

Are you a boiled frog?

IN the last issue of Adoption Today Helen Oakwater examined anxiety and the concept of “being in flow” as illustrated in the diagram below. This second part looks at the specific skill of maintaining ones identity. But first – tedium!

Boredom

The challenges of being an adopter are well documented. Being bored with it is rarely, if ever mentioned. However in my experience there are significant chunks that are tiresome, tedious and dreary.

Changing bed linen every night for five years is monotonous and tedious. Putting the same stinky sheets in the washing machine every morning is mind numbingly dull. However for many adopters that's a reality as their child wets the bed every night because historical trauma creeps into their sleeping minds during the night.

Living with children who lie and steal is standard stuff for us. On the one hand we know that such behaviour is the vocabulary that says “I’m not okay”, on the other hand it's as irritating as hell.

I found the most frustrating aspect was never knowing whether I had mislaid something or whether it had been stolen. I have spent over nine years mainly keeping my purse in my back pocket. (Yes my bum did look big in that). My kids also took other things. My favourite swimming costume disappeared. Had I left it at the pool (unlikely), mislaid it or had someone nicked it? What a waste of (understandable) effort deciding which it might be as I searched the car and house. I repeated that process for hundreds of other items. Was it paranoia? Sometimes it was – other times they really were out to get me.

Being stolen from regularly is **boring**.

It wasn't boring the first time – it was overwhelmingly awful, a huge anxiety.

My purse one weekend, my credit card holder (now containing cash too) the following Saturday. I knew my ten year old had taken it. No one including my

husband believed me. It was enormously challenging and distressing. (By the way – I phoned Adoption UK – then called PPIAS – explained my story and voice roared with laughter and said “I believe you”. The relief of having my sanity confirmed lifted a weight from my shoulders.)

Repetition changed stealing from distressing to a dull routine. Just like bed wetting. Learning how to accept your children's ‘crazy lying’ is one of the thousands of skills and strategies an adopter needs.

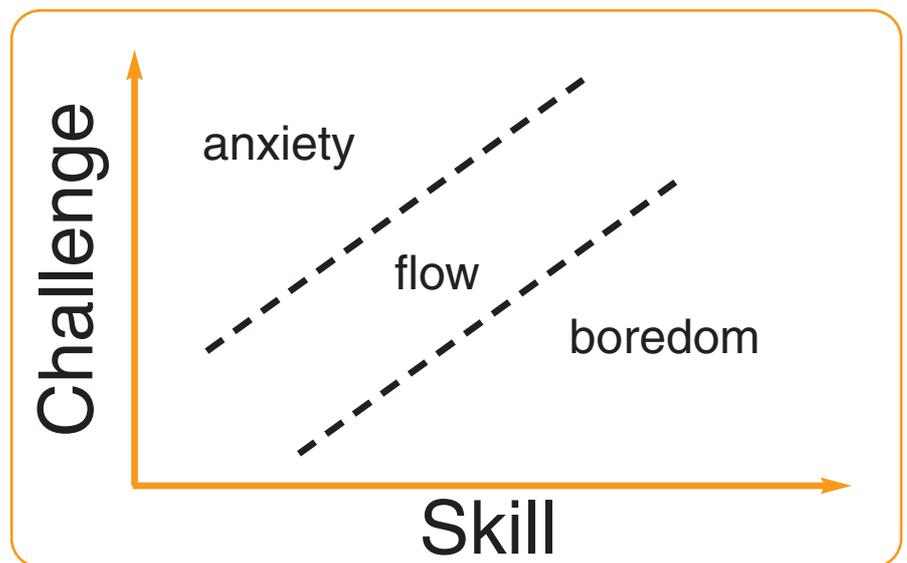
I find my children's lying tedious – however I've become inured to it. It's no longer a huge challenge for me. After much experience I have found strategies to deal with it, so it rarely winds me up the way it did. (I'm human – sometimes its pointlessness raises my blood pressure, but now it's a monthly not hourly event.)

traumatised children make you a frog slowly being boiled? I was; and it did nearly kill me. As a metaphor for secondary trauma, it resonated with me and I have witnessed others slowly being destroyed by this process

Our children often have a fragmented self image; they feel hollow, as if they barely exist because their cries were not heard. Sometimes I wonder if in connecting with them we too are pulled into that void. Our cries for help often fall on deaf ears too. (This concept in examined in more detail in my ‘Logical Levels’ article from *Adoption Today*, August 2006)

Who are you?

I now realise I lost much of my sense of self because I became so embroiled in being an adoptive mother. It took all my time, attention and energy. Even when swimming (my great escape and



Boiling frogs

Repetition changes almost anything from distress to dull routine. On the front of his book *The Age of Unreason*, Charles Handy (management guru) says “If you put a frog in water and slowly heat it, the frog will eventually let itself be boiled to death”. Obviously if you put a frog into boiling water it will jump straight out (let's hope an attachment disordered child hasn't actually tried that).

Does the sheer relentless of living with

best problem solving environment) I thought about kids' issues – seldom about me or even my swimming technique.

One of the things adopters need is good self care. Living with children who lie, steal, act out, etc while you're fighting the system trying to get educational or therapeutic help is exhausting, depressing and frustrating.

If you don't look after you, who will? Remember adoptive parenting is more like a marathon than a sprint.

Stop for a moment, sit back and ask yourself the following questions, pausing between each one:

What percentage of you is taken up being an adoptive parent?

How is the remaining percentage allocated?

How long has it been like that?

How would you like it to be?

What makes you come alive?

One way of looking after yourself is keeping your sense of self – keeping hold of the various parts of you that are you, and maintaining your own identity.

“Remember adoptive parenting is more like a marathon than a sprint”

Identity

Many people assume they cannot change who they are, that their identity is a given and fixed. In reality we are constantly changing who we are. We are different people when aged 20 and aged 50. Many important aspects of our identity may be the same, but there are important differences. Identity is fluid, not static.

Becoming a parent is a big addition to our identity. Becoming an adopter is an even greater and more complex addition. It can push other parts of us so far below the surface we forget they are there.

In the next section I am going to generalise hugely about adoptive mothers – many of the principles apply to men too. It's simply easier to describe from one perspective, so please don't think I'm suggesting this is not an issue for fathers too!

For many women they release the

'professional' part of them, add homemaker and other 'traditional roles'. Over time and whilst living with children who constantly challenge, the woman's sense of self and identity can shrink. A woman might start to feel "small inside" and deeply inadequate as 90% of the time her role is 'just' being a mother. Our kids know exactly which buttons to press to wind us up and hurt us – diminishing us yet more.

The skill of holding onto yourself

In my experience, personal and observed, women often go through transitions and self doubt while parenting children. For years they haven't used professional or social skills. Adopters tend not to go to dinner parties, restaurants, weekly nights out with the boys/girls – we often can't find industrial strength baby sitters, let alone deal with the angst of our kids as we try to get out the door with a hysterical seven year old clutching our ankles (literally or metaphorically). It's just easier to veg in front of the telly. After a few years we can lose confidence in ourselves and the challenge of socialising is just too much – with or without the children.

Flow

Czikszenmihalyi in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, describes flow as "being alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious and with a sense that they are performing to the peak of their abilities. Both their sense of time and emotional problems seem to disappear. There is an exhilarating feeling of transcendence, of breaking out of the boundaries of identity. It is an experience of being fully present in the moment."

Do you think that 'being in flow' or 'in the zone' as athletes describe this state, is empowering? Might it get positive chemicals coursing through your body? Would it sustain you through the boredom of the daily grind? Would it help you be more you and sustain your sense of self during the difficult times?

That is why self care at all stages of the adoption process is important. An

empowered parent is resourceful and capable of functioning at a higher level.

That is why holding onto our identity as individuals and not being subsumed as an adoptive parent is vital.

Do it

That's also why getting out and having fun is crucial. If being a sailor, knitter, dancer, writer, artist, gardener, raver, diver, reader, runner, friend, style guru, cake maker is important to you do it. If visiting the theatre keeps your inner fire burning, do it. If having a pedicure makes you feel gorgeous do it. If scuba diving enlivens you do it. If walking in the woods brings you spiritual comfort, do it. If dancing around the living room manically while Robbie Williams blasts out "Let me entertain you" energises you – do it.

Do what ever it takes to make you feel alive. Laugh outrageously. Put yourself in a space or activity where you feel you are you, connected to your inner core and who you really are.

The skill of holding your identity solidly is the secure base for all other parenting skills. The 'normal' therapeutic and reparenting techniques and skills can be attached to something firm. If we don't model a solid sense of self for our children, how can we help them join their fragmented parts together?

Our role as adoptive parents is to be the best that we can be – secure, flowing, connected and truly alive.

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She adopted a sibling group in the early 1990s and has first hand experience of living with 'the child who hurts'. Her knowledge and perspectives are borne from this; plus books, numerous training courses, other adopters and through her own personal journey.

Her adoption and NLP credentials, and previous articles in Adoption Today can be seen at www.helenoakwater.com. ©Helen Oakwater 2007.