



Inducement: Adoption Language We Must Understand

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by *Maris Blechner*

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This article introduces a philosophy promoted by Family Focus Adoption Services in New York, where Maris is executive director. The concept of inducement, as borrowed from psychologists, has helped adoptive families and family support professionals to view adopted children's acting out behaviors in a more positive way, and was adapted for use in the adoption field by Maris' creative, innovative, always-thinking, and deeply committed senior staff.

In a world where telephones and e-mail dominate our interactions, we sometimes forget there are other ways to communicate. In the adoption world, particularly, communication without words takes on special meaning, and 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 or work with adopted children need to understand that inducement is absolutely the language of the abandoned. Family Focus staff are convinced that it is the most important conceptual tool we have to understand why children act the way they do.

Inducement and Abandonment

Inducement, as it applies to relationships, is simply defined. With no words required, one person sets up a situation to make another person feel what the first person feels. All of us do it to a greater or lesser extent. One classic example is when we come home from work after a terrible day. While we may say nothing, our actions cause everyone else in the house to feel as angry or upset as we are. It's a very common human experience and certainly not unique to abandoned children. However, abandoned children are experts at setting up a situation to make someone special feel exactly how that child feels.

There is no question that children in foster care whom we place for adoption are filled with negative feelings—the "baggage" we hear so much about. 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 have a better life. Yet, as we have learned directly from adoptees, the sense of having been abandoned is central to adoptees' experience.

Abandonment is the most awful experience that any human being can endure. In fact, there are no words in our language to truly describe it. Then too, think when adopted children are abandoned. Abandonment usually happens pre-verbally, at a very young age—timing that adds to the sense that words cannot even adequately describe an abandoned child's painful feelings.

Adults, however, can pretty easily list some of the emotions that perceived abandonment engenders. How does an abandoned person feel? Isolated, guilty, lost, filled with profound sorrow, enraged, worthless, hopeless, helpless, and most of all, crazy. This, too, we learned from adoptees.

Unfortunately, "crazy" makes a great deal of sense if one defines it 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 she is to be there.

Then add intensity. 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 a child shares in this non-verbal way are negative. Anyone working with adoptive parents has surely heard the parents complaining that they are experiencing intensely negative feelings as a result of what their children are doing. In fact, parents who call an agency, a friend, or a therapist, often use the same words that describe 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 solid proof of inducement. In short, the difference between general inducement and inducement by adopted children is that the feelings the children induce in their parents are specifically the horrible feelings of abandonment, hidden in the children for long periods of time, until they feel safe enough to communicate them. We have long recognized that foster children keep their most negative 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 create a cataclysmic explosion. The children would be removed from the foster home and probably institutionalized.

We know that foster children, understanding that they don't have a permanent family of their own, have developed a thick skin as part of their coping mechanism for surviving in foster care. To maintain that thick skin, all of those negative feelings must be tucked far below the surface.

When What Looks Bad Is Really Good

What makes a child finally open up and start to communicate those horrible deeply buried feelings? We believe that children open up when they feel safe within a forever family. As a result, a child's communication of deeply buried feelings is absolutely a good thing. Communication is certainly part of healthy family life. It is proof that an adoption is a success and that a child has accepted his adoptive parents as real parents, because it is to his 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 her negative feelings? As an out-of-control child; as a child who doesn't want to live there any more; as a member of a family in bad shape.

To summarize, 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.

What then is the purpose of inducement? Is inducement simply a way for children to communicate how they feel to their parents? Not completely. Like all unconsciously motivated behavior, inducement has more than one purpose. Its biggest purpose is to express the child's cry for help to the parents. The children induce terribly painful feelings in the adults—perhaps only some small fraction of what the children feel—and then they sit back (unconsciously) and watch what the parents do with 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 constructively?

Separating the Inducement Message from Behavior

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 a parent can do? The worst thing is to blame the child—even though blaming the child is certainly an understandable and instinctive reaction.

Instead, a parent holding a child accountable for his behavior makes the child feel safe. The child is acting out purposefully. The child is deliberately choosing the way in which he acts out, though he is often unconscious of what really motivates him to act out. The parent who understands there is good communication going on will practically deal with the acting out behavior, and respect the message behind the inducement for its tremendous value.

If, as sometimes happens, the adoptive parent, worker, therapist, school, or Child Protective Services uses the child's acting out (the child's inducement-motivated behavior) to decide that the adoption is a failure, they are doing exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. Not only are they feeding the confusion and feelings of craziness already within the child, they are breaking up a solid family and interrupting the child's healing process.

We must emphasize two points about inducement. First, for a child to act out sufficiently to communicate negative feelings to adoptive parents, he or she 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 just as strongly to a child eating leftovers from the refrigerator without saving any for anyone else. Children have a strong unconscious sense of how to engender negative feelings in others.

Second, and usually 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 is finally going to be adopted, and will finally have a real family, that the inducement begins. Most children 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 home.

Family Focus has placed hundreds of older children and teens who absolutely believed their adoptive parents were going to be there for them forever. Upon adoption, the natural next step for those children who finally felt safe was to start to open up and communicate those feelings. As expected, many of those families experienced sometimes terrible acting out because of the child's need to induce negative feelings in the adoptive parent.

Fortunately, our families are forewarned. They are trained to understand that inducement is a good thing that feels bad, an intensity that is almost shocking in its depth. Those families have lots of negative behavior to cope with, and no easy time. The answer for parents who understand and believe in the concept of inducement, though, is never disruption. They hold on and do what all parents must do.

So, what are adoptive parents supposed to do during the inducement stage? There is no magic answer. However, the knowledge that inducement is healthy communication should take a great deal of weight off parents and stop them from worrying that their adoption is failing.

Beyond that, parents must keep parenting and dealing with their children's negative behaviors as other parents would. Negative behaviors warrant appropriate consequences, and positive behavior must be rewarded. Parents' overall responsibility is always to model appropriate responses to both a child's negative behavior and their own negative feelings. The same holds true for the negative feelings that are induced by the child, and recognized by the parents as such. Parents show children how to deal with anger, for example, or sorrow or disappointment by talking about their feelings, and talking about what they are doing about them. It is part of the lifelong parenting job.

Family Focus presents workshops and talks about inducement to help others comprehend its challenge and value. We strongly believe that the more families and workers understand—and see inducement as a healthy adoption dynamic—the more the adoption field, like the children, will thrive.

North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC)

970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106

St. Paul, MN 55114

phone: 651-644-3036

fax: 651-644-9848

e-mail: info@nacac.org

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