

# IS THIS WHAT I EXPECTED?

***IN her continuing series of articles Helen Oakwater, an experienced adopter, explores how expectations need to change as we parent our children.***

During the drafting of this article I had an 'interesting Sunday', which for me illustrated how the complexities of adoptive parenting change as our children grow older. Hence this piece has a different flavour to previous articles. The 'expectations and hard truths' theme and time travel tools will continue in the next issue.

I am emotionally bruised, battered and scarred – I am the parent of three adolescents, so it is to be expected. Fortunately, for me, the wounds are not inflicted physically; however this is not always the case.

Please note every event in this article is true. I have modified certain aspects to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved. Regrettably the incidents described are not unique – I have heard similar experiences from adopters throughout Britain.

## A not so typical Sunday afternoon

One set of adoptive parents, who are old friends, phoned me recently on a Sunday afternoon, just before term started. In the background I heard screaming and crashing as the 'child' (early teen) was throwing his possessions down the stairs, hurling abuse with the chairs and squirting shampoo onto the chaos and school books below. The mother asked me whether she should phone the police (something she had done before). I said, "Yes – this is domestic violence".

The violence, aggression and anger inflicted on these parents, their possessions and pets was gruesome. The mother had not worn short sleeves for several years because of the bruises her son had inflicted on her. Imagine that in the hot summer we've just experienced.

I arrived at their home an hour later, expecting police cars and hullabaloo. However it was eerily quiet. The threat of the police (on this occasion) had been enough to placate the child who was insisting that he wanted to enter foster care that evening. He was calmly settled in front of Coronation

Street – he is an avid fan.

In the garden, a vitriolic letter from the child was clasped by the tearful mother whose years of tolerance, effort and skilful parenting were being rewarded by apparent hatred and total disrespect. The father showed me the metal poles with which the child hit him.

It was an ugly scene. Fortunately light relief was on the way. As a true Brit, I made tea and distributed hugs with the biscuits. The mother, still shaking, phoned the emergency Social Services number with the aim of having her son accommodated that evening. Unfortunately, when she eventually got through and repeatedly explained the situation was told, "I'm sorry it doesn't fit in with my shift pattern". Cue much hysterical laughter in the garden.

Those of you new to the 'adoption experience' will be shocked and horrified on hearing this. Many old timers will be saying "fantastic . . . a social worker on the end of the emergency number on a Sunday evening".

My friends have been fighting for help with their children for years . . . we all saw this coming. The local authority is relatively good – even though it is unresourced, overworked and just grasping that infant trauma, if left unresolved, explodes in adolescence. Regrettably 'the system' was not able to help before this family shattered. This is a familiar scenario throughout the country - occurring with both girls and boys.

## Can I face Mr and Mrs Smug?

Later that same evening I was invited by a friend I met years ago in the primary school playground, to a local pub where her mate was playing in a band. As I parked the car, I saw Mr and Mrs Smug with their daughter Precious, clearly heading for the music venue – Precious had been in the same primary school class as one of my children. She and most of her other class mates had just received A level results and were planning exciting futures.

The evening flashed before my eyes. How would I respond to the inevitable questions about my children? (Which does not include A levels, gap years or even employment). What do I say that

does not breach their confidentiality?

Two are (technically) adults – I have no right to reveal the pain of their lives to others. I can't glow with pride at my children's current achievements; the major emotions I experience right now are frustration, grief and sadness. However – I have been here before and seen them survive self destructive behaviours and grow as a result of their pain. I trust they will do so again.

I called my friend from the car, explained with sadness that I simply couldn't face the evening with Mr and Mrs Smug and was going home. She understood completely – a true friend. Before you all reach for the tissues, I had been out till 2am the previous evening at a rip roaring party, so my, still aching feet, were happy to view the telly!

Feeling too fragile to face former primary school parents is a surprising by-product of adoption when your children are 'adults'. Yet I'm not alone in this experience. This isolation is usefully reframed when you are part of a good adoptive parent support network. Parents in the playground don't 'get it' – other adopters do. That's why attending local Adoption UK meetings is so valuable and affirming.

After years of adoptive parenting I take 'self care' very seriously. I deserve a life and wish I'd learnt to prioritise myself earlier. If I am strong, empowered and together I am much more use to my children. I can't throw them lifelines if I'm in the sea drowning alongside them.

Later, stepping back, I thought, why did these incidents resonate so much with me? Neither were new experiences for me. What linked them? What was the learning from these two, superficially unrelated, events? The answer is 'expectations'. None of us when we started the adoption process expected, planned or signed up for the above two episodes.

## Facing hard truths

I have been very lucky. Through Adoption UK I have met adopters with older children than mine who have helped me face hard truths about myself, my parental expectations and my children. The benefits of support through Adoption UK become more evident over time, for those open to it.

I recall being at a conference after about five years as a parent. I was the

youngest of four adoptive mothers standing in a group. I listened to these fabulous women in some awe. They gently confirmed my fear that my kids were not 'normal'. That was my catalyst to face some tough stuff and the start of my own personal journey and transformation.

Two of these women are still dispensing wisdom, understanding and support to fellow adopters at different stages of the process. One became my mentor and great friend. Without her support, fresh perspectives and honest feedback, I doubt I would have survived the last few years. Thank you L.

## Modelling excellence

Last century, I was able to compare and contrast two sets of adopters; both had taken children with similar backgrounds. After almost two decades Mr and Mrs Rigid held almost the same aspirations for themselves and their children as they had on placement. 'Their' children would be like them - academic, musical and attend university. Unfortunately the children who arrived did not fit that preconceived mould. The Rigids, unable to see the talents the children did have, were repeatedly bitterly disappointed.

Mr and Mrs Flexible had changed some of their beliefs around parenting, had open expectations for their children, and honoured their children's difficult starts without accepting outrageous acts in their home. They offered choices and behavioural boundaries to the children. They grew as individuals, survived then thrived as a couple, are excellent, fun company and compassionate human beings. The Flexibles saw their children for who they really were, hence honoured their unique abilities and witnessed their pain.

By contrast Mr and Mrs Rigid are not people I, or others, choose to be with. Their failure to change themselves (yet demanding their children do so), has left them bitter, humourless and shrivelled after countless, often pointless, battles and disappointments.

I recognised that I innately was a 'Rigid'. Yet I wanted to be a 'Flexible'. Either I changed and faced some hard truths or I'd become a person I'd choose to avoid! That's where my own journey of self discovery and growth commenced. What luck! Adoption stopped me becoming Mrs Rigid.

The first step was to stop pretending my kids were just a little odd and accept the level of their dysfunctionality. The next step was to enter my own Tardis and do some time travelling. Forward to see how things would be if no change occurred and back to get a true picture of my children's early lives. ('How to Time Travel' will be covered in some detail in the next issue).

## Positive by-products of facing hard truths

You may think this article is depressing and scary, over the top and written by an embittered adopter. I hope not because through facing hard truths, I have been empowered and liberated. Yes my life is difficult, yet it is also honest and real, so I can see the sparkly bits. Through this strategy I have been able to dump some of my own historic garbage, grow, laugh, cry and face new challenges. Rainbows regularly appear.

My life is so much richer and rewarding because I am an adopter. I am now (I hope) Miss Flexible who regularly steps outside of her comfort zone and recognises that if she goes down, so do her children. By facing my hard truths I hope I am able, when given permission, to help my children handle their demons and limiting beliefs. Instead of being Mrs Rigid-Martyr, I'm now Miss Strong-Flexible - a more useful role model too. It worked for me. I hope it will work for my children.

***An adoptive mother since the placement of a pre-school sibling group in the early 1990s, Helen has explored many diverse topics in an effort to make sense of her children's behaviour. Her experience is multi-faceted, including many years as an Adoption UK Coordinator and also a Local Authority Adoption Panel member. Her surname has changed hence her children's anonymity is protected.***

***Helen is an NLP Coach and Trainer.***

***Previous articles published in Adoption Today are on her website.***

***www.helenoakwater.com where there are further useful links.***

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## FROM THE MESSAGE BOARDS

by *Danny Evans*

**ADOPTION UK's Online Community Message Boards became a heated forum recently.**



Adoption and the issues which surround it are always sensitive. Most parents would defend their children to the hilt, and to adoptive parents who often fight daily battles for their children, this feeling is even stronger.

So from time to time the tensions start to show through.

To ensure the community runs smoothly, the Message Boards are moderated to ensure each post does not break the Rules of Use.

Sensitive and controversial issues will always arise. Maintaining the delicate balance of this sensitivity, whilst not preventing members from sharing their views is a tricky area and one the moderators navigate every day. The decisions to delete or disregard posts are not made lightly.

Once the atmosphere returns to normal, there is usually a period of calm. In this case the return to controversy came with a discussion on smacking children - always likely to get passions rising.

Community members talked about their own experiences of being smacked as children and their feelings about the practise now, including concerns about smacking traumatised adopted children.

They shared their views and ideas, disagreed and at some points the debate became heated.

But it provided an opportunity to see the issue in a new light, learn about other people's ideas and experiences and explore the problems in new ways that could change or reinforce opinions, just like any discussion forum should.

[www.adoptionuk.org/message.asp](http://www.adoptionuk.org/message.asp)