

The 7 Core Struggles in Adoption: Understanding & Supporting Your Adoptive Child's Needs

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## Week 1: Loss/Abandonment

Presented by

Dr. Chaitra Wirta-Leiker & The Adoption Exchange-Nevada

# The 7 Core Struggles

- **Loss/Abandonment**
- Rejection
- Guilt/Shame
- Grief
- Identity
- Intimacy
- Control

# Loss

- Internal Question:
  - “Will anyone/anything in my life be permanent?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
  - Resistant to change/transition; cling to the familiar
  - Avoid commitments
  - Difficult to find meaning when believe the nature of most things are temporary
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
  - Avoid or sabotage emotional connection or dependence
  - Cling to known relationships, even when they are harmful or unfulfilling
  - Words/gestures of commitment feel hollow, insincere, or manipulative

# Loss

- Pandemic Influence:
  - Reinforcement of lack of permanence & belief that nothing matters
  - Fear & lack of trust upon returning “normal” relationships & places
- Potential Benefits:
  - Maintain long-term, long-distance relationships or respond well to relationships ending
  - Forgiving of mistakes in relationships or able to set firm boundaries
  - Stick with challenges (school courses, jobs, relationships) or remove unfulfilling things

# Loss

- Parent Support Strategies:
  - Expect regression in periods of change & respond with nurturance & playfulness
  - Create routines & traditions
  - Emphasize the familiar to promote continuity & security
  - Avoid multiple changes at once & try to introduce “new” as a continuation of “old”
  - Talk about the needs being met or unmet in specific activities/relationships
  - Allow space to openly mourn losses & engage in remembrance activities around adoption & other important losses
  - Add contributions instead of removing privileges

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Week 2: Rejection

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Rejection

- Internal Question:
 - “Am I good enough?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
 - Lens of anticipatory rejection limits options
 - Perfectionism & fear of making mistakes
 - Extreme makeovers or changes in personality/actions to be accepted
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
 - Identify flaws/limitations in self & others to self-protect
 - Reject first, before being rejected
 - Fear of burdening others/people-pleasing
 - Acceptance of harmful relationships
 - “Chameleon Mask”; value dependent upon external reassurance/approval

Rejection

- Pandemic Influence:
 - Familiar sense of emotional isolation has become physical
 - Feeling less left out because everyone is “missing out” on the same things, but this may change as “stories” are shared
- Potential Benefits:
 - Maintain long-term, long-distance relationships or end unhealthy relationships
 - More forgiving of others or sets firm boundaries
 - More cooperative/easygoing or hold high standards

Rejection

- Parent Support Strategies:
 - Anticipate connection as a trigger & respond with empathy toward self-protective tendencies
 - “And” instead of “but”
 - Praise traits instead of skills/accomplishments
 - Role model recovery in relationships after conflict
 - Speak openly about adoption & emphasize losses were not child’s fault

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## Week 3: Guilt/Shame

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- Loss/Abandonment
- Rejection
- **Guilt/Shame**
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# Guilt/Shame

- Internal Question:
  - “What is wrong with me?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
  - Fear of making mistakes
  - Denial as a form of self-protection (lying/mistakes, compliments, etc.)
  - Internal locus of control for “bad things” & external locus of control for “good things”
  - Sense of “either-or” instead of “both-and”
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
  - Line between actions & identity blurred to strongly influence self-worth
  - Feel “unlovable” or undeserving of love
  - Fear of burdening others
  - Feel unnecessarily responsible for others’ feelings & experiences

# Guilt/Shame

- Pandemic Influence:
  - Sense of responsibility for others' illness/death or the general state of the world
  - Detrimental comparisons upon returning to “normal” relationships & routine
- Potential Benefits:
  - Vigilant about impact on others
  - Able to take ownership over mistakes
  - Able to maintain privacy boundaries

# Guilt/Shame

- Parent Support Strategies:
  - Show confidence in ability to handle intense emotions, needs & problems
  - Employ curiosity instead of accusations/assumptions
  - Emphasize choice/action language for negatives & identity language for positives
  - Role model recovery from mistakes
  - Open & transparent communication of facts & feelings
  - Openly dialogue about differences, privileges & injustices

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Week 4: Grief

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Grief

- Internal Question:
 - “Why me?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
 - Lack of trust & confidence in self to make the “right” decision
 - Difficulty accepting unanswered questions or lack of detail
 - Sense of unfairness & injustice (may feel “owed”)
 - “Ghost Life”
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
 - Sense of missing out on crucial awareness/information about self & world so excessively seek answers & reassurance
 - Assumption of secrecy or information being withheld
 - Difficulty feeling “whole” or fulfilled (seek material items as substitute)

Grief

- Pandemic Influence:
 - Exacerbation of “what if’s”
 - Increase in anguish over things missed as time goes on & routine returns to “normal”
- Potential Benefits:
 - Empathic towards others with “non-traditional” histories or lives
 - Able to imagine multiple contexts & perspectives
 - Strong curiosity & inquisitiveness
 - Careful & deliberate decision-makers

Grief

- Parent Support Strategies:
 - Acknowledge & validate unfairness of unknowns
 - Share openly & honestly in developmentally appropriate ways
 - Provide detailed information about options & outcomes of decisions
 - Create space for “what if” fantasies
 - Remain patient with repeated questions & respond with encouragement of already knowing the answers, emphasizing trust in intuition

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## Week 5: Identity

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# Identity

- Internal Question:
  - “How do I matter?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
  - Sense of self feels tentative & fragile; built upon unstable foundation resulting in lack of trust in intuition, emotions, beliefs, desires, etc.
  - Experimentation based upon first family & cultural traits
  - Difficulty integrating parts of self into whole
  - Dichotomous categorization
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
  - “Imposter Syndrome” & “Chameleon Mask”
  - Experimentation based upon societal expectations
  - Desire to contribute to the world in significant ways
  - Seek identity through future offspring (early pregnancy desires)

# Identity

- Pandemic Influence:
  - Redefining sense of belonging & purpose in the presence of unclear expectations & concrete limitations
  - Smaller world created by social-distancing leads to sense of solidified self in role that will change significantly upon return to “normal” routines
- Potential Benefits:
  - Sensitive to others who do not fit “traditional categories”
  - Ability to develop full ownership over identity & narrative
  - Creative & ambitious out-of-the-box thinkers & problem-solvers



# Identity

- Parent Support Strategies:
  - Promote critical thinking & realistic goal-setting through curiosity & open dialogue
  - Reframe perceived negatives in history (powerlessness as resilience, strength, survival)
  - Identify present truths & reflect on their importance (beliefs, values, talents, passions)
  - Share known details of adoption story in developmentally appropriate ways with honest language & explicitly emphasize permission for a wide range of emotional reactions
  - Build relationships with other adopted individuals/families & people who share child's race/birth culture

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Week 6: Intimacy

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- **Intimacy**
- Control

Intimacy

- Internal Question:
 - “How can I trust anyone?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
 - Vulnerability feels like a threat to survival, so self-protection becomes key
 - Struggle to share transparently or spontaneously
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
 - Closeness in relationships may feel foreign, unpredictable, or superficial
 - Need/dependence on others feels frightening
 - Isolate, cut off, or “sabotage” relationships to self-protect
 - Overanalyze “shoulds” in relationship roles due to “Imposter Syndrome”
 - Fear of unknowingly dating a biological relative

Intimacy

- Pandemic Influence:
 - Forced physical proximity may feel triggering or elicit false/superficial sense of emotional closeness that recedes dramatically when “normal routine” returns
 - Mixed emotions about dependence upon caregivers during a time of global crisis
- Potential Benefits:
 - Cautious when developing new relationships
 - Less invested in “social drama”
 - Able to end unhealthy relationships

Intimacy

- Parent Support Strategies:
 - Role model transparency & openness with your own emotions, thoughts, flaws, limitations, etc.
 - Attune to communication of needs in verbal, non-verbal & underlying ways that reflect understanding & acceptance
 - Communicate openly & honestly about adoption story in developmentally appropriate ways & empathize with reactions instead of reassuring/comforting
 - Show your child how you value their input in concrete ways

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## Week 7: Control

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# Control

- Internal Question:
  - “How can I stay safe?”
- Influence on Decision-Making & Behaviors:
  - Determined to meet own survival needs
  - Triggered by unpredictability or uncertainty
  - Pervasive fear of failure/mistakes, especially in novel situations
  - Poor choices may be the only avenue of feeling in control of some situations
- Influence on Self-Esteem & Relationships:
  - Excessive bossiness or micromanaging of others
  - Poor frustration tolerance for others’ mistakes or flaws
  - Strong desire or independence may stifle relationships

# Control

- Pandemic Influence:
  - Daily routine is more predictable & controllable, while global community is less predictable & controllable
  - Smaller world created by social-distancing leads to sense of competence/confidence that will change significantly upon return to “normal” routines
- Potential Benefits:
  - Ability to effectively manage own schedule, chores/errands, deadlines, etc.
  - Able to voice opinions & preferences assertively
  - Responsible for role in cause-effect relationships

# Control

- Parent Support Strategies:
  - Collaborative decision-making & validation of input balanced with structure & taking charge to build trust in caregivers' ability to handle challenges
  - Tell when options are not available; ask & offer 2-3 options when possible
  - Give ample opportunities for good decision-making & convey trust in ability to follow through
  - Use curiosity to guide realistic cause-effect thinking
  - Emphasize earning/contributing over losing/removing & express consistent messages about limits, rewards & consequences

**Thank you for joining us today!**

For more resources from Dr. Wirta-Leiker,  
visit [www.growbeyondwords.com](http://www.growbeyondwords.com).

Questions?

Contact The Adoption Exchange at [MVargo@adoptex.org](mailto:MVargo@adoptex.org).