

# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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## “Will I Love Her?”: Love and Attachment in Adoption

BY DANIEL NEHRBASS, PH.D.

**W**hen my best friend heard that my wife and I were planning to adopt, he asked, “Do you think you will be able to love your child as much as you would if she were your own?”

Those of us who have adopted know that our adopted children *are* “our own.” Yet this question posed by my friend revealed a fear that lay within himself, and in the minds of many prospective adoptive parents.

My wife and I met when we were in the eighth grade. We married seven years later, at the age of twenty. We talked about adoption before we were married, but did not envision how large a role it would play in our life together. Three years into our marriage, we received a diagnosis that determined conception would be impossible for us.

Two years later, in the midst of the foster parent licensing process, we learned that we were pregnant. After our son’s birth, we adopted two children from foster care and had two more biological children as well, bringing us to a total of three girls and two boys in our home.

From experience I can say that it is possible to love adopted children just as much as those born to you. Yet I recognize that I cannot speak for others, nor can I tell them what is possible within their own families. If someone tells me, “I don’t think I *could* love an adopted child equally,” perhaps he



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and I should both trust his judgment. Perhaps he knows something about himself that I don't know.

## The Capacity of Love

When I used to give people the “Trust me...you *can* love adopted children equally” speech, I assumed that everyone *was* equally capable. I envisioned love primarily as an emotion. The primary change in this line of thinking occurred when I realized that love is better envisioned in terms of capacity, rather than emotion.

Think of love as a jar that holds water, or a room that holds people. Jars come in different sizes; rooms range from tiny to enormous. Capacities vary greatly. If we all have our own individual capacity for love, then I cannot speak for anyone else who wonders about their own capacity. Nor can I speak for you.

I can speak for myself, however, and I can speak of families I have counseled. Nearly all of these adoptive parents would say that they love their children with all their heart. Those who also have biological children in the home would add that they love their children equally. And most would say that they, too, have come to realize that they have great capacity for love; it is not merely a feeling, it is an ability. A choice.

Adoptive parents are not the only ones who know this, of course. Other parents know it, too. Many parents can remember a defining moment when they had to make a decision about how to think of love. For me it came almost immediately after our son, Thai, a seven-year-old Vietnamese boy from California, was placed with us. He spoke not more than fifty words of English, yet by the end of his first week, he had asked me: “Do you love me?”

No biological parent has ever been asked this question in the first week of parenthood. How was I to answer Thai? At the time I still knew very little about him. We were still getting to know one another. But when he asked me “Do you love me?” I was prepared with my answer. I gave him an immediate, confident, genuine “Yes!”

I was able to say this honestly because—long before he asked—I had come to the understanding that my love is a capacity, not merely an emotion. When I told Thai that I loved him, I expressed the following genuine commitments:

- I am committed to you for life, no matter what.
- I want what is best for you.
- I will make great sacrifices for you.
- I will forgive you when you misbehave.
- I will demand nothing, but I will cherish even the smallest expression of love in return.

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*[Love] is not merely a feeling, it is an ability. A choice.*

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Love is not some external force that comes out of nowhere: it is your own capacity, which grows with time and work and commitment. **If you have this capacity, you will love your child.**

## Love is Commitment

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When my wife and I put our firstborn child in the car and drove away from the hospital, I thought, “I can’t believe they’re letting us do this! Why are they letting us take this child?” I knew that no one from the hospital was ever going to call to see if we were okay. They were done with us. It was up to us to care for our baby’s every need.

I can say with complete honesty that my love for our son during his first week of his life was no more or less than the love I just described for our adopted seven-year-old during his first week in our home. I loved holding him, and felt overwhelmed with positive emotions—feelings of joy, tenderness, and delight. But my love for our newborn son was primarily felt in terms of commitment—just like my commitment to our adopted son. My love for him meant that I was committed to him for life, prepared to make sacrifices for him, determined to do whatever was best for him, and always ready to forgive him unconditionally.

So how will you answer your adopted child when she asks, early on, “Do you love me?” I define love in terms of commitment, and action. Love is acting lovingly. Love is commitment. **If you can truly commit to loving your child, then you will.**

## Love is Expressed in Unique Ways

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Jill and Brent adopted Steven when he was seven years old. At the time he only spoke a few words of English. But lack of language wasn’t the only reason he was uncommunicative. He entered the foster care system because of severe neglect. Though his family was Chinese and spoke that language at home, Steven was not able to speak Chinese, either. He spent the first seven years of his life sitting on the couch watching television. His adoptive parents describe their first couple of years with him as follows:

*A few years after Steven’s adoption, he still struggled with doing his homework. We continually had to remind him to do his homework, but he would just stare. Sometimes he would stare at a blank page for an hour, even if we sat right next to him. We would tell him what to write, and give him the next answer, but he just couldn’t get the answers on the page, even though he knew how to write.*

*Similarly, we would ask him to do the dishes—that task would take him an hour, even though our other children got it done in less than ten minutes. Steven was not being disobedient, nor was he distracted by something else. He just moved slowly, or not at all, and had to constantly be reminded to put the next dish in the washer. Without the verbal cues, he might just stand there, holding a dish for minutes on end. I remember watching him in the middle of this chore, and that’s when it hit me: “He acts like a kid who sat on a couch for seven years.”*

*That realization gave me the compassion I needed, and also a welcome explanation for what was going on. Steven was so neglected as a child that apparently no one ever talked to him. Since no one talked to him, he never spoke. He sat there. This lack of stimulation made it possible for him to spend hours “doing nothing” for years to come.*

Brent noticed that whenever he picked Steven up from school, his son would jump on his back for a piggy-back ride. Sometimes it was painful, particularly when Steven chose an awkward or unexpected moment to jump. This frustrated Brent until he realized the impact of Steven’s neglect and his language deficiency. What else was he to do? Steven knew no other ways to express love besides touch. Jumping on his father’s back for a piggy-back ride was his way of showing his love.

**If you understand love as your child’s unique way of reaching out to you, then you will recognize his love for you.**

## Love is Compassionate

In the case of my adopted son, Thai, his lack of language meant that his anger and frustration often came out in nonverbal ways. He was almost never violent; instead, lacking the words to say, he looked at me with eyes that said it all. He perfected the vacant stare of indifference, and the glare of dislike.

At times when this happened, I would think of the words Christine spoke to the Phantom of the Opera during the play’s climax. The Phantom has threatened Christine and her lover. Most people in that situation would be filled with hatred, but instead she felt compassion for the damaged person who had loved and wanted to mentor her. She was able to show him that he was not alone, because she was filled with compassion.

All children, adopted or not, need and deserve their parents’ compassion.  
**If you can be compassionate, then you will love your child.**

## Love is Attachment

We adopted our daughter Lynn when she was two years old. She was born with some serious genetic problems: her abdominal organs were outside of her body, and she had a cleft palate. She entered foster care because her biological mother, overwhelmed by the medical needs she faced, neglected to give her the food she needed via feeding tube. As a result, Lynn understandably learned to scream. She would scream loudly to demand food, as a matter of survival.

When she was in our care, we always provided the food she needed. But if she didn't get her way, sometimes Lynn would scream the same scream she undoubtedly produced when she was deprived of food. Every frustration elicited the same maximum scream. Every scream was disproportionate to the problem. My wife and I were exhausted with the noise, and I remember thinking, "She screams like she is going to die." Then, of course, I realized that this was exactly how she screamed because that was how she had once felt.

Our daughter entered foster care due to neglect, and consequently she suffered from some attachment disorder. Experts know that a child's first relationship becomes the basis for all subsequent relationships. Children learn from this first relationship, usually with their mother, how to attach, and what attachment will offer. Lynn learned that attachment didn't offer much. But her response to attachment disorder was the opposite of what you might expect. When we were out in public, she hugged everyone she could get her hands on. A friend of ours bragged that Lynn loved him, and I didn't have the heart to burst his bubble and say, "She hugs everyone like that." Naturally, her affection toward others, including strangers, concerned us.

Eventually I grew to appreciate that Lynn is the kindest person I have ever known. She has been our daughter for eleven years, and the effects of her attachment disorder have disappeared. But her kindness has remained.

In my view, attachment is another way of thinking about love. It is a more descriptive word for love, and for the purpose of this conversation, probably a better one. When adoptive parents ask "Will she love me? Will I love her?" they are essentially asking, "Will I feel attached to her? Will she feel attached to me?"

Yet how could you possibly feel attached to a stranger on the first day? Let's suppose you are an incredibly affectionate person, and you do feel completely attached to your adopted child on the first day. Even so, that

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is the day when you will be the least attached. Your attachment will only grow from there.

At the beginning, Lynn's attachment to all people seemed equal, because no one had ever fulfilled a need in her life. She had never had someone to rely on for everything she needed, and so every stranger she met seemed equally likely to meet her needs.

Experts agree that attachment forms through the fulfillment of needs. It does not come overnight. Lynn began to see us, her parents, as distinct from others over time, as we proved trustworthy in loving her and meeting her needs. Only after this occurred did we come to earn more hugs and kisses than strangers. Love and attachment are borne through shared experiences, for better and for worse.

**As you share your life together, and prove trustworthy in meeting your child's needs, she will love you.**

## Love Values Good Over Easy

A few years ago, my son lied to me for the typical reason: to avoid getting in trouble. Eventually he told me the truth, but a struggle like that is always exhausting. It is the battle of two human wills.

Shortly after the incident I got on my bicycle and went for a ride. As I was riding, I kept thinking it would be easier if I had children who didn't lie. Understand that I wasn't really wishing for a different life, or a different son. I was frustrated with the situation. But then I had a powerful epiphany. The question came to me: "Easier for whom?"

The weight and significance of that question has had a lasting, profound impact on me as a parent. Sure, it would have been easier for me if I had children who didn't lie. But is my "ease" really relevant to my role as a parent? If my son *had* been raised in another home, would his growth into a mature, healthy man have been more likely? Would things have been easier for him if he had aged out of the group home in which he was living before he came to us?

People with a large capacity to love do not ask what is easier for them, but what is better for those they love. **If you can do this, then you will love your child.**

## Love is Unconditional

In the book *Mortal Lessons*, Dr. Richard Selzer tells this story about our capacity to love:

*I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of her facial nerve, the one to the muscles in her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. As a surgeon, I had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh, I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private....*

*The woman speaks: "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say. "It is because the nerve was cut." She nods, is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It's kind of cute." ... Unmindful of my presence, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I'm so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show her that their kiss still works.*

This story of the patient and her husband is just one illustration of the unconditional nature of love. **If you can love unconditionally, then you will love your child.**

## Love is Often Understood in Retrospect

I have a stack of stories that adopted children have written to their parents as adults. Here is a brief part of Olya's story:

*What does it mean to me to have been adopted and have a family? A gift. A second chance. A renewed hope. Joy. A miracle. A future. Safety. Unconditional love. Freedom. No fear. Security.... I don't have all the right words to even begin to paint a picture of what adoption has done for me. I am aware that too many children have not found homes, especially if they are older. Many of them end up on the street without an item to their names, begging for food and shelter. I myself have begged for food from strangers. The family that adopted me at the age of twelve could have easily overlooked [me]... But they didn't. They wanted me, despite my age and despite the problems I could have been bringing with me. They chose me!*

*I am now 27 years old and this still brings tears to my eyes. Tears of happiness and disbelief that they picked me out of thousands of other children that they could have picked. In the fourteen years of living this life, I have had the opportunity to have dreams and attain them. Thank you Mom and Dad for picking me. I still have to pinch myself just to see that this is not merely a dream.*

Love is sometimes much easier to see and understand in retrospect than in the moment. **If you understand this about love, you will see your child's love for you.**



## Love is Not Demanding

Whenever my son Thai would play violin at a school performance, or receive an award at the Boy Scouts, he would always ask at the end of the event, “Were you guys there?” For years the question bothered me, because it seemed to express distrust. Of course we were there. We wouldn’t miss it. But he kept asking, and I always assumed it came out of some sense of self-defeat, as if he was saying, “The other kids’ parents came, but did my parents come?”

My wife had an important revelation about this. She realized that what Thai was really saying was, “Tell me again that you were there. That you saw it. I like to hear that you came and felt proud of me.” Once my wife redefined what was going on, it was a pleasure to hear the question and to answer it.

Love is meeting the other person where they are at, on their terms, and offering the reassurance they need. **If you can do this, you will love your child.**

## Love is Patient

Dawn Gasser tells the story of her daughter Lily in *Thriving as an Adoptive Family*. From the moment Lily came to live with them, Dawn offered to give her daughter a hug each night before bed. Lily, like many other adopted children, was reluctant to attach. She refused the hug.

Dawn was sad for herself, but mostly for Lily. What would it be like, she thought, to be a child who was never hugged? Yet she persisted every night to offer a hug or a kiss. Night after night she was rejected.

It is difficult to continue offering a piece of yourself, only to be consistently rejected. But Dawn continued, for more than a year. Then, finally, one night Dawn offered a goodnight kiss, and Lily—for the first time—took her first step towards accepting Dawn’s sign of affection. She said, “You can hold my hand.”

**If you are patient, you will see your child’s love for you.**

## Love Requires Sacrifice

People have a variety of motives for adopting, and not everyone who inquires about adoption is able to move forward in the process. Sometimes they simply aren’t prepared for it, or realize they would prefer to pursue other things in their lives.

*Love is meeting the other person where they are at, on their terms, and offering the reassurance they need.*



Recently a retired, married man inquired about adoption. I met with him at our office, and asked why he wanted to adopt. Our social workers were wary; they thought perhaps this man wanted someone to take care of him. Or perhaps he had no other children, and was just terrified that he would eventually have no one.

But his answer surprised us all. He said, “I have other children, and they are doing well. I have traveled the world, and I have had a great life. Now I’m asking myself, what am I going to do? I don’t want to spend my years on a golf course, or on a cruise ship! I heard about a couple who adopted a child from Eastern Europe, and I thought ‘that’s what I want to do!’”

This encounter reminded me that love is always worthwhile, even when we are sacrificing things like time, money, freedom, the ability to live just for ourselves. Love is the most significant legacy we can leave. **If this is how you feel, too, then you will love your child.**

## Love is Empathetic

Katie Davis, the author of *Kisses from Katie*, adopted fourteen girls from Uganda. She wrote about leaving her upper-middle class home in Tennessee, complete with expensive wardrobe and convertible, to move to Uganda and live in an impoverished community. Her parents wanted her to come back home, to live in safety and comfort.

Katie says she was always able to distinguish between the orphans and the children who came from loving families, because the orphans were children with untreated scabies infections, chigger bites throughout their body, and bleeding mouths. She said, “I saw myself in these children’s faces.”

For many, that is a baffling statement. What did she have in common with these kids? But Katie had developed a great capacity for empathy. Empathy is another essential part of love. **If you can see yourself in the face of your adopted child, then you will love her.**

## Conclusion: Love is Focused on Others

Another adopted child, Katie, defines her mother as follows:

*Mommy means I trust you. Mommy means you will protect me. Mommy is for calling out when you need someone dependable, and for laughing when you are excited. Mommy is for crying on and cuddling with when you are sad, or giggling and hiding behind when you are embarrassed. Mommy is the fixer of boo-boos*

*and the mender of broken hearts. Mommy is a comfortable place, a safe place.  
Mommy means you are mine and I am yours and we are family.*

Katie defined the love of a mother in terms of how a mother relates to her children—not how they relate to or think of her. This definition of parental love is focused on what you can do for another, not what they do for you.

The love of a parent is always focused outward. It demands nothing; it only gives. **If you take this approach to your child, then you will love him.**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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