

“Holding”
Emotionally or physically should be one In the Same
Or
The Adoptive Family Asks.... *What is this thing called “holding?”*

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Adoptive parents can provide their babies and young children with an inner peace, a sense of connectedness and closeness. It is at their finger tips, or rather, in their arms, it's called “holding.” Many adoptive parents seem to have difficulties with the concept of “holding” and all the confusion around what it means.

My premise is that babies and young children come to their adoptive parents in an aroused state. Their body systems are hyper-aroused when they are placed in their new parents' arms. I believe some children are in this state of arousal, continuously, from the act of abandonment on through the process of adoption --- a fear --- and this unhealthy arousal continues to worsen if interventions are not instituted. If an adoptive parent realizes that this is what is occurring for their child, I believe they will truly feel compelled to calm their child's fears. If the source were known the parent would act, there is no doubt. Helping parents connect to their child's inner state via “holding” is simply the right thing to do, just as a parent takes an unwilling child to a doctor to receive numerous injections during their young years. Both “injections” and “holding” are preventative and curative medicine!

A Basic Premise – The “Right” to “Hold”

As a mother of two birth children I never had to ask the question, “should I hold my son or daughter... against their will?” It never entered my mind! It was my right to hold my babies, to cuddle them, to nurture them in my arms at any time I felt they were in need. It was my right and my responsibility to pick them up and hold them to help them nap when they were cranky or unhappy or feeling out of control. I didn't have to second guess myself and ask if it was the right thing to do, I just did it. They needed me to be there with them, and as their mom I needed to be in charge of their regulation since they were not yet able to always control it themselves. It was the biggest part of my job... to give them the gift of self-control. I would have been considered a lax or uninvolved mother had I done anything less. It seems quite the opposite for the parents of adopted children. It appears, frequently, as if they need permission to hold their child when their over-aroused child wishes NOT to be held.

Recommending adoptive parents “help their child regulate” and then helping them understand that they have a responsibility and the right to do this with their unwilling child is often the largest milestone of treatment. But the most frequent comment made by parents of avoidant, anxious, or angry children is, “But she doesn't want me to hold her, so how can I do this against her will?” I then ask the parent the question that will be the deciding linchpin of their relationship: “How can you not hold her?” Their child may be in chronic psychophysical distress (aka: emotional pain). His or her body (central nervous system) might be hyper-aroused and the tension could be exhausting! Imagine what it would be like to always feel fear... as if you are walking down a dark alley, hearing footsteps behind you?”

Some people are waking up to the fact that adopted children, no matter what age or under what conditions, experience trauma when they are separated from their birthmother/family. It is also true that when a child experiences such a trauma it is captured in the body's limbic system. The

limbic system is the part of who we are that keeps us safe, in so much as it regulates our response to engage in flight or fight. An important piece of information about this process is that the limbic system doesn't access higher "thinking" in order to intellectualize what is happening. When we are scared we just "do," there isn't a lot of thinking going on in the moment.

The mix of "aroused child + uncertain adoptive parents = avoidant behaviors for both parties" which prevents replicating the beautiful resolutions described in Dr. M. Welch's book, *Holding Time** Babies and children cannot, simply cannot, resolve their feelings in a "Holding Time" as portrayed in the book until they learn "trust." This takes time and must be experienced over and over until a child can believe that their new parents will not leave and will take care of them, it is a milestone called "trust of care". It will take a lot of energy and a very long time before a scared, anxious and/or angry adopted child arrives at the ultimate blissful closeness described in Dr. Welch's book.

I have come to recognize that many of the adopted children I see are "stuck" in a primitive aroused state. They have not learned how to regulate their emotions internally, from a caretaker/mother, and so must seek an external source to regulate the internal chaos. This "stuck" state can last for a very, very long time and in some cases even a lifetime of chronic anxiety. So what can adoptive parents do about this? How can they give their child the gift of self-control? They can learn that they must hold their child, and "hold" in such a way that it is calming, nurturing and loving in order to instill those regulatory processes that didn't have a chance to develop earlier.

Some adoptive parents feel they are not able to help their child by using holding. They often report feeling that they are harming their child by "holding" them against their will. It is my recommendation that these parents NOT "hold." People are never successful at things they don't believe in and "holding" isn't any different. A parent has to believe it is "right" and that it is "their right" to hold. There is a caution here: to NOT "hold" may result in a sense of failure as a loving parent, and can lead to further distancing and increased stress for all members of the family. And, unfortunately, reticent parents who choose not to hold are missing an opportunity to "connect" when their child is stressed, unhappy, angry or fearful – being held by someone that loves you can provide a deep sense of connectedness.

"Holdings" – Creating or Dissipating Anxiety

When a young baby cries the mother or father will pick their child up and do something soothing, something to regulate them. If the baby or child is scared, sad, or in pain, the parent acknowledges the baby's state and contains it, modeling regulation. If the baby is left wailing in his or her crib they are not learning how to regulate. Rather they learn their mother or father cannot meet their physical and emotional needs. Conversely, soothing interactions by the mother or father serve to constantly regulate the baby's shifting arousal, and the child will then learn self-regulation. Such regulation is imperative in developing a capacity to contend with stress and tolerate novelty and ambiguity.

For most of us it is so very easy to hold a baby during any distress, be it anxiety, unhappiness, hunger or fear. But to hold a young child or a toddler seems to not be so easy. For example, when an 18-month-old is moving anxiously from toy to toy, not really playing, what should a parent do? Bringing this child close (physically or emotionally) could create a screaming fit or it could create a calming state. What to do? Some say hold others say leave him be. It is quite a dilemma for a parent. As a result I see parents increase their child's anxiety by not containing it, and actually intensifying it by not holding.

What is going on inside a child during an emotional or physical holding? Are fight or flight feelings aroused? The child's fight reactions are obvious; efforts to get away are unmistakable. But the flight reaction may not be so obvious as the child might fall asleep, "check out" as though visiting some long ago place, use chatter or noise to distract or disconnect in some way... maybe

just to rest. You will likely not receive eye contact or any form of acceptance until your “holdings” have been repeated with positive outcomes, over and over and over. Will a child think his/her mom or dad are mean? It all depends on your empathy, the reason for holding and your belief in your parenting skills. All of this takes time to learn; knowing what a child needs vs. what they want is key. “Holdings” are based on “need,” your child’s need for regulation and comfort in order to develop self-control, not your need to control your child!

The Struggles of “Holding”

So how do you “hold” a child? I pick up my grandson at will when I want to kiss his little fat cheeks and snuggle my face into the folds of his neck. He laughs, I laugh. This transaction is called a “holding.” If he didn’t laugh and enjoy this exchange, his parents would first look to see if there was some physical reason for his lack of enjoyment. If there weren’t any physical reasons, they would then look into his soul, to see what the problem might be. They would be eager parents, trying to find the cause. This seems to be where I’ve seen adoptive parents get “stuck,” they don’t look within. It can be frightening to think about what has caused a baby or child to not want to be held, to be snuggled, or to be kissed. However, a parent who backs-off in an effort to be respectful of their child’s space or who is afraid that “holding” will emotionally hurt their child and will begin to build a sad, painful road to a psychotherapist’s office. For other families, they might simply accept the rejection and adapt, feeling lonely inside themselves.

A parent must go into the child’s pain and soothe it; this can be done in a compassionate and nurturing way. A “holding” is “performed” using a caring voice, a gentle but firm touch, comforting eyes and the promise of unconditional parental love. It takes a strong character to do this, to “hold” on and prove to an unwilling or unhappy child that you both can get through their fear and anger together. Your child may not enjoy being close to you but a parent still needs to project a positive feeling about the loving support that they have provided for their unenthusiastic child. The loving message will eventually be felt!

Another experience of parent-child struggle might be with direct eye contact. Looking into his or her new parent’s eyes may not be a positive encounter for an adopted child. The traditional picture of a mother lovingly gazing onto her child’s face won’t be a reality for some time. Your child may have never experienced such a loving and tender look, and will avoid your gaze due to prior experiences. This is so very painful to a parent, but understanding a child’s truthful past will help a parent to look deep into their child’s heart, regardless of the reciprocity, and continue to send loving messages via their own gaze.

In treatment I use drawings of various eyes, reflecting the moods of a mother. The child, parent and I talk about which eyes the child wishes to see. (For a younger child or baby I explain this concept to the new mom and dad, helping them to understand what their child may be expecting.) A parent who uses loving eyes during a “holding” may find it does not matter as their child yells, screams or pushes away. Their child is still searching for regulation from the wide external world as they haven’t yet developed it internally from a parent-figure nor do they understand that their mom or dad can provide it. Should a parent accept such behaviors and STOP, even knowing where the behaviors come from? The answer is NO!

A “holding” that is initiated by a parent out of a child’s rejection, can last a few minutes or hours. The reason I suggest that it may last only a few minutes is due to time commitments. For example, if you are getting ready to go somewhere and you reach to hug or kiss your child and they recoil, it isn’t time to prove a point. It is time to quickly kiss, hug and do something positive to end the interaction. You must be mindful of what you set yourself up to do. Once you begin a holding an adopted child will watch for and interpret your responding behaviors as accepting or rejecting. Some children can masterfully orchestrate an interaction to be the negative reverse of what you intended! Therefore, you must end every interaction positively. A parent sometimes will need to use other means to create or conjure-up a positive resolution or ending. A holding can be ended by providing sweets, sharing some quiet time, rocking or listening to soothing music. Whatever

the means, a holding should end on a positive note to externally provide what will later come intrinsically.

Whether or not a parent should display emotion during any type of close times with their child is another of those “struggles.” Dr. Daniel Hughes suggests that “affect” needs to be communicated via gestures, tone of voice, touch and a parent’s eyes, in the same way the child is expressing their own feelings. Dr. Hughes condones expressing the same emotion the child is displaying at a level of intensity that is appropriate, just as you would with a baby. A parent would not scream at a baby who is raging with an earache but the mother’s intensity of understanding the baby’s level of pain would most certainly be communicated. It is the empathic connection/communication that is sought, not the histrionics and drama.

It is heart breaking to have a child not want to be with you; it is painful and makes most moms and dads so very sad. When a mother or father cries a child “should” be sad and will often cry too. This is a wonderful sign of empathic connection. I am not suggesting that parents cry on demand or impose one of their own unresolved issues onto their child. Rather, I have seen tears help a mother or father express affection and I have seen children become one with their mom or dad through empathy. It is a beautiful sight and I feel privileged when I have the opportunity to observe this communion. Does this happen one in ten times, or one in every twenty? There is no magic number and there is no formula. But, I do know it will happen with consistent “holdings” under prime conditions (meaning when the parent is emotionally available).

A key ingredient to a successful holding are parents who are in touch with their own feelings about the past and are able to talk about the reasons they decided to adopt. Parents need to be able to not only manage their own feelings but those of their child so that their son or daughter feels safe, understood and loved. What needs to be communicated during a holding is a state of unconditional love, with no expectations of any return. Parents need to surrender to this state and let go of any preconceived expectations of a return to fill their own needs. This has to be a state of total giving, no strings attached.

It is important to note that there are cases where a child may need restraining because they are not able to reach within to control themselves in any situation when overwhelmed by emotions. This most certainly cannot be called a “holding,” it is simply a restraint. It is used in hospitals nationwide and anyone using this technique needs to be appropriately trained.

Just a note about “Visiting the Past”

Hurt children are frequently unable to “talk” about their past, yet they are the ones who have the behaviors indicating the past is always infiltrating the present - it permeates the surface. For hurt children the past is the reason for present problem behaviors. A sensitive person who uses holding needs to find a “*port of entry*” to reach a child... or to sometimes reach a tired parent. One way is to take on the possible thoughts inside a child’s head and put voice to them. This can often explain to a child, or to a parent, how a child might feel. Taking on the child’s voice, a voice that may have never come outside the self, can be a powerful cathartic experience. Taking on a child’s voice, one that has never had the sophisticated words to express inner experiences, can be empowering and provide for a learning experience that the child may wish to repeat. Dramatizations of this magnitude can be powerful for all parties involved.

It is very important to understand that a child who is experiencing behavioral/emotional problems will NOT resolve their issues in a loving Dr. Welch-style resolution. Perhaps a paradigm shift can help here... the positive resolution may be seen more in the fact that there was a “holding,” in other words, the family was together, they talked, kept their child safe and everyone is still together.

The Gift of Calm

For a child without behavior problems, or loss issues, a parent can typically talk honestly and share their thoughts and feelings while sitting with their child. They can easily gaze at each other in a manner that assures everyone that the truth is unifying, that it does not separate. This is a beautiful holding, an emotional holding of each other's hearts and minds. This approach is the goal, a wonderful accomplishment. You, or someone else, has given a child who is able to share in this way, a gift. It was the early rocking; holding, talking and nurturing that created a sense of calm and peace, "the gift". This isn't always possible with babies and children who have experienced other parents/caretakers before you, ones who may not have given your child the gift of inner peace or the way to find it.

Holding is a tool that can help adoptive parents reach deep within their child to calm the sads, or the fears, or the anger. Holdings will help build a bridge -- a vital connection between parent and child. Holdings may be done for different needs and reasons, but they are always done with love and to create an emotionally healthy, regulated child. Holdings can help an adoptee to develop a normal, secure attachment/relationship with his or her parents, and can help create a place where one can resolve issues that may be interfering with becoming an integral member of their family.

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*\* Dr. Martha Welch's "Holding Time," is a great book with helpful information; a wonderful resource. However, it can become an adoptive parent's enemy! The descriptions of the "holdings" are of children who have not experienced the sad losses that made them available for adoption in the first place. It is often difficult for adoptive parents to believe that their child experienced adoption as a "hand over" filled with fear and dread of what might come next, but for many children it is their truth. Often the experience of adoption leaves scars on the hearts, minds and bodies of little ones so that "holding" becomes an emotionally painful experience, at least until the child experiences otherwise. The wonderful resolution described in Dr. Welch's book do not come easily to an adoptee and unsuspecting adoptive parents think it is their poor technique or lack of parenting skills that prevents lovingly soft "holding."*

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