

# Fresh perspectives and action replays and

*Helen Oakwater*

## **MY children came in the early 90s, collectively giving me 40 years of adoptive parenting and they never fail to amaze and surprise me.**

I was recently told by my 16-year-old that the pill gives you cancer . . . how did she know? A college friend had told her. That source, at that moment, was more believable and credible than me. She believed it to be true. Why? Because she trusted the source. It caused me, yet again, to reflect on how we as humans, and in particular, adopted and fostered children form their beliefs.

I have spent much time with my own children unravelling how they feel about themselves and how they came to that conclusion. I have found that helping them see an event from a different perspective has aided changing a limiting belief to something more empowering.

Groping through their belief systems has been fascinating. It has also helped me not take their behaviour so personally. Initially when they stole/lied/acted out I felt it was aimed directly at me. Over the years I have learnt that this behaviour is just thrown out, a message from their inner world. I was simply in the way, an unwitting target. I also found some strategies which helped me cope better.

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.

If we had been told in infancy that the world is flat, why would we change that view – what evidence do we have to contradict that standpoint? To our ancestors it was a given – heresy to suggest otherwise. For us photos from outer space give us the evidence that our earth is round.

Our children often believe they are useless, worthless or unimportant because their early life experience gave them that message. They were regularly “stood up” by adults unable to put their needs first.

Experiencing neglect, witnessing domestic violence, coming second to a drug habit; these events gave them sensory evidence that they were

worthless and helpless. Being told, “You make me sick” facilitates an “I am bad” belief.

Lying in a cot hearing angry shouting, having a sore tummy because you are hungry, being left by your parents because their need for drugs was a higher priority than you will generate negative beliefs about oneself such as “I’m worthless”; “adults hurt me”; “I don’t matter.”

So it’s no surprise a few years later when struggling with spellings or making friends that the phrase, “I am useless” or “everybody hates me” pops out. For that child it is true. Their source is very credible – themselves. They had much evidence from their infancy to prove it and in the intervening years they probably filtered out any contradictory data.

The beliefs, formed in infancy, being deeply imbedded, are often the hardest to change. Our children have acquired these beliefs from the people who should have cared for them. Parents are supposed to care for their children and society reinforces that image.

Adopted children have a dilemma; their birth family loved them – yet hurt them, failed to keep them safe and put their own adult needs first. For that child the following beliefs make complete sense.

“I don’t matter.”

“I can’t trust adults especially parents.”

“The world is a dangerous place.”

“Others are more important than me.”

These beliefs will structure the internal working model for a child, i.e. how the child sees themself.

From a child’s perspective, if parents are supposed to look after you and people tell you your birth mummy loved you, then you must be bad and unlovable because your experience with her was so painful. These early sensory experiences generated the beliefs that kept the child safe, reduced the pain and made sense of their world at that time.

Later these beliefs are reinforced by society. Life story books list events, emphasise positive intentions, yet rarely face the harsh truth. Adults around the adopted child endeavour to protect the child from further harm and therefore fail to honour the child’s reality. How can a child learn a different perspective or change his internal working model without a fresh way of reviewing his ‘evidence’?

I believe this concept brings a fresh insight to adopters. I spent longer than I would have liked feeling a victim because of my children’s behaviour. The idea that my children were holding

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onto beliefs which no longer served them was a revelation. It also made me realise that, I too, was holding beliefs about them, parenting and myself which needed updating or discarding.

For me recognising that my children filtered out praise, compliments and positive endorsements was revelatory. None of them landed because they didn’t fit with their beliefs and internal working model.

If you believe you are stupid (because that’s what you were regularly told as an infant), a teacher saying, “it’s not difficult, you can do this” will not generate productive behaviour. It’s more likely to generate an emotionally charged, “I hate maths”, or, “science is stupid” or, “I can’t do this”.

So how is this knowledge useful to adopters? It gives us another perspective. For me it made sense of the behavioural ‘nonsense’ my children exhibited and allowed me to move from unresourceful victim to empowered parent better able to help my children. Yes the behaviours were still difficult to live with, however the new insights gave me different ways of dealing with them.

Next time your child does something ‘noticeable’:

### STOP

- S Step back from it
- T Think
- O Organise your thoughts
- P Proceed

By stepping back you immediately disengage from the immediate situation, become more disassociated.

Think . . . be curious . . . what belief might have generated that behaviour . . . do you need to do something . . . if so what options do you have?

# d action replays

Organising your thoughts can include what to do next, a coherent action, or simply awareness that something interesting just occurred and you'll rerun it later as a fly on the wall.

You might be asking yourself, so what? If my children have these beliefs what can I do about them? By standing in their shoes and really seeing what's happening inside is the first step, because you then have a feel for their world, you could even inhabit it for a while. This approach is common to all attachment therapies; it's what Dan Hughes calls "getting alongside the child".

One word of caution – mind reading is a form of hallucination, so when you are imagining what belief might have generated a particular behaviour give yourself choice, come up with, at least, three options. Even though none will be 'right', you will gain insight into your child. New learnings, fresh possibilities and different choices provide a more empowering way of understanding and parenting traumatised children.

One simple technique for proving a new perspective that I have found children love is to 'replay an event'. Do this when you are both calm and sitting side by side, avoiding direct eye contact (in the car while you are driving is an option if safe to do so):

- Ask them to imagine a particular event has been videoed.
- Ask them to imagine there is a screen in front, or to the side of them which is about to show the video.
- Tell them to look at the screen and run the video of that specific event.
- Ask them what they notice.
- Ask them what they learnt.

You can stop at this point or add a second part.

- Ask them what did they or others need to achieve a better outcome (keep your ideas to yourself).
- Ask them to put those resources into the video.
- Run it again.

The process will probably take less than five minutes – kids do this very quickly – their brains love it.

Ways to play with this include:

- imagine the video is filmed from above (helicopter)
- side (fly on the wall)
- through another's eyes
- in black and white or colour

- move the screen further away or closer
- notice the soundtrack

Children will come up with amazing things; just let them play with it. Your job as facilitator is to direct the process (not the content) and not get in the way. Keep quiet, hold the space, listen and then just let it go. Don't interrogate for the content.

Experiment with a recent low intensity event. As you and your child gain confidence use it on medium intensity events (not trauma). Also by using it on positive experiences a child can see that they really did do "a good job", which means that the source for a positive feeling is themselves; 100 per cent credible and believable; leading to thoughts such as "I did play with my sister nicely"; "I did sit still for the whole lesson"; "I can do that". These are fresh perspectives, and another step towards a more empowering and useful belief system.

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'Replaying an event' is also a fabulous tool for us as parents.

We can play with all of the techniques listed above and replay any event through our children's eyes and see ourselves. You may then realise that although a particular episode felt dreadful at the time and you questioned your ability and competency as a parent (or human being), that actually, given all that was going on, you did an great job, you dealt with a difficult situation quite effectively. Yes maybe you might do it slightly differently next time... and next time you will. You may see that you need some extra resources, more sleep, a day of fun, more energy. You will probably notice what an extraordinary parent you are.

You will have the option to feel more positive about yourself and know that **you are enough.**

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