



Things to Consider Before you Adopt...

In the United States there are over 100,000 children waiting to be adopted out of foster care. There are thousands more living in orphanages around the globe. Unfortunately, many of these children have histories of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, abandonment and more. When these experiences occur during critical time periods of development, the child's brain development can be disrupted.

The impact of early trauma is broad and varies in severity. Renowned psychiatrist Dr. Bessel van der Kolk coined the term development trauma disorder (DTD) to describe its effects on some children. Children with DTD typically struggle to form meaningful and authentic relationships, regulate their emotions and control their impulses and aggression. Many of them have sleep issues, poor executive functioning, learning disabilities and low self-esteem. While certainly not all adopted and foster children suffer from DTD, many do.

There are no quick and easy fixes for the effects of early trauma, unfortunately. A healthy, positive attachment to a stable and consistent caregiver, however, is key to positive outcomes for these kids. Adoption is an important piece of the puzzle for many children to heal from early childhood trauma.

Here are some important ways families can prepare for adoption:

- 1. Learn everything you can about the impacts of early childhood trauma.** Despite what people sometimes assume or want to believe, children do not simply outgrow serious impacts of trauma. "Good parenting" also does not heal the disorder. You need to educate yourself beforehand to know what to look for and who to call upon if you need assistance. A few recommended resources to get started include *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. and the [Institute for Attachment and Child Development blog](#).
- 2. Be realistic in your expectations.** Traumatized children need stable love to heal but love alone cannot repair the damage of early childhood trauma and mental disorders. Many children with DTD will need life-long care and intensive mental health and educational services.
- 3. Consider your ability to manage difficult behaviors and challenging special needs.** Every family has differing levels of resilience and abilities to take on challenges. Be realistic when considering your bandwidth. Children with DTD can actively thwart your affection and have [serious behavioral problems](#). It's possible your adopted child may need a stay-at-home parent. Is this something you are financially able to manage? Also consider the time requirements for tutoring, counseling, occupational therapy, and medical and psychiatric appointments.
- 4. Think carefully about other children in your home.** Having a sibling with special needs can be both a positive and negative experience. It will undoubtedly result in your resources being stretched and shared. If your child has a history of aggression or violence, it's best if they are the youngest child in the family. It's almost always beneficial for children to have their own bedrooms. [Siblings will need access to respite activities](#) – camps, time away with grandparents and friends and one-on-one time with you.

5. Work closely with your adoption agency. Request a copy of all available records for the child and read them thoroughly. Insist on a full psychiatric evaluation by a mental health clinician so you can understand the challenges your child faces. If you're adopting out of foster care, ask that your child remain qualified for Medicaid regardless of your income. [Negotiate a subsidy and understand the appeal process should your financial obligations change.](#)

6. Build a strong support system now. Lack of support is one of the greatest issues adoptive families face. Don't assume [family and friends](#) understand the challenges of adoption and early childhood trauma. Even adoptive parents typically don't understand the realities of raising a child with DTD until they have the experience. Provide friends, family, neighbors and [educators](#) with resources and ask them to partner with you *before* the child enters your home, if possible. Consider who you will be able to call on to pick up a child from school, help with dinner in a pinch and to listen without judgement when you just need a supportive ear. Reach out and join local and online support groups.

Children who have experienced early childhood trauma desperately need to be welcomed into families as part of their healing process. Unfortunately, too many adoptive families go in with unrealistic expectations and are unprepared for the challenges they will face. If you decide to adopt, be sure to consider the trauma history of the child and prepare yourself and your family for the challenges ahead.