

## Parenting with Narratives: the A, B, C's of Adoption Stories

*Ed note: This guide looks at the work of Dr. Daniel Hughes and others and brings it down to the practical level for use by parents. Here you will find great tools for your parenting toolbox. We thank Dr. Hughes for his support and review of this project. CAK*

### FORWARD

By Daniel A. Hughes, Ph.D

Jean MacLeod has reminded us of the timeless power of stories in our lives and of their special importance for adoptive families. All children struggle with "Who am I?" as well as "Who are we--as a family?" As Jean says very clearly, the story of the life of an adopted child "needs to go deeper" than statements of fact. The adopted child needs to experience her story from many perspectives and with both the mind and the heart. He needs to know that the mystery of his spirit is fully welcomed by his adoptive parents. She needs to know that her unique story has its place among the community of stories that have emerged over the generations, among the cultures and nations of the world. By bringing stories into the home and by creating their own stories--together--parent and child are jointly creating interwoven stories of their family history.

Stories need to have a central place  
in the ongoing development of the adoptive family.

Jean MacLeod and this EMK Press Guide have definitely facilitated this process...

# INTRODUCTION

By S.M. Macrae, Ph.D

The use of stories, drawn, sung and told, is at the base of human kind. From cave paintings, through the Bhagavad-Gita, the Odyssey, the Iliad, Beowulf, diaries, novels, high opera, film, TV and pop songs, we tell our stories and make our connections. Stories make personal and social history.

Our stories are different in capacity to any other creatures' songs and gestures. Our stories can be told to reinforce the past, yes, but... we can change the endings, reflect new happenings. Our stories have an infinity of ways of being told... and we have the capacity to tell them differently, so they reflect our thoughts as they change.

Human emotions are the core of stories. Across the world, stories tell of madness, sadness, badness, loss, betrayal, anger, joy, love... and often a "happy ending". Perhaps this is so because we are optimistic beings: we are optimistic because we can narrate the past, and hope to change it in the future. We can use the past to serve the future if we take time in the present so to do.

We alone in the world can talk of the future. Perhaps that is why so many children's books have as a central character an "abandoned" child... the future is then in the child's own power.

Children's books are most often characterized by repetition, rhyme and clear-cut characters. So too were the early oral-formulaic stories, told by minstrels to the beat of a drum or the sound of a horn, told so as to draw the "listening clan" together. The repetitions were there to strengthen the archetypal enterprises sung of, and also were there to help the audience listen, not fall asleep, and have recall of the catch-phrases, the watchwords, from the last telling.

For our adopted children, author Jean MacLeod suggests that in working with our children in developing narratives (through reading books, reading WITH Mother, and grappling with emotions described therein) our kids can both develop empathy and Attunement with us. They can then go on to get a coherent sense of themselves through working with us "on emotions" in the easiest and most bonding ways... reading or making a story. Thus, having Built identity, we are strengthening their Connection to emotions which happened "before us", but are there to help them survive them. And through our stories and through our "song" and the song waiting in their hearts, we are forging catch phrases, watchwords, FAMILY words that connect the kids and their past to us. And to a future as our family.

It's what Jean MacLeod calls the ABC of Adoption Stories.

There is more in the bonds of story telling, too. Because we are storytellers, most children have heard their mothers speak and sing and be angry and sad months before they are born. Shortly after birth, babies recognize and turn to the sound of that voice.

It's important then that we adoptive families turn to story telling as soon as we can, not just for the power of the story, nor even for the power of the snuggle, but also for the power of the voice. Even for older children, and children adopted internationally whose ears are not attuned to our voices or indeed our language, the power of our voice is important. Fun, sorrow, gentleness; all are conveyed in the voice. We should offer an especial place to the power of our voices, in our natural tongue, to our adopted children. It's a tool we can borrow from how bio mothers bond.

Writers of works on the therapeutic use of narratives offer us this which works also on simple "in-family story telling": that when an adult enters the world of fiction and fantasy WITH a child, this breaks down barriers. The child doesn't feel "taught" by the adult, but, accompanied by the adult into scary places or sad ones, feels strong and good about going there. Or we may know that it's time to face the dragons and the monsters, and that facing them \*with Mum\* may mean triumph for the child.

The above notwithstanding, children often cue us about what they need in books. If we supply a plentiful pile, yet there is one book that is carried under arm, slept with and demanded ten times a day, then that is the book the child "is working on". In our house Owl Babies is in its sixth reincarnation. Its primary reader started it at 18 months, is still reading it at eight. She says she loves it that Owl Mother **KEEPS HER PROMISE AND COMES BACK**.

Narratives are powerful parenting tools.

## Parenting with Narratives: the A, B, C's of Adoption Stories

by Jean MacLeod

*Once Upon a Time* there was a little girl with shiny black hair and dancing brown eyes who was born in a faraway land. She lived happily with her mama and papa and her big sister, until an evil emperor decreed that all second-born children must leave their families and go to work in his elegant palace. The little girl's parents were very sad, as the emperor's laws must be obeyed. They decided to hide in the forest and live secretly and quietly all together, until the evil emperor had a change of heart. One night when the moon was full, the mama and the papa and the big sister packed up their meager belongings, placed the little girl on top of the bundle and began their move to the deep, dark forest. The little girl wasn't afraid. She was with her family, whom she loved very much, and she knew they would keep her safe. Soon she grew very sleepy; the bundle she sat upon was very big and very soft and she curled up like a kitten and fell fast asleep.

When the little girl woke up it was early morning and she was all alone. Sometime during the long night's journey she had slid slowly off of the top of the bundle, and had landed in a bed of flowers on a busy corner in an unfamiliar village. The little girl called for her parents and for her

big sister, but no one answered her cries... until a kind voice asked her why she was crying. The little girl looked up through her tears and saw a strange and terrifying sight: it was a woman, with wild yellow hair and the pointiest nose the little girl had ever seen. "Can I help you, little one?" the woman said with a smile.

"I have lost my parents," the little girl said in a small voice.

"Well, how lucky I found you then! I have been looking for a long time for a little girl to love and take care of" said the kind woman. So she helped the little girl up and held her hand and took her to her lovely home where she fed the little girl hot chocolate and raisin toast, gave her amazing toys to play with, and a small bed of her own to sleep in. Once the little girl realized the scary-looking woman was really very nice, she grew to care deeply for her and they lived very happily ever after...

**\*\*UNTIL the little girl hit the teen years, realized her losses, raged at her adoption-abduction, and became estranged from the loving woman who had "rescued" her from the street corner in order to fulfill narcissistic parenting needs!!!\*\***

How will your child see her/his adoption? What "story" will they read into their own lives as they begin to make sense of what happened to them as young children? When the little girl said, "I have lost my parents", shouldn't the strange woman appropriately have answered, "Then I will help you find them" instead of claiming the child for her own?

If this is how some of our children secretly perceive their own adoption stories (and their adoptive parents) then we need adoption explanations that go farther than the adoptive parental platitude "we were meant to be together". Parenting narratives allow the child to see a complex tale from all sides and perspectives, and give a child the opportunity to examine some serious thoughts and emotions in a familiar format. They also allow the parent to present the truth in several different ways and to provide point-of-views that are personally empowering to the adoptee.

Parenting narratives can take shape through a parent's use of children's literature, by the oral tradition of storytelling (a favorite at bedtime), by co-creating a Lifebook, or by utilizing personal adoption videos or photographs. Realizing that there are gentle and creative ways to approach the issues of adoption and the intense feelings of adoptees, and that children's books can help provide the tools, is a relief for all of us adoptive parents who have taken on this monumental job without much tech support.

A child's attunement to his or her adoptive parents via narratives, and co-creating a Life Narrative with an adopted child, are both part of an overlapping, circular process. The parent-child narratives that I advocate in this Parent Guide are NOT meant as therapeutic tools. Several forms of narratives are used by professionals to help children who have been traumatized or who are seeking help for social or developmental difficulties, and an excellent source for further information can be found in the workbook from the Family Attachment and Counseling Center (see resources), or in the work of Daniel Hughes.

Adoption issues are normal. Some require a therapist's attention, but the issues that most often get expressed by adoptees are usually addressed at home by mom or dad. We want our children to express all of their feelings surrounding adoption, because it allows us to do our job: we are

the responsible parent and we need to encourage, support, listen to, and walk with our adopted children through their personal stories and beliefs.

The benefits of Parenting Narratives are what I call:

## The A, B, C's of Adoption Stories

**Attunement and Attachment** - stories can help teach a post-institutional child the meaning of family, and help him or her to learn to love, trust and feel secure

**Building Identity** -- children need a foundation for “self”; they need the truth AND they need to feel empowered by their story. Kids can't go forward without a past!

**Communication and Connection** -- children need to be able to talk about adoption's tough stuff, and they need to be able to count on YOU being there next to them when they do

## A = Attunement and Attachment:

Our internationally adopted children come to us missing the first steps of the Dance of Attunement. Attunement happens between a newborn and a mom as they learn to pick up and respond to each other's verbal and non-verbal cues. Voice, eye contact, facial expression and touch, all play into this amazingly essential give-and-take; a baby learns she has control over this all-important mom (equating to control over her world), and she learns she can trust mom to understand and respond to her needs.

This natural dance between mom and baby is the foundation of attachment. It takes place in hundreds of moments every day, and is so hard-wired into healthy moms and bio-babies that it is not even noticed. When a child and a parent are attuned to each other the child is able to self-regulate. This doesn't mean that she is tantrum-free, but that she is able to draw upon the inner structures she has in place (from her mom) to calm down and make sense of her moods and feelings. A child who is securely attached is not ordinarily out-of-control angry or fearful; she is attuned to her mother's unspoken words and expectations. She knows the steps! What the mom offers/teaches/imparts to the child is reciprocated back to her in a solid relationship-- it is the dance, tightly and lovingly choreographed. As a child pays attention to the mom's requests, and the mom pays attention to the child's needs, trust grows and invisible boundaries are laid and respected....

A post-institutional kid has missed the early formative groundwork that moms and infants do with each other, and must be taught to attune/attach. It is much harder to do with an older baby, toddler or child who has had their trust bruised, but it is crucial in having the kind of bond (and behavior) that brings joy to the entire family. In order for us to have the relationships that we dreamed of having with our children, we need to work a little more at connecting to them—and we need to teach them to connect to us. Attunement is a graceful dance between two people who know the steps, who can both lead and follow, and who can anticipate the change in music...

Or, as a poem used by psychologist Dr. Daniel Hughes puts it:

To love a child  
is to learn the song  
that is in her heart,  
And then sing it to her  
when she forgets it.

How do we foster this dance, this song, this connection in our toddlers and older children? Most of us are not experienced attachment therapists or adoption social workers, yet we parents can do what moms and dads have always intuitively done to connect: we can create shared emotional experiences with our children. We can involve our children's "perceptions, thoughts, intentions, memories, ideas, beliefs and attitudes" (Dan Siegel, MD). We can use our facial expressions, voice, and body movement to MATCH and/or RE-DIRECT our children's affect and response. We can verbally help our children understand what they are feeling by communicating our own feelings.

***We can tell stories.***

Stories are universal and personal. They can be utilized as shared emotional experiences, and we can use dramatic voices and active body language to help our children become involved. We can share our own emotions, and help a child reflect back on their own. When we are aware of our children's body signals and emotional cues, we can tailor our storytelling to feed our children's needs.

***We can connect on the cognitive level, and from our hearts.***

Adopted children may need to re-learn to love, trust and feel safe. They may need to learn about families and relationships—children who have lived some/most of their young lives in an institution cannot be expected to understand the unseen structure of a family, or the role of a mom or dad. Stories and books don't make attachment happen, and they don't heal a traumatized child or cure attachment disorder. But used with a parent's awareness of attunement, they can provide a "warm fuzzy" on the long chain of warm fuzzies that are necessary to build a loving relationship.

**CHILDREN'S BOOKS** can provide the tools to facilitate stories that promote parent-child attunement. Tools are not always easy to use... reading a story to a child is fun; reading a story that evokes emotion, shared conversation, understanding and empathy, is a little harder. The beauty of using narratives to adoption-parent is that it is already part of what most of us normally do with our children. It is just done consciously with an extra level of awareness, and with an end result in mind.

Storybooks can assist children who are navigating a new environment. They can be used to begin a conversation or open a topic, and can be personalized to a child's circumstances. Books are user-friendly and non-threatening, and can help a parent find the words that unlock shared feelings.

The following is a short list of parenting favorites that claim and celebrate the nurturing bond between a parent and young child:

*I Don't Have Your Eyes* by Carrie A. Kitze  
*Baby-Steps* by Peter McCarty  
*I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* by Rose A. Lewis  
*Even If I Did Something Awful* by B. Shook Hazen  
*I Promise I'll Find You* by Heather P. Ward  
*Little Miss Spider* by David Kirk  
*Mama, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara M. Joasse  
*The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown  
*I Love You As Much...* by L. Krauss Melmed  
*Hush Little Baby* by Sylvia Long  
*Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale* by Karen Katz  
*Tell Me Again About the Night That I Was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis  
*The Little Green Goose* by Adele Sansone  
*Hazel's Amazing Mother* by Rosemary Wells  
*Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell

Almost any book with any kind of happy or sad “feeling” can be used to leverage attunement. Older children can be similarly reached with a good tale and an exploration of its theme. I read the dog classic “Lassie Come Home” (the big, beautiful, illustrated version of the original, by Susan Jeffers / Rosemary Wells) to my nine year old, who had been adopted from China as a baby. We were both teary-eyed by the end of the story, and I took advantage of the opportunity. I asked, “How do you think Lassie felt when she was lost and all alone?”

We talked about poor Lassie, who had been abandoned and who was searching for her birthparents—oops! I mean human family. Well, you get the idea... adoption, and the feelings a child has about her/his adoption, can be discussed via a story without an older child shutting down. The attunement came after we discussed Lassie's sad, dire circumstances: I told my daughter “If Lassie had been MY dog, I never would have let her go! I would have searched every inch of England AND Scotland, and I never would have stopped looking until I found her!”

I didn't change the sad stuff the poor dog had to experience, but there is always more than one take we can make on every finish. I like to acknowledge what the main character has or hasn't done with what has happened. What would my daughter do? What would I do? What are the choices?

We ended up in a hug after sharing our sadness (and relief over Lassie making it home!), sitting close together, both of us enjoying the moment and each other.

When using stories to do “the dance”, or to sing the “song” with your child:

- Infuse your stories with drama and feeling
- Take verbal and non-verbal cues from your child (listen and watch!)
- Reciprocate with the next-step verbal/physical cue (show them!)
- Give actual words to shared emotion
- Encourage physical closeness

When reading stories, keep in mind:

\*Books that might appear “too young” for a child’s chronological age, may be very appropriate for that child’s emotional age. Do not hesitate to use younger-level picture books that have stories that touch all ages on a deeper level. The books do NOT have to be about adoption to be useful.

\*Reading a book with your child in your lap is cozy and comforting. Alternate with having your child sit directly in front of you, knee-to-knee, while holding the book up and open. The child will see the illustrations, and also be able to read your face. “The most powerful of our non-verbal communication instruments is the face. A child's face, and yours, is a barometer expressing interest, investment, curiosity, joy, fear, anger, confusion, or doubt.” (Dr. Bruce Perry)

\*Some children are wigglers, and have a difficult time sitting still to listen. Author Susan Olding suggests a solution that worked for her family:

"A few disastrous experiences showed me that if I ever hoped to get my daughter to accept me as I am (somebody who loves to snuggle up with a book or twenty), I'd also have to show her that I accept her as SHE is (somebody who NEEDS to move, to think!) So from the time she was about 18 months on, I built in time before, between, and after stories to shake the sillies out. In our house this even included the special privilege of jumping on the bed. At that stage, I also read a lot of "action" books to her (Eric Carle's Head to Toe comes to mind) and we'd both act out the pictures. I also allowed her to turn pages, etc. (until and unless she sabotaged that, in which case I would just put the books away.)"

\*Use a lot of expression! Be passionate! Use gestures! Some children have difficulty in “getting” non-verbal cues, and are helped with story interpretation through exaggerated, dramatic interaction. Stories with repetition and catchy say-aloud lines are fun to read together.

\*Be aware of your child’s physical / verbal cues. If a story makes him or her uncomfortable, stop and talk about it. Trust and emotional safety are key to attachment, and it is up to the parent to listen to the child, acknowledge the child’s discomfort, and take the lead in either continuing the story, deciding to offer another story, or by suggesting a different joint interest.

\*Story-time can be an example of “reciprocal communication of thoughts and feelings, and shared activities” (Dan Hughes, Ph.D). Dr. Hughes’ P.L.A.C.E philosophy --Playful, Loving, Accepting, Curious, and Empathic interactions--reinforces attunement, and according to Dr. Hughes, facilitates the capacity for fun and love. Ask your child specific questions about what they think and feel about the story. Share your own opinion/feelings. “Spin” the story and explore alternate endings. Have fun together!

\*There is no perfect, pre-determined set of children’s books that work for every child. Therapists that work with narratives believe that the parent understands the child better than anyone else, and will have a better feeling for stories that will touch the child on some emotional level.

\*Narratives are a PROCESS- there is no “right” way to tell a story; if you screw up, there’s always another chance to re-tell it!



\*Dealing with Disney: Disney movies are a particularly vivid form of cultural “storytelling” that children (and parents) either love and cherish, or hate and fear! We can use these films, if our children are open to them. Elaine Hannah wrote:

"Disney movies can be a wonderful starting point for discussing bigger life issues. When my daughter has expressed fear of the necessary mean character, be it witch, queen, or stepmother, I explain that without evil there can be no happy ending. Without a nasty character how would we measure the character of the good one? In life good things happen and bad things, there are good people and bad. There can't be one without the other. I try to boil the story down to the bone. There is challenge and evil, but courage and pureness of heart triumph and everyone lives happily ever after. Sometimes on a daily basis."

A Disney movie, like a dark fairy-tale, is an opportunity for talk, and for a release of emotion. It is an opportunity for a parent to attune with a child and help them emotionally “re-write” the ending. We can use Disney to declare what we, as parents, would do to help our children no matter what happened. AND what our brave, creative, strong children could do to help themselves!

**CLAIMING NARRATIVES** take parent-child stories a step closer and deeper, and offer a warm and caring “re-write” to a missing early chapter of the relationship. Typically, a claiming narrative is told in first person using storytelling’s oral tradition, and is used to build or repair an emotional bond.

Claiming and Re-parenting:

Mom or dad tells the story of how they would have taken care of the adopted child, if he or she had been born to them. The tale can begin in imaginary-utero and progress to the detailed, daily maintenance of a well-loved infant. Most children, even older children, like to be occasionally babied, and a claiming narrative allows a parent to physically act out caring for a “baby” while simultaneously telling the story. The emotional connection of re-enacting a happy, playful infancy is further reinforced by expressing the poignant, underlying wishes of both parent and child:

\* Mom: “I wish you had grown inside of me”; or, “I wish you had been my baby from the very first moment of your life”; or, “I wish I could have taken care of you the way you should have been taken care of”

\*Child: “I wish you had been my birthmother”; or, “I wish my birthmother could have taken care of me”

A child that expresses a wish to be with his or her birthmother is generally not taking a personal shot at the adoptive parent. A child feeling “safe” enough to express this kind of honesty is usually speaking to the loss that has rocked his or her world, and is not trying to be actively hurtful. It is actually a remarkable opportunity to attune: an adoptive parent that meets this sort of sad, wistful statement with empathy, and words of understanding, will help the child desire to turn to mom or dad for comfort.

Dan Hughes said that a parent that helps their child “co-construct an interpersonal reality gives a child the tools that she needs to make sense of the internal and external worlds in which we live.”

We parents give meaning to our children's experience, and we help them learn to analyze how they feel and what they think. Our children borrow our strengths, and our filters, and by sharing ourselves (our thoughts AND emotions) we help them grow. Ultimately, an attuned dialogue on a sensitive topic like birthparents could prove to be an affirmation of the strength of the adoptive parent-child relationship. Children's books can provide an introduction into this kind of sensitive parent/child dialog:

"I may never know you  
but I wonder  
who you are,  
and what you look like.

Do you wonder too?

The full moon glows  
heavy in the night sky.  
a beacon of  
beauty and truth.

Why did you leave me?

It's soft light  
filters through rustling leaves,  
making shadows  
that play on the grass.

Do you remember me?"

(excerpted from We See the Moon by Carrie Kitze)

#### Claiming and Family Membership:

Claiming narratives have traditionally been used to pass on a family's history and rituals. Older adoptees can benefit from "family stories" that introduce their new family members (Great-Grandma Millie and Crazy Uncle Ed), and that include the adoptee in the group experience. It is a huge comfort for a child to feel that she belongs in her adopted family, that she has full membership along with her parents and siblings, and that the membership can never be revoked. A parent can emphasize family kinship by telling stories that celebrate connections.

Susan Olding made audio-tapes for her young daughter that recounted stories from Susan's own childhood, and used the connecting power of a mother's voice:

"The stories on my daughter's most recent tape are indeed 'family stories.' Tales about me when I was a little girl, and a first version, storybook-style telling of her own baby story. The Family Narrative has been so important for my daughter. She ADORES those stories of my own childhood naughtiness or silliness. She likes to hear how her grandma (my mother) responded. This morning she asked me if Grandma was young when she adopted me. I

gently reminded her that I was born to Grandma, not adopted by her. For a second I thought this might upset her. But instead, she said, "Hey! I know a birthmother!"

A claiming narrative does what the Story Maven, Sharon Falter, states is the most important reason for reading books and telling stories in the first place:

“Storytelling creates a connection between people. What more can a parent give to their child than the gift of a story? It is a gift of meaning. It is a gift of understanding. And it is a gift of self.”

## B = Building Identity

“When a child is born of the Bear clan, you’ve got to tell him what it means to be part of the Bear Clan. He’s got to be given a name that fits with Bear Clan customs. He’s got to know that he has this whole identity and that identity goes right back to the myth, right back to the beginnings of time. That is strength. That is power. That makes you feel good about who you are. And if you don’t know who you are, then you don’t know where anything else fits.” (Native American / Rev. Katie Lee)

Helping a child develop an identity that includes the past, the present and the future is integral for a child to feel whole. For adopted children five to ten years old, identity may be the consuming core issue. Their realization of the blank space in their early family history coincides with the hollow feeling they carry inside, with a profoundly sad result. They don’t know who they are.

How do we help our adopted children develop a sense of identity? Particularly, how do we help international adoptees feel pride about where they were born, AND help them be comfortable in the world they live in?

We can tell stories.

“I still wonder about my life in China.

I love my parents very much and I  
wouldn’t want any other family, but  
I think I will always miss knowing the  
parents that weren’t mine to keep.

My mom says that I am a brave kid  
and that my life has been an amazing  
adventure—that I have experienced  
enormous changes, and I have survived  
them all. I like to think about it that way;  
it helps me bring both my sides together.

I was born in China and now I’m from  
here, and my before and after is all part

of who I am: one girl from two places  
who is growing up to be at home in this  
big, wide world.”

(excerpted from *At Home in This World* by Jean MacLeod)

As parents, we also tell stories to change a child’s view of themselves. For instance, the protagonist in *At Home in This World* has had sad things happen to her, but she is not a victim. She is coming to terms with her story and it’s enigma, and she is empowered by her (and her parent’s) particular view of her life. The Family Attachment Center would categorize *At Home in this World* as a “Successful Child Narrative”. The Dulwich Centre, specializing in Narrative Therapy, would call it an “Alternative Story”.

“There are many different sorts of stories by which we live our lives and relationships – including stories about the past, present and future. Stories can also belong to individuals and/or communities. There can be family stories and relationship stories.

An individual may have a story about themselves as being successful and competent. Alternatively they may have a story about themselves as being ‘a failure at trying new things’ or ‘a coward’ or as ‘lacking determination’... All these stories could be occurring at the same time, and events, as they occur, will be interpreted according to the meaning (plot) that is dominant at that time. In this way, the act of living requires that we are engaged in the mediation between the dominant stories and the alternative stories of our lives. We are always negotiating and interpreting our experiences.” (Alice Morgan, Dulwich Centre)

How do we negotiate and interpret these important stories about identity in a way that allows our children to really integrate what we are saying about them? A narrative can help to change a child’s reality (or “internal working model”, as trauma-specialist Dr. Bruce Perry calls it). Dr. Dan Siegel has been researching the kind of narratives that have the power to effect positive change in our adopted children. What he has found is that certain interactions can model and facilitate brain-integration of the thinking and feeling—the key is in using verbal and non-verbal signals at the same time to help integration of the story take place (e.g. language plus emotion).

Dr Siegel likes to use the word “collaboration” for attunement, and he stresses that it can be taught to parents to use with their children. This includes involving a child by sharing “eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, gestures and timing and intensity of response.” This also means sharing reflective dialogues about inner “thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories, sensations, attitudes, beliefs and intentions.”

Both Dr. Siegel and Dr. Hughes have researched and clinically validated the importance of marrying thought and feeling when working on attunement/collaboration and attachment. It is impossible to really help a child deal with their adoption stories or adoption issues, without having or fostering parent-child attunement. It is the BASIS for telling stories, and on a much deeper level, for building a child’s identity. Healthy growth isn’t possible without a firm foundation.

Attunement with our children helps them to create their own positive self-image. Therapist Denise Lacher said, “If you change the story, you can change self-understanding.” I just call it “spin”, but they both work the same way. When you talk with your son or daughter about their

birth story and abandonment, you have the power in your words to make your children feel like Heroes or like Victims. We are all multi-storied people, and we have choices we can make about our life-narratives.

Narrative Therapy uses a correlating concept called “Narrative Spaces”, that is helpful to apply to our kids. Below, I am using an example from the Dulwich Centre website, but applying it to an adoption story:

Picture Stonehenge. Between the gigantic boulders that form the circle, are big spaces. An adoptee is used to getting his or her story told by the big, powerful boulders (society-at-large and the media), and has not had much choice but to internalize a demoralizing reality: “unwanted, abandoned, left on a street corner.”

But the spaces “in between” are equally powerful. A parent can utilize those spaces to bring a different, alternative meaning to what the boulders have proclaimed. For example, the space-in-between: a child who was left on a street corner as a baby and later adopted is not a pathetic, perennially wounded kid. He/she was a brave, strong baby with an iron will to survive, who overcame the odds... and who is imbued with traits to conquer the world!

By helping our children to see the spaces in their story and in the world around them, we can give them a tool that is truthful and life-changing. Words have the power to change; it is a force majeure to hand that power to our children, so they know that the rest of their story, their ending, is within their control.

A pre-adoption Lifebook (\*see accompanying EMK Lifebook Parent Guides by Carrie Kitze and Beth O’Malley) can help define a narrative space, and an adopted child can better learn to acknowledge the empty places in her history when they are re-framed and normalized by the principal adult in her life. It's all about empowerment; a co-created Lifebook (shared words and emotion!) gives a child ownership of her life story, and all of her thoughts and feelings.

Dan Siegel said that we can “collaborate in the construction of a coherent reality for our child, and help them connect the past, present and future to create an autobiographical form of self-awareness.”

Which brings us to...

## C = Communication and Connection

Stories COMMUNICATE our thoughts and emotions. They CREATE A CONNECTION between people, AND between the past, present and future. Life Narratives are an identity tool that can present an opportunity to use stories and mixed media as part of an attuning activity. Creating a Lifebook, watching and discussing an adoption video, and looking at pre and post adoption photographs together can combine the most basic collaborative, co-constructive attuning elements of Dr. Hughes’ and Dr. Siegel’s theories and research.

ADOPTION VIDEOS and PHOTOGRAPHS can be used as a jump-off point to conversations about a child’s early life, and can give clues to a child’s pre-adoption history. Looking at these

tools analytically, a parent and child can discern the emotions of all involved and sometimes deduce relationships, level of pre-adoptive care, and a physical and developmental history.

In looking at your child's adoption day video/photos and the first months or year at home, it's important to talk about the emotions that the baby in the images might have been feeling, and the emotions your child has today watching herself on tape. It's okay to talk about the fact that she might have been scared, or grieving a caregiver or foster family during the adoption, and you might point out how your own happy expression does/doesn't match hers in the video. Ask her if she can see the difference, and can she guess why?

I am amazed at what I see in my daughter's photographs and video years later; they have given me a better understanding of her history, transition and personality. My daughter had a life before me, but I'm the person responsible (at this point in time) for helping her fill in the holes.

---

"Where did I come from? What did my birthparents look like... what will I look like? What was my life like before I met you? Why was I abandoned?" are questions my daughter has asked me, and she and I have looked for clues together. We might never find definitive answers, but we piece together what we can and find comfort in the process.

How can adoptive parents make sense out of the sometimes trivial, sometimes confusing, sometimes overwhelming information we have for our children?

We can tell stories.

My daughter and I watch her adoption video and discuss the feelings she had when she met us, that are evident by viewing her reactions on tape at 10 months old. We talk about how happy I look, and how wary she looks. We watch her private interaction with her caretaker and understand more about her life in the orphanage. We watch, and talk about the area she is from, what the local people look like, and why she might have been placed where she was found. Without a lot of concrete answers to give our children, a lot of small clues can be surmised by viewing video footage or early photos of the adoption, and of the first months at home:

How did your child interact with her/his caregiver?

What was the caregiver's personality? Name?

Was your child healthy, well-fed, happy? Developmentally on target?

(if not, look for visual clues "why")

What was she wearing?

How did he play? What amused him?

What was her reaction to you? Is this how she still deals with change?

(one clue to personality and early life experience)

Did he look sad, happy or scared when he met you, and did his expression change over the next two weeks together, and next couple of months at home?

What do you think she was thinking/feeling?

If you visited the orphanage, where did he spend his time?

What was the atmosphere? Who were his friends/crib-mate?

What were her milestones, once home? First tooth, first word, first step?

Photos and video helped to familiarize my daughter with her beginnings, and the visuals helped me to talk with her about the bittersweet side of adoption. Our video is part of my daughter's life story; it is part of my "mothering" story. It is a precious piece, because it captures loss and love, and the first tentative moments of family connection.

Pictures do tell a story... but it's equally important to communicate how you and your child feel about what is gleaned from these visual puzzle pieces. An empathic, attuned parent-child relationship will remember the "dance" steps through the questions of childhood, the angst of pre-adolescence, and the teen identity crisis. Ultimately, we want our children to be comfortable with all of their pieces and with who they are; giving a child ownership over their history is part of a Parenting Narrative. Attunement, Building Identity, Communication and Connection:

The A, B, C's of adoption stories provide us with some of the fundamental tools of family. We can't be untruthful about a child's life story... we can help our children connect a narrative that hangs together from the fragments that are known, and re-story the whole with our love and strength. ~

---

## **SOURCES and RESOURCES**

Daniel Hughes, Ph.D

[www.danielahughes.homestead.com](http://www.danielahughes.homestead.com)

[dhughes1060@adelphia.net](mailto:dhughes1060@adelphia.net)

Daniel J. Siegel, M.D.

[www.parentinginsideout.com](http://www.parentinginsideout.com)

[danieljs@ucla.edu](mailto:danieljs@ucla.edu)

Professional Interview - Daniel Siegel, MD, at Mental Help Net

[http://mentalhelp.net/poc/view\\_doc.php?type/doc/id/818](http://mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type/doc/id/818)

Denise Lacher, M.A

"Connecting With Kids Through Stories" (CD)

"Parenting with Stories:

Creating a foundation of attachment for parenting your child" (workbook)

By Melissa Nichols, M.A., Denise Lacher, M.A., and Joanne May, Ph.D.

Family Attachment and Counseling Center

[www.familyattachment.com](http://www.familyattachment.com)

Narrative Therapy (info & articles)  
"What is Narrative Therapy?" by Alice Morgan  
Dulwich Centre  
[www.dulwichcentre.com.au](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au)

Doris Landry, MS  
Attachment Coalition of Michigan  
[Doris@adoptionparenting.net](mailto:Doris@adoptionparenting.net)  
[www.adoptionparenting.net](http://www.adoptionparenting.net)

Rev. Katie Lee  
Sermon, First Parish of Sudbury, 11-14-99  
[www.fpsudbury.org](http://www.fpsudbury.org)

"Placing Our Children Within Our Family: Family Storytelling" by Susan Ward  
<http://www.olderchildadoption.com/therstories/placing.htm>

"How to Tell Stories" (Therapeutic Storytelling) by Susan Ward  
<http://www.olderchildadoption.com/therstories/howto.htm>

"Becoming a Storyteller" by Gerald Fierst  
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/storyteller/becoming.htm>

"Collecting Family Stories"  
<http://www.storyarts.org/classroom/roots/family.html>

"Orphans and Warriors" by Dee Paddock, MA, MTC, NCC  
<http://www.rainbowkids.com/602orphanswarriors.htm>

"Attunement: Reading the Rhythms of a Child" by Bruce Perry, MD, Ph.D  
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/attunement.htm>

"Adoption's Lifetime Issues: what parents need to know" by Jean MacLeod  
[www.emkpress.com](http://www.emkpress.com) /Parent Resources

"The World of the Adopted Child" by Christopher J. Alexander, Ph.D  
<http://e-magazine.adoption.com/articles/462/the-world-of-the-adopted-child>



## **LIFE NARRATIVE BOOKS for children**

*We See the Moon* by Carrie Kitze (EMK Press)

*At Home in This World, a China adoption story* by Jean MacLeod (EMK Press)

*Twice-Upon-a-Time: Born and Adopted* by Eleanora Patterson

*Before I Met You: A Therapeutic Pre-Adoption Narrative* by Doris Landry, MS

*When You Were Born in China* by Sara Dorow

*When You Were Born in Korea* by Brian Boyd

*When You Were Born in Vietnam* by Therese Bartlett

*Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale* by Karen Katz

## **BUILDING A FAMILY**

Claiming (creating family rituals & ceremonies):

*I Love You Rituals* by Becky A. Bailey, Ph.D

*The Heart of a Family* by Meg Cox

*The Five Love Languages of Children* by Gary Chapman & Ross Campbell

## **UNDERSTANDING ADOPTION ISSUES**

*Building the Bonds of Attachment and  
Facilitating Developmental Attachment*  
by Daniel A. Hughes, Ph.D

[Real Parents, Real Children; Parenting the Adopted Child](#)  
by Holly Van Gulden & Lisa Bartels-Rabb

*Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents* by Deborah Gray

Adoption Learning Partner free e-Courses [www.adoptionlearningpartners.org](http://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org)

EMK Press: Books for Adopted Children, Resources for Their Parents  
[www.emkpress.com](http://www.emkpress.com)

## LIFEBOOK RESOURCES

*Adoption Lifebook, A Bridge to Your Child's Beginnings* By Cindy Probst  
[www.lifebooksource.com](http://www.lifebooksource.com)

*Lifebooks, Creating a treasure for the Adopted Child* By Beth O'Malley  
[www.adoptionlifebooks.com](http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com)

Pergamon Adoption Video Services  
[www.pergamondesign.com](http://www.pergamondesign.com)

## BIBLIOTHERAPY LINKS

(using specific books on themed topics, e.g. sibling rivalry, death, divorce, etc.)

[http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/pub/eres/EDSPC715\\_MCINTYRE/Biblio.html](http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/pub/eres/EDSPC715_MCINTYRE/Biblio.html)

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/bibliotherapy.htm>

## LINKS TO POETRY OF CONNECTION

"*The Prophet*" by Khalil Gibran  
<http://www.kafel.com/poetry/gibran/gibran.html> (click on Children)

"*The Family of Adoption*" by Joyce Pavao  
<http://www.fpsudbury.org/kl/1999-2000/bearclan111499.html> (scroll to the bottom of the page)

"*For All the Little Girls from China*" by Penny Callan Partridge  
<http://www.emkpress.com/links> (scroll to the bottom of the page)