

Characteristics of Successful Adoptive Families

1. Tolerance for Ambivalence and Negative Feelings

Successful adopters keep going when “the warm, mushy feelings are gone”. They do not judge themselves too harshly for experiencing negative feelings towards the child. They accept the inevitability of such feelings given the child’s behavior. They understand that they may feel angry without acting on that anger.

2. Entitlement

Successful adopters feel that their adopted child is truly theirs. They make the transition from a tentative parental stance to **being** the parent in a relatively short time.

3. Intrusive and Controlling Qualities

Successful adopters are comfortable giving direction and providing structure for their adopted children. As the adults in the family, they take the lead in the relationship and are instructive and controlling in a caring way. They assume control, try to anticipate behaviors, interrupt negative behaviors early and provide a great deal of praise and physical affection. They are not deterred by a child’s protest or withdrawal.

4. Flexible Expectations

Successful adopters, particularly of children with special needs, have realistic, flexible expectations of themselves and their children. They do not work to remake the child, but strive to help the child achieve success by acknowledging and appreciating small steps towards goals.

5. Tolerance for Rejection

Successful adopters are able to withstand testing behaviors by their adoptive children, including hurtful, angry and rejecting behaviors. They do not take it personally if the child is rejecting, because they recognize the rejection as the child’s fear of closeness. They realize that the child’s ties to the birth family, former foster families and others are not a rejection of them.

6. Ability to Delay Parental Gratification

Successful adopters are aware that the relationship with their adopted children may not be reciprocal. They can give nurturance without receiving much in return. They can postpone their own rewards and not equate the child’s behavior with failure as a parent.

7. Sense of Humor

Successful adopters are able to use humor to cope with the stress that can result from adoptive parenting. They can laugh and vent feelings, finding humor in daily exchanges with their children.

8. Ability to Meet Personal Needs

Successful adopters know how to take care of themselves. They refuse to be martyrs and recognize that taking personal time as a couple and as individuals is necessary. They take breaks from the child, using respite care and other resources to do this.

9. Ability to Use Resources

Successful adopters seek and accept help. They learn how to identify and access help and support. They may do this on a formal or informal basis, seeking assistance, ranging from self-help support groups to professionally facilitated therapy. They let others into their family system to get the additional support they need.

10. Flexible Family Roles

Successful adopters share the responsibility of parenting and nurturing. They look to the total family system to find answers for problems. Parents are able to detect signs of “burn out” in their partner and share the caregiving role for the children. Such flexibility greatly increases the likelihood of success.

These characteristics develop over time. Successful adopters are those who are willing to grow and change in order to maintain their commitment to their adopted child. They are also families who feel good about asking for help and use it appropriately.

National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption

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