong" in their adoptive family. One way she works on this stage is through acknowledging her daughter's birthmother at different times and including her as part of their family. "We make a gingerbread house every year with people, representing every family member, including her birthmother," she said. Another family, with very little contact, says a prayer for all the people in their family, including their daughter's birthmother. Many older adopted adults report feeling not quite in one family or the other. Great attention to this stage can hopefully ameliorate some of that. Including or talking about birthfamily during family routines and rituals can also be useful.

## Through Significance

*"When we matter to each other there is more room for disagreement."*

In order to feel close and connected to somebody Neufeld asserts, we seek "significance" which means, we seek to feel we "matter" to somebody. Kids attaching at this level absolutely delight in the happy faces of those they love. Parents at this stage are heavily rewarded by beaming faces when they tell their children quite actively how special they are and how lucky they are to have them in their family. "I am so glad you are my boy," always gets a smile at my house." There are many great children's books parents can use to springboard into these kinds of conversations. Birthparents also aid this stage when they communicate to the child how important they are. More storytelling at this stage about how the child is cherished by both birth and adoptive family members is useful. As her preschooler moves through this phase, adoptive mom Amy Prestia tells pregnancy stories about her daughter's birthmother, how they all came together at the hospital, cared for her together in the days following discharge, and then how she and her husband brought her home with big brother. Thankfully, nearly all children **love** talking about themselves at this age and are happy to hear about and feel their significance directly.



*Deepen connections to your child with these books recommended by Dr. Neufeld.*

## Through Love

*"When we have a sense of emotional intimacy, there is more room for individuality."*

Attaching at this stage refers to those feelings of warmth and affection. Deeply felt and vulnerable emotion is always involved in deeper levels of attachment. Dr. Neufeld posits that you will know you have hit this mark when your child starts drawing hearts for you and telling you they love you. "They are literally giving their heart to you," he

said. It is also at this stage when children are better able to manage longer separations from their parents, because they are able to "hold on" to that parent more completely when the parent is gone. This is quite a fun stage to be in – with a partner or with a child. Reading particular books at this stage can be a powerful way to verbalize to a child they are loved, and that they are deeply connected to all of the members of their family. Some recommended books include: *The Invisible String* by Patricia Karst or *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn.

## Through Being Known

*"When you give full expression of your individuality, when you are truly known by the other and have room to be who you are, that is being in deep attachment."*

When attaching at this level to feel close to somebody is truly to feel "known" by them. The best way to describe this is to think about how you feel when a partner or friend gives you the perfect gift without any prompting. You feel moved by that person's capacity to choose something so well suited to you. Children in this stage will share their secrets with you and won't want to lie. They want you to know everything about them. Late night conversations at bedtime often accompany this stage. Parents can work on this stage by paying close attention to their child's natural interests, activities and dreams. Wise birth parents inquire and do research before every visit – what is the child into these days? Adoptive parent can provide clues and then validate that. For example, "She brought you the paint set because she knows all about the animals you have been painting lately." When all of us "feel known" for who we truly are it brings enormous comfort.

### The Six Stages in the Service of Development

Neufeld, a developmental psychologist, deeply concerned about what makes children "grow up" considers attachment the "womb of maturation." Children can meet their potential for growth when they have the confidence their needs will be met, that they matter and belong with their family, that they are loved, and that they are known completely and wholly, that literally all parts of them, including **all** their emotions, are acceptable, and will be valued. Dr. Neufeld summed up the purpose well when he said, "The more fully attached a child is, the more room they have to be themselves." A person who is able to BE who they are innately, is a person with true freedom.

### Want to Learn More?

Our hope is that these six stages can demystify the process of attachment in concrete ways. For those interested in deeper study there are many opportunities.

- **Amy Prestia, an OA&FS adoptive parent and certified Neufeld Course Facilitator**, can be reached through [www.seattleneufeldcommunity.org/](http://www.seattleneufeldcommunity.org/). Amy is the Director of Education for The Seattle Neufeld Community, a non-profit organization with the mission of supporting Seattle-area adults who are nurturing children to reach their fullest potential. [The Art and Science of Transplanting Children](#) is one course which thoroughly explores attachment, the impact of separation, strategies for ameliorating the impact, why conventional discipline methods often don't work and other strategies in their place. Please see their website for a listing of other courses.
- **The Neufeld Institute**, [www.neufeldinstitute.com](http://www.neufeldinstitute.com), provides education and training to adults involved with children using the attachment-based developmental model created by psychologist Gordon Neufeld. Their mission is to use developmental science to rejoin parents and teachers to their own natural intuition. ■

*Inspired by OA&FS families since 2001, author Katie Stallman, (OA&FS' Seattle Regional Manager), recently completed two courses on Dr. Neufeld's theory after an introduction by adoptive mom and OA&FS client, Amy Prestia. Many thanks to her and to all for the ongoing illustrations of family and love that OA&FS families provide.*

## "Talking With Your Child About Adoption" Resource List.

- [The Center for Adoption Support and Education](#)
- [The Donaldson Adoption Institute](#)
- [Adoption Learning Partners](#)
- [Beth O'Malley's Lifestory Books](#)
- [Adoption Mosaic](#)
- [Adoptive Families Magazine](#)



- [Tapestry Books](#)
- [Talking with Young Children About Adoption](#) by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher
- [Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self](#) by David M. Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, & Robin Marantz Henig
- [Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child](#) by Betsy Keefer & Jayne E. Schooler
- [Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew](#) by Sherrie Eldridge

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