LAURA BROOKS with her husband Ronald Briggs and son Carl, age 8 months, in 1994.

Adoption and Your Family

By Laura Brooks, LCSW-C

I NEVER THOUGHT IT WOULD HAPPEN TO ME! After working 20 years as a clinical social worker and hearing myriad family stories, many from adoptive families, about difficult children, I had become an angry and critical mother with my 9-year-old son, Carl, whose name has been changed to protect his privacy, whom we adopted at birth.

For years, I had coached individuals and couples on navigating relationship problems in their families. In one adoptive family, the mother expected her daughter to be a ballet dancer, as well as a "cuddly and frilly type girl." Her daughter had her own ideas and asserted them by the age of 3.

After consulting me about the problem, the mother came to see the similarities between her relationships with her daughter and her mother. While her relationship with her mother was positive, worrying about upsetting her mother stopped her from expressing her true thoughts and feelings. With her daughter, this pattern was being replicated as she expected her daughter to go along with her. The difference was that her daughter was not nearly as compliant. This mother's effort to be more forthright with her own mother opened their relationship. More meaningful contact between them appeared to lessen the focus on her

daughter, who was then freer to pursue her own interests. In turn, the relationship with her daughter got calmer and more open.

I was well aware that a history of "peace/agree marriages" and a strong focus on the children, who provide stability to the marital relationship, existed in my family. I hoped frequent contact with my extended family would protect me against repeating this pattern, but I was still vulnerable to it. My difficulties with my son caught me off guard, not because of the pattern in my nuclear family, but in their appearance at such an early age. He was a cuddly baby, a compliant toddler and identified as bright when he entered school. By age 9, however, he began to be defiant, particularly about schoolwork and personal hygiene. At times, our conflict about these issues escalated to the point of him threatening to run away and me feeling totally helpless.

Like so many other adoptive mothers I had talked to, my connection to my son was automatic and natural, and I can't imagine feeling any more connected to him than I do. One adoptive mother in my psychotherapy practice reported that a friend suggested she return her young child to the Department of Social Services after a few trying years in their relationship. She responded that she couldn't imagine doing so because her child was "just like her own." I also knew from reading that adoption is a natural process found in many species, from chimpanzees to birds to insects. Across species, adoption apparently meets the need for the young to survive and the caretaker to reproduce.

I was also aware that when an adopted child has difficulties, often parents and professionals look to the adoption itself as the basis of the problem. One of my clients put her son in play therapy at age 5 because she "was going to deal with the issue early on and up front." After thinking about this decision, she came to see that her anxiety about her son's adjustment was her problem, not her son's. This client was not alone in focusing on the relationship between the adoption and the challenges at hand. And that's where my thinking went when Carl first began to have problems.

My husband and I had always been open with Carl about his adoption. With the advent of his defiance, we talked with him more about his adoption, but his behavior persisted.

Consequently, I asked myself the same question I posed to my clients: "How might my behavior be contributing to my son's behavior?" I began to see the degree to which I was focused on him. I subtly but constantly hovered, cajoled, advised, and generally treated him as if he were much younger than 9.

Looking back on the beginning of my relationship with Carl, the first red flags appeared when my husband and I decided to adopt after being unable to conceive. My role in my family was the academic and career-oriented one. More importantly, I had been available to my parents emotionally in subtle but predictable and expected ways. My mother was resistive to the idea of adoption and encouraged me on several occasions to "stick with my career." This wedge in the relationship was compounded by her reluctance to talk about our adoption plan and have contact with Carl until the birth parent rights were finally terminated 15 days after his birth.

In retrospect, the tense distancing that developed between my mother and me was not new, although during this time, it was more intense than usual. We had a long history of avoiding disagreements with each other, and I worked hard at trying to keep her happy or avoiding upsetting her. My father actively encouraged such behavior, as his tolerance for her anxiety was low.

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I think these issues with my parents contributed to my overly strong focus on Carl and my need for him to be a "super-kid"-smart, responsible and well-liked, especially by my extended family. In addition, Carl held a particularly vulnerable place in the family as the first-born male. For generations, the expectations of first-born males were high. While my father, a first-born, had risen to the challenge, the other first-born males by my generation had serious difficulties functioning.

I came to see the importance of being more myself with my parents as I made an effort to let Carl be more himself. I was free of the anxiety generated in my relationships with my mother and father. Like me, Carl had become oriented to what others expected. This characteristic, however, was more evident and troublesome when he became rebellious at age 9. Often, if rebellious, the adopted child can be seen as lacking a bond to their adoptive parents. To the contrary, I began to see that our high level of emotional connection was impeding his ability to be self-directed.

I began to address this issue by being more open and direct with my parents, especially with my mother, with whom I had the more intense relationship. I contacted her cousins and other relatives, and their information gave me an appreciation of her people-pleasing pattern and how it contributed to distance in many of her important relationships. As I began to know her more objectively, it was easier for me to give her information

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about myself and ask her without fear of judgment or worry on her part.

The effect on my relationship with my son has been encouraging. I see him as more separate from me and more responsible for himself, his decisions and his mistakes. He is becoming more responsible for his homework and taking more interest in his personal appearance. Our relationship calmed, and I am less anxious about his well-being. As I have become less focused on him and "recovered" more of myself, I have more energy for my marriage and my own personal and professional goals.

I think the process with birth children is fundamentally the same, although the explanation might be different. In adoptive families, the adoption itself is a unique fact in the child's history. Recent studies of large and representative population samples clearly show adopted children are no more likely to have problems functioning than biological children. Furthermore, many adoption studies have concluded that a healthy rearing environment has significant lasting effects on the child's life adjustment. This holds true for children with genetic predispositions toward depression, alcoholism and schizophrenia as well.

While a child's pre-adoptive history and age at placement have an effect, the relationship patterns in the adoptive family are another significant influence on the child's adjustment. How much does the family let the child be himself or herself? Is he or she focused on so much that he or she is constricted by others' expectations and sensitivity and unable to think for himself or herself?

The less we have focused on Carl and the more we have allowed him to be an individual, the more responsibility he has taken for himself. The tensions in my family relationships impeded Carl's ability to handle his own challenges in life. The lessening of these tensions freed him to direct his own life more effectively.

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