

Nature vs. Nurture

When we judge our children's birthparents, we often judge our children.

By Lois Melina

When we think about raising children, most of us are believers in genetics. Besides the natural drive to carry on our family line, we also associate reproducing ourselves with replicating our genetic material. We want and expect to have children who reflect the best in ourselves and in our partners, and we subscribe to the belief that our DNA is the most likely way to create them. This is why infertile couples go to great lengths to achieve pregnancy-many of them convinced that even one person's DNA in the mix is better than none.

When we think about adoption, most of us find ourselves swinging on the nature vs. nurture pendulum. Whether we've already had biologic children or are looking at adoption because of infertility, we must believe that environment plays a significant role in the development of children before we can seriously explore adoption.

It is interesting to watch ourselves move from thinking our child must have an IQ equal to or above ours, athletic ability like Mom's and musical sensitivity like Dad's, to thinking that our child will develop intellectually because we will read her books, will be athletic because she will grow up in a family that takes her hiking as soon as she can walk, and will appreciate music because music is heard at home.

This thinking lasts, I sometimes tell adoptive parents, until the child reaches adolescence, at which point we conclude, "No, it was genetics after all." The comment never fails to get a laugh, because we recognize that adolescence is when children who once seemed so familiar take on beliefs that seem alien to us.

What is not so funny, however, is that adoptive parents sometimes credit themselves for their children's positive qualities, while blaming the birth parents for those aspects they don't like. We are certain that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is due to something that happened to the child before or soon after birth. We comment on how personalities are genetically determined. It's similar to a mother saying to her husband, "She gets that from your side of the family."

Certainly, biology is responsible for many individual differences in human beings. However, as adoptive parents, we should be aware of the ways we think biology is showing up in our children. Our attitudes convey subtle messages about who they are and whether they "fit" in our family.

Most parents wrestle with explaining complicated ideas to their children, and adoptive parents often have some tough things to explain. We want to know how to tell a Chinese girl that she was abandoned so that she doesn't feel like she isn't valuable. We want to know how to tell a teenage boy that his birth father raped his birth mother so that he won't think that the man he may be most like was violent towards a woman.

What is most important is not what we tell our children about their birth parents, but what we think about them. Our feelings will come through regardless of the words we use. So will our thinking about whether our children are like their birth parents-whether we expect or fear they will "turn out" in a certain way. Rather than trying to construct explanations to communicate something different, we should change the beliefs we hold in our hearts.

Do we have a mental picture of the unnamed birth father as having raspberry-colored hair and multiple piercings through his lower lip? Do we see this image when our two-year-old defies us, imagining that his adamant "no" is warning of rebellion that is sure to get out of control during adolescence? One couple had their daughter's birth mother live with them during the last stages of her pregnancy. During that time, the birth mother sat on the couch eating snacks and watching TV. As their daughter grew up, they became concerned that the girl's interest in TV was a sign that she was "lazy"-just like her birth mother.

Years after the placement, one mother was still livid that her son's birth mother had neglected him while she smoked crack. The birth mother was in jail, "and as far as I'm concerned," the adoptive mother said, "they can throw away the key."

If such children grow up to be oppositional, lazy, or drug-dependent, will it be because of a biologic predisposition to those traits, or because their adoptive parents gave them a message about how they expected them to behave?

Even adoptive parents who are sympathetic toward their children's birth parents may have negative attitudes toward them that they don't even acknowledge. We may say, for example, that the birth mother wanted to keep her child but knew that she couldn't raise a child at that time in her life. But we may be thinking, "I would have found some way to keep her." It's no surprise then, when the child grows up thinking "If my birth mother had really cared, she would have found a way to keep me. I must not be worth caring about."

And when the teenage father with piercings and dyed hair is our biological son, we see his confusion and kind heart. When it is our sister arrested for drug abuse, we remember the late-night giggling when we shared a bedroom, and hope that she is able to spend her time in jail working on her recovery. When it is our father who sits on the couch watching TV rather than developing outside interests, we wish he had a fuller life, but we know he cares for us. We are able to distinguish between their actions and the basic goodness that we know is there. We know it is there because we have known them in a variety of contexts, over many years, in many situations. Many of us have only limited contact with our children's birth parents, usually during the greatest crisis of their lives.

One mother asked me how she could tell her daughter that her birth father was serving a life sentence for a felony. "I've met him and he's such a wonderful guy, but he makes poor choices. How can I explain that to her?" I knew the message would come through because she believed in her heart that the birth father was a good man.

Seeing fundamental worth in our children's birth parents and forgiving them when their actions fail to bear witness to that worth is no more than we do for our own relatives and in-laws. And, in truth, our children's birth parents are as much a part of our extended family as our in-laws. They share decades of history as well as DNA. They have helped shape our children. Together with them, we share the mighty responsibility for the growth and development of a human being. We are connected to them, not by biology or law, but by our love for a child.

Some behavior of the birth parents may be incomprehensible to us. Their actions may not be ones we would or should condone. Nonetheless, we have an obligation to forgive them and strive to see their inherent worth.

It's actually not difficult to find their value.
It's right there in our children.

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