

The Interview with Mother

(The interviewer talked with Mother twice, once in a formal, scheduled appointment and once on the phone, calling her with some more specific questions raised during the writing of this paper.)

How old is J? Can you run down some specifics for me, about him and your family in general?

He is a 2½-year-old boy. We adopted him in 2007. The adoption was finalized in December 2007. That was a pretty big deal at the time, but it's over. J is talking in sentences now. He is starting to lose that 'baby-look', although I will say he isn't that big, because he is 2 and still wears clothes for an 18-month old. He LOVES Spiderman and likes to run around pretending he is shooting webs out of his wrists. He is a very well behaved, polite, little guy. He says 'please' and 'thanks' just about every time. He is so happy and so adored by everyone.

He has two older sisters, 'Iz' and 'Kay'. The first is a few years older than him, but the other is 12 now.

Yes. Kay is the big sister, and she is nine years older than J. Iz is only 4 years older. They both have great, if very different, relationships with their little brother.

Tell me about the decision to adopt, and about the adoption itself. I'm interested in the impact it had on J.

We decided to adopt a 3rd child because I had a very hard risky pregnancy with Iz. We decided not to risk it again. I have a good life, but I do have some health problems - nothing that keeps me from being a good mom though.

Anyway, we wanted another child and of course were hoping for a boy, but that didn't matter so much. It certainly didn't matter after the adoption, when it seemed as if J is the little boy we were meant to adopt!

But the adoption was really hard. I had no idea how traumatic it was going to be. I don't think someone who hasn't gone through it can really understand. J was 8 months old when he met him. His birth mother was 19 when she gave birth to him and 20 when she gave him to our keeping. We met her and J, and some folks from the adoption agency, at Red Lobster. I was shaking, waiting for them to come in. Father was really calm though - I remember being a bit irritated about it. When they came over, everyone seemed to have an easy time of it but me. I remember thinking this girl, the birth mother, would never give him up. She obviously loved him, took great care of him there at the table. Even then, there was some gentle discipline - she had a great way with him. It was so hard not to look at him; he was so, so beautiful. I had this deep feeling that he was mine.

I know it sounds strange, but I'd been dreaming about him. Father is not like me. He's very logical, but he said later he knew that was our son and was confident it would work out.

I wasn't that confident. I lived in fear the birth mother would change her mind, would take him away.

You say she was a good mother. I'm interested in that. In the theories I'm studying, trust is of primary importance all through one's life, but begins at the first stage of development. Understanding that, can you let me know more about that stage of his life, the transition?

She was a good mother to him, no doubt. She'd done her best to raise him for 8 months but just hit a wall. She was nurturing and protective and you could tell he was ahead for his age. And he had discipline, like I said. I remember her telling him at the table, "Don't be ugly, please." And he stopped what he was doing. She wanted to know if we were willing to parent her child; it was obviously an important question to her. We told her 'Yes,' absolutely we would, if she chose to place him. She moved in with us, during the transition. I would never have expected how things worked out, you understand, and I know it sounds funny, but she had nowhere to go, and it seemed horrible to just leave him with us one day. None of us wanted that, we felt he needed time. Father worked out the timetable he thought would be appropriate. She brought him to visit every day during the last few weeks of her lease, and then when that expired she moved in with us for a month.

(As we were interviewing, Mother became very frustrated and stressed. She said later she felt as if she were reliving the process. She said it felt like someone was holding her head underwater. We had to take a break for a bit.)

The birth mom was great, and I know it had to be hard on her. She wanted him to have a mom and dad, siblings to play with, and the stability of parents staying together to raise him. She did her best but worried that she would never be able to provide these things. She did everything to make the transition as easy as possible for him. She would point to Father saying J's daddy, point to me saying J's mommy, then point to herself saying J's (her name). She slowly and deliberately spent less time with him. It had to be horrible. Sometimes, I could hear her cry.

Father had a much easier time of it. Before the adoption, J didn't seem to have any male role models, so bonded to Father very quickly.

But there was this period when J was bonded to the birth mother and to my husband, but not to me. I know it sounds terrible of me but it was really hard. I was with him all the time and he would cry so much. He would throw fits for a long, long time and nothing would work. He did that in the mall one day, screaming like crazy; people were literally staring and pointing. It seemed like forever before I got him out of there. And baths! I would give him a bath and he would scream bloody murder. Then the birth mother told me he loved baths. I remember crying about that.

The birth mom had moved out by that time. She went to the military; she really wanted to make a life for herself, didn't want to be dependent on other people again. I know she felt really let down by her family. Anyway, Father and I just kept at it, and it got better. Then three months passed and the birth mother came back in town for a court hearing. That was really stressful for all of us, for different reasons. I worried J would be taken away, but I also worried how he would react to his birth mom. But we had to bribe him to get him to go to her. I was mom now! The birth mom was really happy about that, I know she worried too, but she was happy J was in his forever home.

Tell me about his interactions with people since that time, how he relates.

For a long time after that, he kept his circle small. He would hold me or Father and just look at other people. He was a very serious little thing. He's mostly grown out of that, but for a long time he wouldn't have anything to do with most other people. He had some people he was close to, like his uncle. It just took a bit of doing.

(Much of the transcript of Mother's interview has been edited out of the final assessment, being variations on a theme or observations about development noted elsewhere.)

The Interview with Father

(Father's interview was by phone and fairly brief, documented here almost in its entirety. By the point of the interview, the assessor had a specific set of questions and a strong idea of the information required.)

How do your two girls relate to J?

Kay warmed to him right off. She relates to him in a very different way than Iz does, more like a mimi-mom to him at times. She was older, and she was big enough to hold him. She enjoyed that so much that we eventually had to encourage her not to do it any longer – put him down! He can walk by himself now. We never let her change a diaper though; she could play with him when she wanted to, mother him when she wanted to, but we never wanted it to be a job. This was a deliberate choice of ours, to define it this way.

Iz would get jealous of that, some. She wanted that relationship and didn't understand why J didn't respond. She is a playmate, a peer.

I was told you were confident from the very beginning that it would all work out. What happened, was there some reason?

Not really, no. At the first meeting he reached out his hand and grabbed my thumb. For some reason, I just thought to myself, this is going to be my son. I wasn't wrong. I know

it was hard on Mother sometimes. I was very mindful of that; we talked about it a lot. We developed lots of strategies to deal with it.

Can you be specific?

Sure. When he lived with his birth mother he slept in her bed. We wanted him to sleep in a crib in his own room. When they came to live with us he started sleeping with me in a twin bed, just the two of us. We were all involved in the decision – we didn't want him to continue sleeping with his birth mother there and associate that with the way it was supposed to be. After a time, he slept in the bed with Mother and me, though only for a few nights, since that just wasn't that workable... anyway, we put him in a crib next to the bed, and for most of the next week one of us was up all night rocking the crib and talking softly to him when he would wake up. Eventually, he slept in his own room. Small steps.

Can you tell me briefly your thoughts about his developmental milestones back then? I've been observing him now, but what was it like over the last year and some?

He met them all on time, most a bit early in fact. Even when we first got him he was crawling around, moving hand over hand to furniture and such. And he was a climber! J climbs; he would stack things up to try to climb. It was really funny to watch him try to stack plastic chairs and then attempt to climb them. I would hold my hands out, ready to catch him. He also loves to use things to walk with. He will grab onto something and then take off running. He'd climbed and run full force long before being able to walk on his own.

He is a bit small for his age, and he's changed some too. Now, he's just as fearless but far more deliberate. He's not one for chances anymore.

Are there any cultural or spiritual aspects of his upbringing you'd care to share?

I don't know – we're a normal sort of family. We go to church often, though not as much as we're supposed to, certainly. We're moral though; we want our kids to understand that. I mean, we make good choices and want them to as well.