

Our first daughter was adopted. Two years later I gave birth to my other daughter. Even with all the crazy things they do in hospitals the bonding process with my biological daughter was much easier and more effective than with my adopted daughter. When we adopted, I had no idea that this could be true.

At three days old my adopted daughter knew her mother and I was not the mother she expected or wanted. I didn't know that at the time. We were told to take this baby home and love her and everything will be just fine. That's what I thought would happen.

Since then, a lot of adoptees have told me, "we've been loved very much but love is not enough." I became very interested in what my daughter was experiencing. After having experienced the birth-bond with my biological daughter, I could only imagine how desperate and terrified my other daughter must have felt when she was separated from her biological mother. I grew to understand how much that bond plays in the prenatal to postnatal experience. Bonding brings a component of safety and security, which I don't think adopted children feel. Once you've separated from one mother, there's always the possibility of being separated from another. They live with that every day.

Attachment can and often does happen, but it's what we call anxious attachment. There's always the feeling that someone can leave. Children are traumatized by this experience of being separated from the birth mother and the mothers are traumatized as well.

Let's explore this notion that love is not enough. It has very serious implications.

Adoptees are often told that your birth mother loved you but she couldn't keep you. This very well may be true, but the child associates love and closeness and intimacy, with basic trust and security. Rather than getting close to someone, they feel much safer if they don't. The phrase, "If you don't love too much, you don't lose too much," comes up quite a bit.

They do things to distance themselves from their adoptive parents so they won't feel the loss if they leave too. They act out in ways that test. It is as if they know its going to happen and just want to get it over with, like they are holding their breath. They keep talking about it, that they are just waiting for it to happen. That's one of the reasons these children are often diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. How can you possibly focus on math when you're so afraid of being abandoned? It's in their minds all the time, not wanting to be abandoned again.

The kids that aren't acting out are, what a woman in Vancouver calls, acting in. They withdraw, go inward, and don't want anybody to know what they feel about anything. They often don't know how they feel themselves. They become very compliant and do everything they cannot to rock the boat.

Most people feel that they are well adjusted. They've adjusted just well at the expense of who they truly are, which is not what they see when they look for feedback from others.

As mothers we mirror our babies and we do this instinctively. When an adopted child looks up into the mother's face, and he or she does not see anything familiar, it is like looking in the wrong mirror. They aren't being mirrored the same way a birth mother would mirror them, and the baby knows the difference. Mirroring is the beginning of self-esteem. Adopted kids miss this. It is an on-going trauma... the ugly duckling theme and its one reason that love is not enough.

For some people birth itself is a trauma, but certainly if you were separated from the person with whom you feel close, whom you've been with for nine months, you are going to feel trauma. Part of that has to do with the sense of self. It isn't just losing mother. At birth babies are very immature, as mammals go, physically and emotionally, and are very connected to the mother. She plays the role of ego for quite a while after birth.

The adopted child has to develop what we call premature ego. They have to be a separate person right away, before it's really time. One might think that helps develop a sense of self, but it doesn't. They don't have a chance to go through the process of separating from her and knowing that they are safe, which means loved and wanted. What they feel is that somehow they are to blame for the separation. They feel they are not good, that they are bad because mothers don't leave their babies. There's no evidence, anywhere in the world, of mothers leaving their babies and that being okay.

There seems to be a feeling of defensive in the creation of this self centered entity. Perhaps the ego is fundamentally a defense response or reflex. Being abandoned would necessitate an immediate and strong defensive reaction.

Babies go through a process of beginning to understand that they are separate from mother and that she isn't a person over here and they're a person over here. That happens over time. When it happens at birth, before they have a chance to go through the normal process, there's a sense of something missing. Mothers talk about this also. They feel something's missing. They want to get back together. It is a sense of not only finding that lost child or that lost mother, but finding that other part, the lost self that was disconnected.

Your perspective, looking and caring from the babies' perspective, at such a deep level, is powerful and unique.

We need to keep babies and mothers together if possible. There are times when it's not possible.

Then adoption may be the best thing. I don't believe in coercing mothers into giving up their babies, which is what we were doing in the forties, fifties and sixties, making them feel really bad about wanting to keep their babies.

There are a lot of children in foster care right now that need homes but everybody wants a baby. Rather than these people adopting children who need parents, they're trying to find people who will give up their babies, often because of poverty. That's wrong. There's also a movement to get mothers to sign papers early, so she can't change her mind. A mother who's contemplating giving up her baby for adoption is in shock when the baby's born. She should not be signing anything. She should be allowed to hold her baby, be allowed to talk to her baby. This is important for the baby and for the mother.

When an adoptee walks into my office, I can almost tell very early if they have been in the presence of their birth mother. They have a better sense of self, even if they've been with her for just a little while. Most people feel the opposite. They think, the sooner you separate them, the better it will be for the baby. That's not true. The baby needs the mother more at birth than any other time. She's still part of them. It's never a good situation, but a newborn baby desperately needs that mother. As Erich Neumann said, it's still a mother/baby.

Being cut off from the source of life, love and nurturing, at birth must be very difficult - frightening.

Some adoptees call it the death of the baby-soul or the death of the baby that they were and they have to be somebody else now. Part of the work we do in therapy is to help the adopted adults find that true self again.

When they go into a different family, they don't see that self reflected - mirrored. They try to figure out what it is they have to do to be in this family, because they don't see themselves anywhere. They talk about the voice, the smell, all these things the baby knows about the mother. The thing they talk about most when there's a reunion is energy.

I noticed that when my daughter is with her birth mother. There's a difference in the energy between the two of them than with she and I. Their energy is more congruent. Some adoptees say it's like living in sand paper to be with the adoptive mother.

There's nothing the mother can do. It's a different energy and we don't take those things into consideration when we think about separating babies and mothers. We think we can just pass this baby on to someone else and they won't know the difference. They know the difference on every level and it must be terrifying.

I would use the word resonance. It's very much like music. There's a certain harmonic that occurs when things are in resonance. It isn't something that we can create?

We have a certain resonance and that that's our resonance. It doesn't fit with the resonance of that child. This is one of the things that they notice the most. Women have all our ova right from our birth. That fertilized ovum, fetus, infant, child knows our resonance, our rhythm, our energy and it can't be fooled.

When you say they, you're really talking about the adult adoptee that are working with you?

It's not just the adoptees working with me. I speak all over the world. After I wrote my book, I had hundreds and hundreds of letters from adoptees saying yes, we've always felt this way but we've never been allowed to say so. Adoption is seen as this wonderful thing that people are doing for babies. How can they say, but we don't like it very much? They made to feel ungrateful.

It is abuse and the victim is supposed to feel grateful. Taking babies away from their mothers is abusive even though sometimes it's necessary. Even if it's necessary, it not what the baby wants. We have to honor that.

If adoptive mothers can understand that, they can do a lot for their children, by validating the feelings and letting them talk about how hard it is for them to be in this family where they don't feel they belong. I hear it over and over again: I had a wonderful adoptive family but I didn't belong there - I never fit. They get angry having to work so hard to fit into a family. In defense of some of the families, more than may really be required. They could simply be different if they wanted to. The feeling is; I was myself and I got kicked out of my original family. Part of the feeling has to do with their own sense of why they got kicked out the first time, what happened, and that they have to be different so that they won't be kicked out again.

That's a big thing to ask a child to do, not only to force them to develop a defensive self early, but a distorted image at that.

It would be difficult for us to go to India and feel that we fit in. We can go and we can adapt to a certain degree, but I don't think we'll ever really fit. That's the way it is for adopted children and adults. They don't ever feel as if they fit. Yet, when they find their birth families, they often feel they fit right away, even when there is no shared personal history with that birth family.

It's not something that we can do much about.

We can try to understand our children. We need to validate their feelings and not defend against their feelings if they say, “you know, you’re not my real mother.” It’s a good time to explore that with them and say, yes, it must feel pretty terrible sometimes. We need to validate those feelings. It is important to appreciate that when they lash out it is because they don’t know what else to do.

Another way they try to communicate with adoptive parents and also with the birth parents in a reunion is through a process we call projective identification. Here they create situations, which we, as the parent, feel what they are feeling. The result is that we often feel enraged. We feel inadequate. We feel chaotic. We feel confused. These are pre-verbal feelings. To communicate what it is that’s going on inside them, they create a situation in which we can feel it, because they themselves often don’t have words to express what they are feeling.

Most parents don’t understand what this child is trying to do, so they get upset and handle them as poorly as the child. Often the child is trying to see if these feelings are tolerable. Most parents don’t tolerate them. They don’t show much understanding of the pain.

This feeling of loss and distrust applies to children who were in incubators -- children who were separated for any reason from their mothers. They’re going to have some kind of separation trauma, and bonding will be very difficult after that. They’re always expecting to be abandoned again. It runs very deep.

Much of what you’re sharing is contingent on an the adult appreciating how sensitive, intelligent and conscious the baby is, and that this consciousness is present and learning months before birth.

We try to educate people before they adopt, but most don’t want to hear it. They want to believe that they can take this baby home and it will be just like having their own biological child. It’s very difficult for them to understand that this child is going to feel a tremendous loss being separated from the birth mother.

Sometimes they have the adopted mother helping with the birth, taking the baby right away, which I am totally against. There is no time for the birth stress hormones to subside, which adds to the baby’s agitation. The birth mother and baby need time together so that they can say hello and good-bye. The more postnatal time, the better.

The bonding we’re talking about, the birth bond, is tremendously intimate. It happens only once. The mother/child bond is the strongest bond in the world and nothing else we call bonding will be that profound.

What can we do to make a less than perfect process better?

We can teach parents to validate the feeling of the child without getting defensive, or without reassuring too much. Rather than listening and feeling what the child feels, we often tell the child how we feel which further denies the child's own feelings.

I was told a story about a mother who adopted a child from South America. The child had different colored skin from the mother. When he was 3 years old he told the mother that he wished he looked like her. The mother did what many of us do. She reassured him that it was okay, that it didn't matter to her that he didn't look like. She loved him just as much. He needed her to understand what he was feeling, not to tell him what she was feeling. She could have said, "it must feel pretty strange to grow up in a family where you don't look like anyone." That would validate what he was feeling rather than reassuring and trying to make him think that it doesn't matter. It mattered to him. He needed her to understand that.

You are talking about a biological patterning which is deeper than personality. What is the difference between personality and behavior?

Personality to me is essence, the true self. My daughter, for instance, has a wonderful sense of humor. She always has, right from the beginning. This sense of humor is something that none of our family had. We could not laugh at ourselves the way she can laugh at herself. We've learned to do that, but it wasn't intrinsic to us the way it was to her. When we met her birth mother, this quality became very apparent. She and her birth mother have a zany sense of humor. It is so different from the rest of the family and she's been that way ever since she was three days old.

We think that we are this entity at this time and at this moment, but genetically, in this essence sense, we are carrying qualities from mother and father, several generations back. It shades off. There are many predisposition's implicit in this genetic history that we carry.

I hope that people are listening. In many states it's impossible to get birth records. You cannot know the birth family if you're in a closed adoption. This is a basic human right. In many other more countries, as soon as you're 18 you can have your original birth certificate. You have the same privilege as everyone else about your original family. In the United States many adoptees never get to grow up. They always have to be at the mercy of what other people want them to do. It's really important that they be allowed to know who they are.

It really doesn't have anything to do with their personality.

I want adoptees to realize that they are not acting abnormally which is what many people have been saying to them.

They are reacting normally to an abnormal situation. Adoption is not normal. The feelings the baby or child has around this experience should be acknowledged as a normal response, rather than pathological.

Many times we blame the victim for everything. We diagnose them and cut them up in little pieces when they're acting in a perfectly normal way to terrible abuse. They act in certain ways and we label *them* as the ones who are sick. On the other hand, it is terribly important for adoptees to realize that their behavior, although normal, is not who they are. Because there was no Self before the trauma, many adoptees identify with the ways in which they've adapted. They've lost their essence by adapting to the adoptive family as a means of survival, or by demonstrating certain behaviors in order to feel safe. They are afraid of the true self, because they believe (falsely so) that it was that original self that caused their mothers to leave them.

It is their task, as adults, to look deeply and find out who they truly are. It is my personal guarantee that we would rather deal with that authentic self than with the generic wounded adopted child.

The process of labeling allows us to blame the victim. There's a nice defense for us built in to that.

We do things intentionally to fool ourselves. For instance, the term surrogate mother. Why is a woman, who gives birth, called a surrogate mother? She is the mother. Calling her the surrogate legitimizes the idea that taking her baby away is perfectly all right. It allows us to do things to the baby without really considering the baby at all. We talk about relinquishment and surrender rather than abandonment. The baby feels abandoned. It's doesn't care what we call it. We have to deal with *what is* rather than what we'd like it to be.

The children who enter day care at five weeks are going to have problems. How is a mother to be responsive to her child when she's not with her child? No one else is going to be that responsive. That baby needs its mother. We don't want to talk about that. If we just acknowledge that there is a problem, this is the most important step to correcting it. We need to look clearly at what we are doing and acknowledge the fact that some things are not healthy for ourselves or for our children. If we supported and valued women as mothers, it would make an immediate difference. Recognition of the intelligence, sensitivity and vulnerability of the baby, and to honor and protect that mother-infant bond are critical steps. We'd have a different society.

Doctors and corporations should stop interfering with mothers being mothers.

Touch the Future
When Love Is Not Enough
Bonding, Birth & Adoption
Nancy Verrier
A conversation with Michael Mendizza

We and our babies are much more sensitive and intelligent than given credit for. We've lost our instinctive nature. We're being told all these different things that we're suppose to do instead of just allowing ourselves to know.

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