

Seeking Meaningful Therapy: Thoughts from an Adoptive Mom

by Debbie Schugg



Kinship Center Education Institute™





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I sit in the therapist's waiting room, surrounded by parenting magazines. The covers promise fun-filled rainy day activities, crowd-pleasing cupcakes, and surefire ways to beat the homework blues. It is painfully clear that these magazines are not meant for me or my family. I am the adoptive mother of a child who experienced early trauma. My daughter is every bit as beautiful as the squeaky clean cherubs on these glossy pages, but where are the articles for *our* family? Where are the cover stories that speak to the storm of loss that rages in my child's soul, to her insatiable appetite for both food and validation, and to the hours of headache and heartache brought on by each page of homework as she struggles to re-learn what she learned the day before... and the day before that?

Before I can reflect further on the vast differences between the path my family has chosen and the path traveled by most other families, I am interrupted by my own thoughts. They are the same thoughts which plague me week after week. What will be the fallout of today's session? How long will it take to pick up the pieces from whatever hurt

Sitting out here, how will I
What is she telling him this
What twisted perception of
fact? Bless her heart. I know it's
the way she does because of
endured in such a vulnerable
try to provide context for her
with truth, I run the risk of
controlling, or insensitive –
her problems. I've asked to sit

“Without specialized training in the complexities of adoption and attachment...he may be no better suited to our family than the magazines in his waiting room.”

is brought to the surface?
even know what the hurt is?
time? Does he believe her?
the truth is she presenting as
not her fault. She sees things
the unspeakable suffering she
period of her life. Yet, when I
comments or balance her tales
being perceived as defensive,
possibly even the source of
in on her sessions, only to be

told that it may interfere with the establishment of trust in her therapist. What about her trust in me? I've asked for some specifics of what they've discussed. Apparently that's confidential. Confidential? She is a *child*. I am her *mother* – the mother she so desperately needs. I'm not asking for every detail of their conversation; I'm asking for the tools I need to parent her in the very best way I can. How am I to comfort her, nurture her, sit with her in her pain and support her through it when I am shut out here with these magazines every Thursday from 4:00 to 4:50?

The therapist is a kind, competent man. He has a warm smile, a kid-friendly office, and the respect of his colleagues and clients. Without specialized training in the complexities of adoption and attachment, however, he may be no better suited to our family than the magazines in his waiting room.

As foster and adoptive parents, we are told repeatedly that it is crucial for our children to go to therapy. It can, indeed, be an incredibly helpful tool...*if it is guided by an adoption-competent therapist in a model which includes the parents*. The attachment-savvy therapist understands that the family is the healing agent and the parent-child relationship is a priority. The field of attachment is gaining new knowledge at an

exponential rate and has become a specialty unto itself, particularly as it relates to adoption, permanency, and early trauma. That's good news for parents. With the right therapist, we can have access to more help than ever before. Therapy is not about "fixing" the child. Therapists trained in adoption and permanency know that it is about building on the strengths of the people in that child's world, sharing ways in which we can weave attachment-building moments into our everyday interactions. It's about strengthening relationships, honoring connections, and equipping the family for its journey toward healing.

There are many excellent therapists in communities across the country who, either by chance or by choice, do not have training in this specialty. However, it is important and well worth the effort to seek out those who do. If I wanted to learn how to nurture a garden—to acquire the tools, knowledge, and skills to help it flourish—I would not seek the expertise of an artist, regardless of her talent, her commitment, or the beauty of her paintings. I would invest in the guidance of a local gardener who could share with me her keen understanding of my climate, of my plants, of their needs and vulnerabilities. I would want her to show me how to tend my garden, so that I could continue to do so on my own for years to come. So often, we are assigned a therapist based on the needs of a system or funding stream, not the needs of our family. As parents, we must learn to advocate for our children in this area as we do in so many others. Otherwise, we're left painting the wilting flowers in our garden.



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