

(The following article is the outgrowth of a workshop presented at the 2004 NACAC Conference, and prior NACAC Conferences. It introduces part of the belief system of a cutting edge adoption agency in the metropolitan New York area, a concept that has helped adoptive families and helpers of families throughout the United States to see the actions of acting-out adopted children in a brand new and more positive way. The author, Maris Blechner, is the Executive Director of FAMILY FOCUS ADOPTION SERVICES, and states unequivocally that she is presenting material that is not original to her, but was developed by her creative, innovative, always-thinking, deeply-committed senior staff)

INDUCEMENT: AN ADOPTION LANGUAGE WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND

In a world where so many of us do so much talking, sometimes we forget that there are other ways to communicate. In the world of adoption, particularly, communication without words takes on special meaning. Psychologists have given us a concept of non-verbal communication that makes an incredible amount of sense in the context of adoption. It is called inducement. Whatever else inducement may be to the world at large, those of us who live with, or work with, adopted children need to understand that inducement is absolutely the language of the abandoned. We at FAMILY FOCUS are convinced that it is the most important conceptual tool that we as workers can give to our adoptive families. It is more important than knowing a child's history. It is more important than going to therapy. It is more important than any traditional tool for attempting to understand why children act the way they do.

What is inducement? At least as we have appropriated it from the psychologists - it is simply defined. With no words required, one person sets up a situation to make another person feel just what that first person feels. All of us do it to a greater or lesser extent. One classic and easily recognized example is that we come home from work after a terrible day - say nothing to anyone - but as a result of our actions everyone else in the house now feels as angry or upset as we do. It's a very common human experience and certainty not limited to abandoned children. However, it is perfected by the abandoned. No one is better than an abandoned child at setting up a situation to make someone special feel exactly what that child feels.

There is no question that the foster children whom we place for adoption are filled with negative feelings - the "baggage" that the field talks about so much. What is the common experience that all children placed for adoption share? Abandonment - or, better stated, perceived abandonment. In truth, there are many birth parents who made plans for their children and perhaps even walked away purposefully to insure that their child would then have a better life. Yet, as we have learned from adoptees themselves, the sense of having been abandoned is central to the adopted child anyway.

What is abandonment? It is the most awful horrible experience that any human being can know. In fact, there are actually no words in our language to truly describe it. Then too, when are adopted children abandoned? Usually pre-verbally, at a very young age, which adds to the sense that there are no words to adequately describe their feelings.

We can, however, make a strong list of some of the emotions that feeling abandoned engenders. How does an abandoned person feel? Isolated, guilty, lost, filled with profound sorrow, enraged, worthless, hopeless, helpless, and the biggest of them all, crazy. This, too, we learned from adoptees. Unfortunately, it makes a great deal of sense - if one defines crazy as feeling that one's inner self is totally "out of sync" with the outside world. Think of a child moving to a new home: feeling sorrow when everyone else is happy; feeling anxious when everyone is saying, "Don't worry;" feeling lost when everyone else is saying how lucky he or she is to be there.

Then add the intensity that is an integral part of inducement. A child who feels abandoned feels intensely alone; intensely angry; intensely sad; intensely mad; and intensely crazy. Intensity is one of the qualities of all inducement. The other quality is that all of the feelings that a child shares in this non-verbal way are negative. Anyone working in the field with people who have adopted has surely heard adoptive parents complaining that they are feeling intense negative feelings as a result of what their children are doing. In fact, parents who call an agency, or a friend, or a therapist, often use the same words that describes an abandoned child's feelings: "I feel so hopeless." "I have never felt such rage before." "I just feel so sad." "This child is making me crazy." That is the solid proof that inducement is going on.

In short, the difference between general inducement, the non-verbal communication technique used by the rest of the world, and the inducement done by adopted children, is that the feelings that the children induce in their adoptive parents are specifically the horrible feelings of abandonment, carried deeply inside the children for long periods of time, until they feel safe enough to communicate them. Certainly the field has long recognized that foster children keep their most intense feelings buried deep inside. If they were to communicate them to their foster parents, in the non-verbal way that children most often communicate, it would be an explosion - and it would result in the children being removed from the foster home and probably institutionalized. We know that foster children have developed a thick skin, as part of their coping mechanisms for surviving in foster care, knowing that they don't have a permanent family of their own. Part of these foster care survival skills involves keeping those negative feelings deeply buried.

What makes a child finally open up and start to communicate those horrible, deeply buried feelings? We believe that it is the sense of being safe and having a forever family, which comes with a good adoptive placement. If that is so, then a child's communication of deeply buried feelings is absolutely a good thing. Communication is certainly good, and part of healthy family life. It is proof that an adoption is a success, that a child has accepted that his or her adoptive parents are "real" parents ... because it is to one's real parents that a child will want to communicate and finally start to get rid of that lifetime of negative feelings. Yet, how does that success often look? Very bad. How does it feel? Very bad. How does the outside world see a child who is acting out (which is the way that children communicate)? As an out-of-control child; as a child who doesn't want to live there any more; as a family in bad shape.

What is FAMILY FOCUS saying? If communication is good - and if a child communicates by acting out - then what looks bad, and feels bad, is really good.....what looks like a failing adoption is really a strong and successful adoption. (Child Protective Services workers must take note here. They are called in when children are acting out, and they too could misperceive these special dynamics of a solid adoption as a family in dysfunction or distress.)

What, then, is the purpose of the inducement? Is it only for the children to communicate how they feel to their parents? No. That is a part - but, like all unconsciously motivated behavior, it has more than one purpose. Its biggest purpose is a child's cry for help to the parents. The children induce these terribly painful feelings inside the adults (although it is perhaps only actually some small fraction of what the children feel) - and then they sit back (unconsciously) and watch what the parents do with what are now THEIR feelings. If the adult can't handle such terrible feelings without rejecting the child, or doing something else negative, then what chance does the child have to handle those same feelings?

At those critical moments in a placement, when a child has opened up and begun to heal by communicating some horrible feelings (without even being aware of what is happening) and letting a parent feel them, what is the worst thing that a parent can do? Blame the child. A parent holding a child accountable for his or her behavior makes that child feel safe. Blaming the child for how the parent feels even has a kernel of truth to it. The child is doing the acting out that he or she does purposefully. It is deliberate although most times, but not always, unconsciously. However, looking at what psychology teaches us, nobody but the individual is responsible for his or her feelings, and what is done with them. The parent who understands that there is good communication going on will then practically deal with the acting out behavior, and respect the inducement for its tremendous value.

If, as sometimes happen, the adoptive parent, or the worker, or the therapist, or the school, or Child Protective Services, use the acting out on the part of the children, the inducement-motivated behavior on the part of the children, to decide that the adoption is a failure, then they are doing exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. Not only are they feeding the confusion and feeling of craziness already within a child, but they are breaking up a solid family.

There are two points that must be emphasized in helping to understand inducement. First of all, in order for a child to act out sufficiently to communicate negative feelings to adoptive parents, that child may have to do some pretty terrible things. Children are masters at understanding how to push buttons. One family may react terribly to a child hurting a family pet. Another family may react equally terribly to a child eating leftovers out of the refrigerator without leaving any for anyone else.

The children have a strong unconscious sense of how to engender those feelings. Second of all, and more surprising to the field, inducement is a dynamic that enters an adoptive family even if that family was a child's foster family for a dozen years. It is only when a child believes that he or she is finally going to be adopted, and will finally have a real family, that the inducement begins. Most children just in foster care won't communicate those feelings, and most foster families are not trained, or warned, that becoming your child's adoptive parent changes the entire dynamic in the foster home.

FAMILY FOCUS has placed hundreds of older children and teens who have absolutely believed that their adoptive parents are going to be there for them forever. The natural next step would be for those children who finally feel safe to start to open up and communicate those feelings. There has absolutely been inducement in many of those families - and sometimes terrible acting out because of the child's need to induce his or her negative feelings in the adoptive parent. However, our families are forewarned. They are trained to understand that inducement is a good thing that feels bad, an intensity that is almost shocking sometimes in its depth. Those families have lots of negative behavior to try to cope with, and no easy time. The issue for those of them who understand and believe in the concept of inducement, though, is never disruption. They hold on and do what parents have to do. FAMILY FOCUS presents workshops and talks about inducement because we believe that the more families and workers who understand it, and see it as a healthy adoption dynamic, the more the adoption field, like the children, will thrive.