

"The sun will come out tomorrow..." — Annie



Whether we realize it or not, we all carry expectations about the future. We picture what the next three, five, or even ten years of our lives will look like. We make plans and dream about the life we hope to build.

For many people, that dream includes owning a home, building a stable career, and raising children. Maybe you picture family dinners around the table, vacations together, birthday parties, bedtime stories, and laughter filling your home. In our minds, these dreams often have a warm, golden glow. Everything feels peaceful, joyful, and complete.

But what happens when reality doesn't match the picture we've imagined?

Disappointment, frustration, grief, and even guilt can begin to creep in. We may wonder why things feel so much harder than we expected.

Adoption is no different.

When I meet with families who are beginning the adoption process, I often ask them what they hope this journey will look like. Most are well prepared for the logistics. They know there will be paperwork, background checks, home studies, court hearings, and waiting. They understand that children from foster care have experienced difficult circumstances.

Yet, as we continue talking, I often discover another picture they are carrying a vision of what life will look like after the adoption is finalized.

Many parents imagine a child who is relieved to finally have a forever family. They picture healing happening quickly, relationships growing naturally, and gratitude replacing fear.

While those moments certainly can happen, they are rarely the whole story.

Children adopted from foster care have experienced profound loss and trauma. Before they ever entered your home, they learned ways to survive circumstances that no child should ever have to endure. Those survival skills often appear as behaviors that are confusing, frustrating, or even hurtful to the adults who love them.

Your child may struggle to trust you.

They may reject your affection.

They may push you away just as you begin to feel close.

They may test whether you are really going to stay.

None of these behaviors mean they don't want a family. More often, they reflect a child whose experiences have taught them that adults leave, promises are broken, and relationships aren't safe.

It's also important to remember that your child wasn't raised in your home. They come with different experiences, routines, values, and expectations. Learning to become part of your family takes time for everyone.

One expectation that can unintentionally set parents up for disappointment is hoping their child will express gratitude for being adopted.

While some children may openly say, "Thank you," many never will.

That doesn't mean they aren't thankful.

Children who have experienced trauma often spend so much energy trying to feel safe that they have little emotional capacity left to recognize or express gratitude. Instead, they may continue to wrestle with grief, shame, confusion, or questions about their own worth.

Their silence is not a reflection of your love, nor is it a measure of whether the adoption has been successful.

One of the things I often tell families is this:

"You may never hear the words, 'Thank you for adopting me.' But that doesn't mean your child isn't grateful. Sometimes the greatest expression of trust is simply allowing themselves to stay connected to you."

No matter the age at which a child is adopted, they will likely have questions about their story.

Children adopted as teenagers may remember much of their past. Children adopted as toddlers may have only scattered memories. Even children adopted as infants often grow up wondering about their birth family, where they came from, and why they were placed for adoption.

These questions are normal.

They are not a rejection of you.

A child can deeply love their adoptive family while also grieving the family they lost—or never had the opportunity to know. Those two realities can exist at the same time.

As adoptive parents, one of the greatest gifts we can offer our children is the freedom to hold both love and loss without feeling they must choose between them.

Preparing your heart doesn't mean lowering your expectations it means replacing unrealistic expectations with realistic hope.

Hope says healing is possible.

Hope says attachment can grow.

Hope says trust can be built.

But hope also understands that healing takes time, love is often expressed in unexpected ways, and the journey may look very different than we first imagined.

The more prepared you are for that reality, the better equipped you'll be to walk beside your child with patience, compassion, and perseverance.

Releasing Expectations

So, how do we put down our expectations and prepare ourselves for the realities of adoption?

There are many wonderful books, trainings, and support groups that can help you develop realistic expectations. I encourage every adoptive parent to take advantage of those resources. However, one of the most powerful exercises I've found is much simpler: honest introspection.

I often encourage prospective parents to set aside an evening together and write down what they imagine life will look like after the adoption is finalized.

What will family dinners be like?

How will your child interact with siblings?

What do holidays look like?

How do you picture your relationship with your child?

This exercise isn't about deciding whether your dreams are right or wrong. It's about uncovering expectations you may not even realize you're carrying.

Once you've finished writing, read your answers aloud to one another. Listen carefully to what you've written. Allow yourself to imagine that future.

Then, destroy the papers.

I've seen families burn them safely, tear them into pieces, shred them, or dissolve them in water. The method doesn't matter. The symbolism does.

By physically letting go of the picture you've created, you're choosing to make room for the child who is actually coming into your family not the child you've imagined.

This doesn't mean giving up hope. It means surrendering the fantasy of a perfect family so you can embrace the beautiful, messy, and deeply meaningful reality of adoption.

"If I Just Love Them Enough..."

One of the most common expectations I encounter is the heartfelt belief that, *"If I just love them enough, everything will be okay."*

I understand why parents feel this way. In many ways, it's a beautiful thought. It comes from a sincere desire to give a child everything they have been missing.

The families I work with genuinely believe that enough love can erase years of pain. They hope that if they provide safety, consistency, and affection, their child will naturally heal from the trauma they have experienced.

Love is absolutely foundational.

But love, by itself, is not enough.

Children who have experienced significant trauma often struggle to believe the love that is being offered to them. For some, love itself feels unfamiliar or even frightening. Healthy relationships may seem unsafe simply because they are different from what the child has known.

As a result, they may push you away.

They may reject your affection.

They may test your commitment over and over again not because they don't want your love, but because they are trying to determine whether it is real and whether it will last.

There is another side to this expectation that isn't talked about often enough.

Sometimes, love isn't an instant feeling for parents either.

I've met many adoptive parents who quietly wrestled with guilt because they didn't immediately feel deeply bonded to the child who entered their home. They expected the overwhelming love they had imagined, but instead felt exhausted, uncertain, or emotionally disconnected.

If that's your experience, you are not alone.

Love often grows through thousands of ordinary moments of showing up, caring, comforting, correcting, forgiving, and trying again.

Before you feel connected, choose commitment.

Children who have experienced significant loss become incredibly skilled at pushing people away. There will likely be days when they don't want your comfort, reject your affection, or question your commitment.

There may even be seasons when you don't feel the warmth or closeness you expected.

Keep showing up anyway.

One of the defining characteristics of healthy adoptive families isn't that they always feel love. It's that they continue choosing love even on the days when it feels difficult.

Commitment creates the space where trust can grow.

And over time, trust often becomes the soil where love takes deep root.