

Facilitator's Guide

MODULE 6

Equipped to Love

Supporting Adoptive
and Foster Families in the Church



“Why” and “How”

MODULE 1

Why children need adoptive families or a temporary home through foster care

- Reasons why children need adoptive families
- Reasons a child may need a temporary home through foster care

How to support and encourage adoptive and foster families

- What you can do to help

MODULE 2

Why interactions with these children need to look different

- What defines a child from a “hard place?”
- What are some potential effects of experiencing these hardships?

How to interact with children who have been adopted and children in care

- “Do’s and don’ts” in interacting with a child who has been adopted or a child in care—The “DON’TS”
- “Do’s and don’ts” in interacting with a child who has been adopted or a child in care—The “DO

MODULE 3

Why these children act differently

- Understanding attachment (attachment cycle)
Delays and differences

MODULE 4

How to meet the unique needs of the children

- Defining and responding to needs

MODULE 6

Why there is a need for overall sensitivity

- Sensitivity to emotional needs of adoptive and foster parents
- Sensitivity toward children

How to show sensitivity toward parents and children

- Language sensitivity
- Respecting boundaries

MODULE 6

Why there is a need for parenting differently

- Understanding differences
- Attachment Parenting vs. Traditional Parenting

How to help families in Attachment Parenting

Connect

Understanding Differences

Say: The God-designed process for children to bond to parents as a basis for development is interrupted (often severely) in many adoptions and foster care placements. One of the tasks for adoptive and foster families is for children and families to build a foundation of attachment through intensive effort. Working to build attachment may mean that a parent's parenting style may be very different from the expected norms, and families need the help of the people around them to respect these parenting differences and to reinforce parental attachment to their children by respecting boundaries. Based on what we've been learning, what are some ways you think attachment parenting might need to look different than traditional parenting?

Discuss.

- Attachment parenting is quite different from traditional parenting. A wide array of parenting tactics may work really well for a child from a healthy background who has stable relationships built on trust, but for a child coming from an unhealthy background and no foundation of trust, what works well is much more limited.
 - For example, adoptive parents are encouraged not to spank their children as a method of discipline. This can be detrimental to the formation of attachment and trust, especially for a child who has potentially experienced abuse in the past.
- Within our church, we must respect parenting differences.

Connect

Facilitator: Use the three scenarios included below to help you take a deeper look at attachment parenting vs. traditional parenting.



DIVIDE INTO THREE GROUPS.

Have each group role play one of the three scenarios using the typical response and then debrief with the rest of the group, taking the opportunity to educate their peers as to why those responses might need to be adapted for a child in foster care or who has been adopted.

Scenario 1

Act out how new parents would typically respond when friends or family members want to come meet their newborn baby.

Ideas: They may say, “Of course you are welcome to come by this afternoon!” Then once the visitors arrive, they’ll probably politely say, “Would you like to hold the baby?”

Following their role play, have the first group then take time to educate the rest of the group by leading a discussion on how this expected, and otherwise harmless response might be harmful to a non-newborn child who has recently become a part of this family through international adoption.

Cover the following points:

- This child has to learn his parents are different from all the other people who have come and gone in his life.
- One way the parents can teach their commitment to the child is by separating themselves from others initially (i.e. “cocooning”) so the child can learn that his parents are not the same as all the rest.
- The child has to learn what parents are and what a family is. It may not be good for the child to see people come and go in and out of his home, nor is it good for the child to be held by total strangers (from his perspective). These experiences could further his belief that no one is any different from anyone else... one day so-and-so holds you, the next day she doesn’t; people come and go and you never know who will be there for you or who you can expect to see.
- The child needs stability and minimal change in the beginning. With a biological child, it may be perfectly appropriate to say, “Go give her a hug” or “blow her a kiss,” pointing to one of mom’s friends, even if the friend is new to the child.
- However, for a child who has experienced harm, he must be taught to be discriminant in his affection. He has the right to say “no” and be respected. It is

possible that hugging or kissing strangers in this child's past carries a harmful, negative association.

- If a parent tells you it probably would not be best for you to come over to visit yet, or she does not offer to let you hold her new child, please do not take offense to this! Please understand that this parent is doing what she has been advised to do and what she feels is in the best interest of her child!

Scenario 2

Act out how parents would typically respond when their child keeps crying at night for no apparent reason.

Ideas: It's not uncommon to let a baby or child "cry it out." This is commonly recommended to help a child establish healthy sleeping habits.

Following their role play, have the second group then take time to educate the rest of the group and lead a discussion on how this might be ineffective or harmful to a child who has experienced neglect.

Cover the following points:

- Research shows that within the first 30-60 days of someone not responding to a child's cry, the child stops crying.
- Many children who have previously experienced severe neglect do not cry even when it is appropriate for a baby or a child to cry (Example: a bumped head or scraped knee). This is because they learned from their experience that when you cry, no one answers. This is a very sad thing.
- So, how would a foster or adoptive parent need to respond differently to their child crying at night?
 - They would (hopefully!) respond to the child over and over again by coming when the child cries. This develops trust, shows the child that he now has someone to respond to his cry, and shows him that he is going to be well cared for in his new home. That parent may even be thankful that the child begins to cry again when he has a need, because it shows that he believes someone is going to respond to him and care for him.

Scenario 3

Act out how parents would typically respond to their child misbehaving.

Ideas: The child may be sent to time-out, or if the offence was severe enough, the child may receive a spanking. Many forms of discipline can be effective for children when there is a solid foundation of trust.

Following their role play, have the third group then take time to educate the rest of the group and lead a discussion on how this response might be ineffective or harmful to a child who has experienced much difficulty and pain.

Cover the following points:

- For children who have experienced significant trauma, abuse, and/or neglect, and who have learned from their life experience that it is safest for them not to trust anyone, what works well in terms of discipline is very limited. Consider... how might sending a child to time-out or spanking a child be harmful to a child who has experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect?
- For foster and adoptive parents, discipline will look different. For example, we recommend they never send the child away from them during correction. They are encouraged to separate the child from the behavior and ensure the child understands, through the correction he receives, that the parents are rejecting the behavior alone and not rejecting the child himself. The child needs the assurance that he will never be rejected regardless of what he does.
- For a child who has potentially experienced abuse, spanking may not be effective at all because he has become numb to it, or it may trigger much fear and trauma from the child's past. When there is no foundation of trust and loads of negative memories, spanking the child places you in the same category (in the child's mind) as the previous abuser. The child does not have the ability to interpret the same action in a different way. Additionally, foster parents are strictly prohibited from ever spanking the children in their care.

Apply

Facilitator: Attachment parenting often looks strange at first to those who do not understand it, but it is very important and difficult work.

Lead group to discuss the following questions;

- Q *What are some things you have heard or seen adoptive or foster parents do that seem a bit strange to you? In light of what we are learning, do any of those things make a bit more sense to you now? Explain.*
- Q *Can you think of other things adoptive and foster parents might need to not only be aware of, but also be continually considering as they parent their children? Discuss. Cover the following information:*
- Parents who are trying to care for children that did not have a stable foundation laid for them early in life need to focus on their relationship with the child more than they focus on correcting the child.
 - These parents need to keep the child's history in mind at all times.
 - They need to be deliberately mindful and insightful in how they parent and respond to their child.
 - They need to be extremely cognizant of potential underlying needs and triggers the child may have.
 - Foster and adoptive parents are often taught to recognize what may be driving a child's behavior (instead of strictly focusing on the behavior itself), so they are much more likely to be analyzing that child's behavior and interactions with others.

Respect the parents' boundaries.

Ask: What are ways you can demonstrate respect for the boundaries that adoptive and foster parents set?

Discuss and then be sure to cover the following information.

- Try not to overstep the boundaries. If you are unclear, ASK. That should not be offensive to, but rather very appreciated by the parents. Asking communicates partnership and a deferring to the parents' authority and expertise on their child and situation.
- Try not to be offended.
 - The parents may be asking you not to do the things that they KNOW are damaging to the child and to the bond the child needs to form with them.
- Give space to the new family initially while expressing that you care through cards, emails, phone calls, etc.

- Do not ask parents, “Where have you been?!?” in a way that causes them to feel guilty, like they owe you an explanation, or defensive. Understand that parents are taught to somewhat isolate themselves from everyone when their child first comes home.
 - Their primary focus needs to be on helping that child feel safe and secure and on becoming a new family unit.
 - They need to simplify their lives as much as possible so that they are able to spend maximum time building a relationship with their new child.
 - Plus, this transition can be extraordinarily difficult for all involved.

One mom said, “Do not ask when we are going to start teaching our Sunday school class again or come to small group ‘faithfully.’ The only things we are doing faithfully these days are praying and drinking coffee.” She went on to say, “Do tell us you miss us in Sunday school class and small group!” and “Do bring random bags of coffee beans to our house.”

*“Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”
Proverbs 16:24*

- Trust the parents and respect the attachment process, then communicate it to others.

Pray

- Pray God would grant church-wide sensitivity toward adoptive and foster parents and toward children who are in foster care or have been adopted.
- Pray for wisdom in personal language and conversation with adoptive/foster families.
- Pray for God’s discerning spirit to overwhelm you so that you can be an encouragement.
- Pray for specific ways you can recognize and respond to adoptive/foster families.

Attachment Parenting vs. Traditional Parenting

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