

expectations, reality and time travel for heroes



by **Helen Oakwater**

WHEN my children were placed in the early 1990s I had a view of how my life would be as a mother. I anticipated some things; however, reading bedtime stories with one child on my lap and two others snuggling in on each side was so much more wonderful and joyous than I could ever have imagined. The smell of my freshly bathed children was priceless.

The delight on *my* daughter's face as she pedalled her tricycle while singing! For many months it was the only time she wasn't whinging and whining. When that

grumpiness dissipated, I really felt I had made a real difference to her life. It outshone any professional success I had ever previously experienced.

Murdering hundreds of head lice, needing two trolleys in Tesco, having three loads of washing every day, cutting hair tangled in a Duplo toy train, finding the kitchen transformed into a pink fluffy Barbie world, cleaning vomit from inside a sofa. All these delights were unexpected. So was having my purse stolen one Tuesday, then my credit cards taken the following week – both by my ten year old.

I didn't sign up for drug abuse, self harming, deceit, assault, theft, under-age sex, criminal damage, visiting prison, mental health issues, perpetual lying, foetal alcohol effects, allegations of abuse, violence, daily bed wetting for six years, running away, molesting siblings, animal cruelty or to return my children into the 'care system'. However, nor did any other adopter.

Unfortunately many of us have experienced some of these harrowing issues as our children grew older and the support and therapeutic input they needed was not forthcoming. (Luckily, my children have not done *all* of the above!)

Despite this horrifying list, I am pleased I adopted my children. It has been hugely challenging, difficult and exhausting. At times I thought I might not survive. However by understanding the impact of early trauma at a head, heart and gut level, my personal transformation helped me to survive and sometimes thrive. I am a different and better person for the experience.

Throughout this magazine, eminent authors and therapists (whose excellent books fill my shelves) have repeatedly emphasised the importance of understanding attachment and trauma issues. Their words are invaluable, as is the dialogue between adopters.

The benefits of joining and continuing involvement in Adoption UK are inestimable. The voice on the end of the helpline was the first person who believed that my ten year old was the culprit of the purse and credit card theft. It was a weight lifted from my shoulders – my sanity was intact. This support continues as I parent adolescents and 'adults'. Also I am able to pass these benefits on to younger adopters.

The theoretical knowledge, other adopter's experiences, various parenting strategies, buckets of self care, facing hard truths and personal growth are, I believe, essential if one is to survive as an adoptive parent.

planning

Before we become parents we will have fantasised about our children, the things we will do with them, our moments of pride; what we will hear; see and feel, uniquely through being parents. If we hadn't created that film in our heads we would have no motivation to be parents. It is natural and essential. Without it -why would we bother?

This planning creates our futures. Many of us did not plan to be adopters, we arrive at it through happenstance. Maybe we wanted to recreate aspects of our own childhood (or the opposite) and naturally we start by visualising and sensing 'future family life' from our own perspective.

Later, at adoption preparation groups, we hear some scary stuff about 'the children who wait'. Their experiences of abuse and neglect, their often deeply inadequate birth parents, the traumatic environment they inhabited. We listen – yet we don't really hear, because it's so alien to our own world and, at this early stage, we don't want to think that our children have had these appalling, disgusting lives. I know I didn't.

Shifting your expectations from wanting *your own healthy baby* to accepting that you are taking on *someone else's damaged child* is a difficult, painful path which takes time to trek. Change of this magnitude only occurs incrementally, yet is essential to

survive the rigours of parenting traumatised children.

Despite excellent preparation it took me four years after placement before I started facing some of the really hard truths. It took considerably longer to recognise the depth of damage my children had experienced: their distorted inner working models, the fragmented sense of self, the trauma still gripping their minds and bodies. However, once recognised and honoured, I could start searching for appropriate therapy and healing. (That's another very long story).

see it for what it is

Prospective adopters (me included) often struggle with understanding how trauma impacts children, and after a few years living with your children, some adopters seem to fall into the "all children do that" myth that is ever-present in the playground.

The brutal truth is that very few children repeatedly lie, steal, 'act out' or exhibit violence. With traumatised children it is habitual – they won't "grow out of it", because their inner working model and beliefs formed in infancy is distorted. The adjacent diagrams illustrate the ideal and also the reality experienced by a child deeply hurt and wounded in infancy.

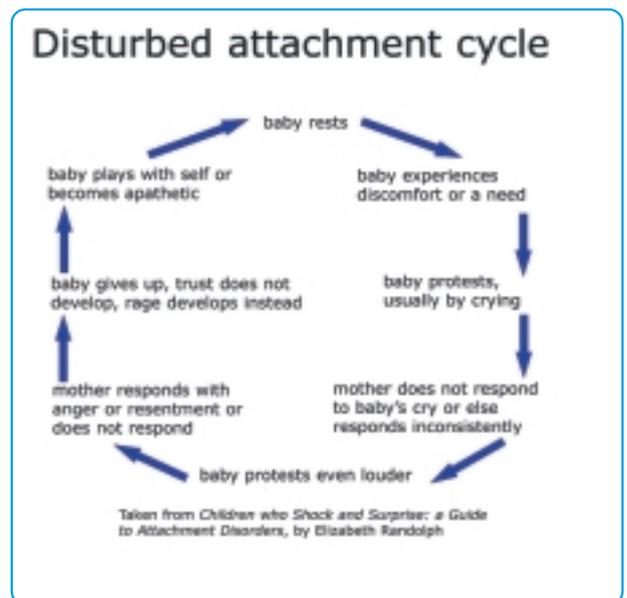
Consider the experiences of an infant who is nurtured, loved, soothed and has his needs met. He experiences warmth, softness, harmony, laughter; cooing, smiling happy faces; hunger is soon satisfied, he cries and a familiar face responds to alleviate the mild distress.

Nurtured infant develops a positive view of self and the world



View of self	View of the world
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I'm safe ● I'm loved ● I'm cared for ● I'm valued ● I'm can trust adults ● I'm special ● I'm okay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It's a safe place ● People love me ● People care for me ● I am important to them ● There is a place for me here ● The world is okay

Neglected infant develops a negative view of self and the world



View of self	View of the world
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I'm not safe ● I'm not cared for ● I'm scared ● I'm unlovable ● I'm ignored ● I'm not valued ● I'm alone ● I'm bad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● It's a terrifying hostile place ● People hurt you ● Dangerous place ● No one could ever love me ● I am not important ● There is no place for me ● The world is dangerous ● The world is not okay

He starts to generalise from these experiences. Remember this infant has no words. He is starting to form an internal working model of himself and of the world via his senses – what he smells, hears, sees, tastes and feels. His internal representation of the world is being constructed – a map is being drawn, beliefs are being formed.

Now consider a neglected child lying in a cot. He has an ache in his stomach from hunger; the thin dirty yellowing blanket gives him no warmth. His nappy is heavy, stinking liquid trickles down his leg. He can taste sour milk, it is dark and he sometimes hears angry voices and crashing puncturing the silence. He smells his own stale sweat and the fragrance of dog dirt. He too, forms a 'map of reality'; a view of self, the external world and the people who populate his environment.

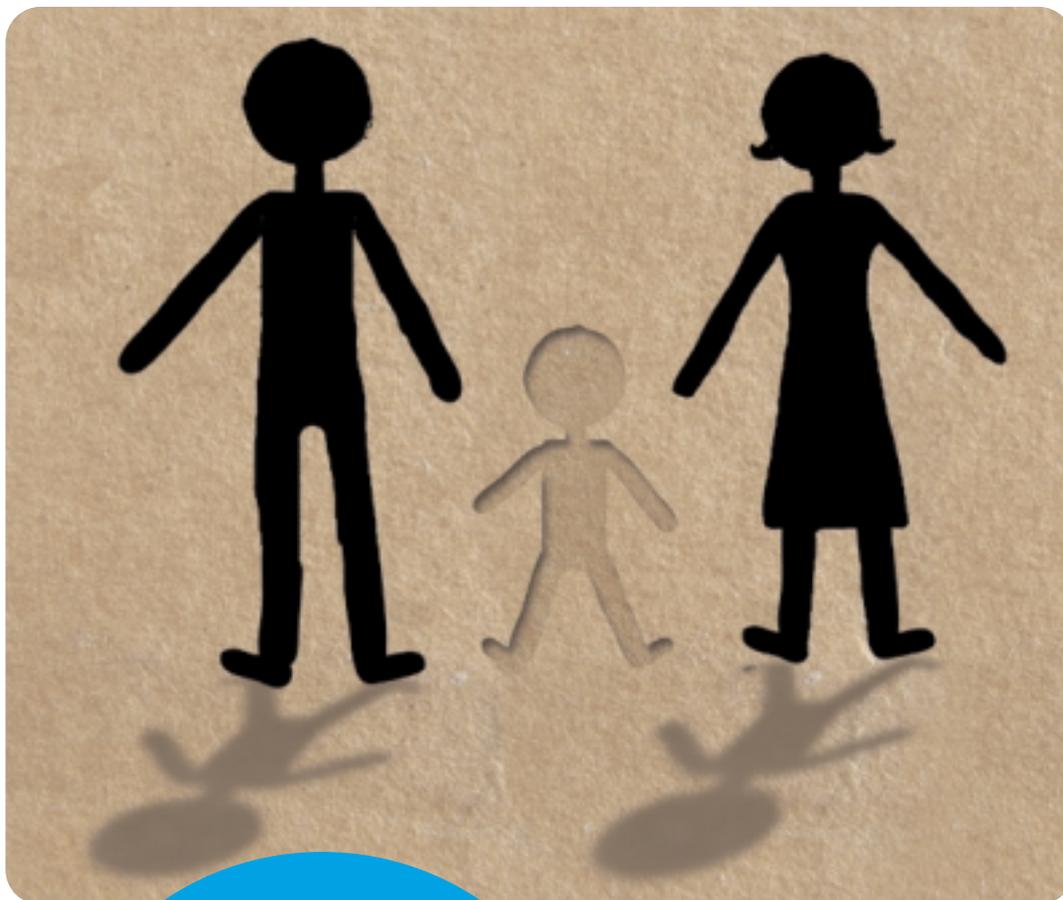
belief formation

Beliefs are formed haphazardly throughout life from the meaning we give to our experience. They shape our understanding of why things are possible or impossible for us. They provide us with rationale and drive our actions.

Beliefs formed in infancy, being deeply imbedded, are often the hardest to change. For traumatised children their belief systems made complete sense and they won't change them.

Would you change your belief systems simply because you were suddenly in a new home, or a foreign country? You might *behave* differently, but you are unlikely to change your core beliefs, particularly as you expect to return to your home at any time.

So what if you, wonderful new adoptive Mum, say you won't hurt him, treat him tenderly all the time . . . other grown ups said that . . . did that . . . and then . . . they changed . . . or just left him. Sometimes he went to a foster home and got fed and cuddled, but often he went back and got hurt all over again. Trust you – *Phleeze!* In his eyes you are no different to any other adult he has ever known. Anyway he knows he's unlovable – and he'll prove it to you, like he proved it to all the others.



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BELIEFS DRIVE BEHAVIOUR

We observe other people's behaviour and often judge it against our beliefs and values, yet rarely step back and ask ourselves “*what is the belief underpinning that behaviour?*” We look at the surface; the superficial behaviour; and seldom question what is going on at a deeper level.

Imagine the following scenarios and consider what beliefs might underpin the observed behaviour:

- A five year old who falls heavily in the playground and just lies there.
- A seven year old boy who laughs at the girl with blood on her cut knee.
- A 12 year old who cuts her arms weekly.

- A three year old who won't accept cuddles from Mum yet licks strangers.
- A ten year old who steals money from her mum and gives it away at school.
- A 15 year old who eats only sweets and burgers.
- A 25 year old woman whose five children have all been adopted.

Caroline Archer (on pages 19-21) talked about the language of trauma. We need to remember that a child's vocabulary is his behaviour and that beliefs drive behaviour. Hence, we need to see beyond the behaviour; get deep inside and identify those deeply ingrained core beliefs – often highly camouflaged and wrapped in trauma.

There are a variety of ways to glimpse or even unpack children's core beliefs. One approach is to truly stand in the child's shoes and experience their world from the inside – in the past and present. Such diagnostic insight is far more effective than the usual 'mind reading', when we interpret someone else's behaviour solely from our own value and belief standpoint.

'Time travelling' described below, incorporates a hotchpotch of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) ideas and methodologies. It is specifically written for adopters, so they can better understand their children, the challenges they bring and make more informed, empowering decisions about their collective futures. (Big thanks to the NLP giants – Dilts, Bandler, Grindler, McDermott etc for the NLP principles and teachings).

Safety warning

'Time travelling' is an exercise to fantasise, daydream and hallucinate. What you experience does not make it 'true'; however the insights and fresh perspectives gained can be enlightening. The more 'reruns' you watch the greater the breath of understanding. The intention is to really stand in your child's shoes and experience their world.

time travelling

This process allows you to travel between guessed pasts and possible futures and so inform the present.

1. Rewind – back in time

- Imagine you had a stack of videos of your child's early days, weeks, months or years, based on what you know from the documents you have and what you were told.
- Hallucinate and jump into one of those old videos and experience the events as it *might* have been for the child.
- Wonder – what beliefs might have been formed back then?

2. Return to now – the present

- Now return to the present. Do those beliefs fit with the behaviour you witness?
- Repeat this process with at least five videos, preferably more. Mentally label each a, b, c, d etc.
- Take a break . . . walk, move, make a cuppa, do something different and let your unconscious mind make some connections then later. . .

3. Fast forward – into the future

- Imagine a pile DVDs that could represent the future. (DVD 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 etc)
- Take a subset of the beliefs and behaviours that were represented in one of the videos and put those into a possible future (DVD 1), seeing how you and the child might behave if there is no change in their belief system (or yours).
- Repeat the process with DVD 2, 3, etc

4. Move up and down the timeline

- Play with the insights, fantasise and hallucinate and be really honest. How do your various futures look? How will adolescence sound?
- Stand in the future look at the present – what messages might be sent to now?

5. Return to now

- In the present absorb all the insights from the future . . . it is as if you are getting hindsight from the future.

6. Change an aspect

- Modify a belief and then run up the time line watch a future DVD as if that change occurred. What do you notice? What sounded different? What did you learn?

7. Revisit the past, present and future again and again

- You must watch and experience many boxes of old videos and new DVDs. Otherwise you will think the first two or

three are 'true' and disappear down a path which may be wrongly signposted.

- Metaphorically it is as if each video or DVD is a series of maps, each has separate features; the first has post offices, the next mountains, the third motorways, then separately rivers, houses, pubs, minefields, farm land, contours etc. You need to assimilate all available information before stepping into that world. . . . and big chunks, say bridges, cable cars, weather and main roads, are still missing.

**“Anyway he knows he’s unlovable –
and he’ll prove it to you,
like he proved it to all the others!”**

- You can repeat this process in any order simply to obtain more angles on the past and the future. Some people walk up and down a physical line on the ground to give their location in time. Play with it and feel what works for you.

Watching the 'Back to the Future' films with your children can encourage this process. Kids love time travel. Playing Dr Who and the Tardis allows them, in a dissociated state, to see into their own futures and pasts.

This process is often a wake up call to adopters. Behaviour just tolerable and manageable aged six, such as temper tantrums, may develop into terrifying uncontrollable rages at 13, and with alcohol explode into manslaughter at 21.

the reality of adoption

Adopting my children is the most difficult, challenging, exhausting thing I have ever done. Levy and Orlans (on page 26) advise "knowing yourself is the first step in helping your child heal and grow" - how very true. That journey of self discovery is in my experience 'the road less travelled' and has extraordinary, seldom glimpsed, dark depths and brilliant heights.

For me it necessitated facing my inner demons, spiteful gremlins, limiting beliefs, my own childhood issues and my deepest

fears. It was challenging and empowering; painful and liberating; surprising and affirming.

Adoptive parenting is not a package tour; suitable for everyone, that's for sure. Strong, courageous, well equipped honest explorers are needed for the adoption voyage. Some might call it a 'Hero's Journey'.

Sometimes I have permission to walk alongside my children down their old,

painful, lonely, less travelled roads. It is a huge, yet distasteful, privilege.

Our children, as survivors of trauma are invisible heroes. They need parents who can provide firm boundaries and a safe space to enable them to learn vulnerability and trust.

So adopters, like their children, need to be invisible heroes. Fortunately many are. Wouldn't it be nice if, rather than being misunderstood, adopters were recognised and honoured as visible heroes?

Helen Oakwater is an adoptive parent, NLP Coach and Trainer.

She adopted a pre-school 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 NLP credentials and other articles can be found at www.helenoakwater.com