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Tales from the Road

by Sue Badeau

Have you ever taken a road trip? With children?

If so, you understand the importance of packing a well-stocked tool kit so you'll be prepared in the event of a flat tire, dead battery, or other roadside challenge. The right tool kit may have life or death implications. Traveling in hot, dry climates with long stretches of road between rest stops requires different tools and supplies (extra water!) than traveling in the blistering cold and ice of the northern regions of Wisconsin in winter (blankets please!).

In a similar way, families fostering or adopting children, as well as the professionals who work with them, need to have the right tools to make their journey safe and healing for all. My husband and I have parented over 75 children – through birth, adoption, foster care, refugee hosting, and kinship care. Many have complex trauma and/or medical special needs. Along with shorter road trips, we've taken coast-to-coast camping trips with our children half a dozen times! We learned many life lessons on these trips, and drew from those experiences to write our book, *"Are We There Yet: The Ultimate Road Trip Adopting and Raising 22 Kids."*

It has been a scary, challenging, thrilling, joyous, confusing, frustrating, and rewarding journey from the first day until today – one that we would definitely repeat if we had the opportunity – and yet one that we were not always prepared for. When we set out to become parents, my husband and I thought we had a pretty complete tool kit. I had a college degree in early childhood education; he had experience as a youth counselor and coach. We had friends who were parents. We had attended conferences, read books, babysat, and observed. We were ready to rock and roll on this journey of parenthood. Quickly we learned that parenting children whose lives have been challenged by abuse, neglect, medical conditions, community violence, separation, loss, and a depth of grief we had never experienced would take more than the usual spare tires, jumper cables, and maps required for most road trips.

Today I'll share a few thoughts about road trips – and a few lessons we've learned along the way. When I speak at the *A Place in My Heart* conference, I'll share a bit about what we've learned to pack in our own parenting tool kit to help you think about what you might need for yours, or for the families you work with.

"Let's go." The most important lesson about successful road trips is that they require action. One of the best moments of any road trip, is getting everyone loaded into the vehicles and pulling out of the driveway. We may not know what lies ahead, but we're on our way.

In my role as a consultant, parents or workers often describe a challenging situation related to a child. Their question goes something like this, "Is this a normal

From the Corner Office

Welcome to Fall!

In this issue of *Partners*, we chose to focus on the stories of other families and their versions of the “tool boxes” they have used to this point on their journeys. Our hope is that their stories and ideas help provide inspiration, comfort, and hope on *your* journey.

What often sticks out for me, is the “little things” that we so often take for granted. I recently had my own experience with realizing just how much the “little things” matter.

On my journey of working to support kids and families touched by the out-of-home care system in Wisconsin, I was once a clinical director at a residential treatment center. While I often took time out to spend with the kids and staff at the facility, it was not my main role, and I don't think I understood the significance of the time I spent with the kids until this recent experience. A couple weeks ago, during a committee meeting, I was approached by a former youth in care who asked if I once was a clinical director at said facility. He had tears in his eyes and all I could think was, “Oh, if I did something then, that I now know better about, I am sorry.” He reminded me who he was and I realized that I didn't recognize the 23-year-old young man standing in front of me because the last time I saw him he was an eight-year-old boy. He told me that he had been admitted to the residential facility during the fall and there were Halloween celebrations taking place.

“I went into a haunted house you guys had made and ran out very scared,” he said. “When I ran out, you were there; you stopped me, told me it would be OK, and held my hand and walked me through so I would not be scared. I will never forget you for that.”

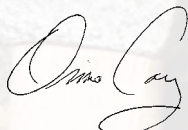
Wow, what a moment.

Back then, doing those things was a small portion of my day and duties. Very often, they were a great distraction from the less-than-fun tasks I needed to do. I would have never considered the significance of such a “little thing” to that little boy. I was just doing my job and what I liked to do with kids.

I share this not for accolades for me, but to remind us all that the “little things” matter; even when we feel we are not making a difference, we are. So, please, put in your “tool box” all of the favorite meals the kids at your house have, favorite movie or story times, or just a little extra reassurance. You won't always know what they mean, but those “little things” do mean a lot to kids who have not always had them come easily.

As always, please know that, here at the Coalition, we want to be part of your “tool box” or a resource to help you build yours. We hope the stories we have included in this edition provide you with information and things to consider. Please don't hesitate to give us a call if you want us to research something more. We also know that, sometimes, you just want someone else to connect with; give us a call or check out our Facebook page – there are plenty of families connected to us that are more than willing to provide a listening ear and supportive shoulder.

Best to you all and thank you for letting us serve you,



Oriana Carey, CEO



Cherish Every Day

Mark and Julie always knew that they would adopt; even before the couple married, they discussed adoption and they both felt that, “[it] was a beautiful way to expand a family.” So the option was never far from their thoughts, even as the couple wed and had three biological children. But, a few short years ago, Mark and Julie renewed the conversation.

It was the fall of 2013 and Mark and Julie started gathering information about local adoption agencies and the types of adoption they might pursue. “We just had a feeling that it was about the right time,” Julie explained. “So, one night, we just prayed like crazy, asking for a sign of what we should do.” The next morning, while attending services at their church, the pastor spoke about international adoption – something he had never preached about before. Mark and Julie knew they had their sign.

In September 2014, Mark, Julie, and their three sons accepted the referral of a little girl named Ellie. They travelled to China in March 2015 to meet their daughter. The whole family then spent a little time in her native country before returning home to Wisconsin.

Building a Tool Box

As with any adoption, there is so much to think about, consider, prepare for, and plan for. For an international adoption, there are the added steps of travelling and language barriers to consider. The process is long and can test even the strongest of resolves, so having a fully stocked “tool box” is one way to get through each step of the adoption journey.

Friends and family. Mark and Julie found a support network of other families through the training classes they took from their agency. “There were about five families who got really close,” they explained. “We sort of formed our own mini support group.”

Faith. An important part of Mark and Julie’s tool box was – and is – their faith. The couple shared their belief that they were called through faith to adopt internationally and that they leaned on this particular “tool” a lot throughout their journey. Prayer was a source of strength and comfort for their whole family from beginning to end.

International adoption contains three big steps that can be daunting and may seem overwhelming – accepting a referral, preparing for travel, and making the transition into everyday family life once back home in the U.S. We asked Mark and Julie what was in their “international adoption tool box” and what tips and information they would share with other families adopting from another country:

Accepting a Referral

- While waiting for a referral, try to focus on the blessings all around you rather than the big question mark of when the call will come. “I know,” Julie acknowledged. “Easier said than done! But try to cherish the moments you have in the current stage of life; before you know it, everything will change.”
- Decide on an international adoption medical clinic to consult with while waiting for a referral. Some referrals come with only a few days to make a decision, so you want to have your doctors lined up ahead of time and know their procedure. Send your child’s file to them as soon as possible, after you receive it. This is a tip that proved especially important for Mark and Julie; when they received their first referral, they had only five short days to provide an answer.
- Be honest with yourself and your spouse/partner about what you think you can and can’t handle, particularly when accepting a referral for a child with special needs. For Mark and Julie, they knew they were open to a child with special needs, but it’s important to know what’s right for you, your spouse/partner, and your children.

“It’s tremendously difficult to turn down a referral, but sometimes it needs to happen,” Julie said. The first referral she and Mark received was one that they turned down. “Trust your gut,” she said. “Just like falling in love, when you read the file of the right child for you, you’ll know. Don’t let your excitement over the beautiful child in front of you prevent you from having honest discussions over what potential medical treatments lie ahead.”
- If your child has special needs, do all you can to research that need. Understand that neither the best case nor the worst case scenario are very likely. Be sure you’re comfortable with something in the middle, hope for best case, and prepare for worst case.

Having completed their adoption of daughter Ellie, Mark and Julie say that, in retrospect, they wish they would have insisted on some additional medical testing for their daughter. “It wouldn’t have changed our acceptance of her referral,” Julie said. “But it would have allowed us to

Continued on page 8



The Right Match

Ben and Becky Eby married in 2007. Two years later, the couple was ready to start their family. Ben and Becky conceived . . . and lost six pregnancies. With no clear answers as to why they could not carry to term, they began thinking about other options for building their family. Ben and Becky contacted the Coalition to get some information about getting started. Following, Becky shares more of their story:

“We decided to look more into adoption,” Becky said. “Over the years, we had discussed this route, but it took several years for the both of us to be on the same page and agree that adoption was the right path for us.

“We didn’t know many people who had adopted, especially not in Wisconsin. So our first step was calling an agency and setting up a meeting. From there, we decided to meet with two more agencies to decide which one was the best fit. We decided that we’d work with an agency, but also try to find a match on our own through an independent adoption. Everything I read online said that matches came from such a variety of places . . . family friends, random acquaintances, or just being in the right place at the right time. (I happen to believe this is the work of a mighty God!)

“So, as we were working on our home study to officially become adoption-ready, we told everyone our plans to adopt. I blogged about it. (www.beckyandbenadopt.blogspot.com) I shared it on my business page for Facebook. We started a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/beckyandbenadopt) and website specifically for our adoption journey, printed little business cards with our website address, and asked friends and family members to pass them out. Sharing our story, including our losses, was one of the hardest things I have ever done. (And I made it through boot camp and military deployment. I have done hard things!)

“Ultimately, we ended up meeting our son’s birth mom through an acquaintance on a Facebook group. We did have a failed match before that, and the expectant mother there had seen one of our business cards on a community bulletin board. She also had seen our website previously when a friend shared it with her. So I don’t think any one “seed” we planted was responsible for us finding our match. Instead, it was a team of family and friends rooting for us, praying for us, and sharing our story. We did have a profile book at our agency, but it did not result in any matches.

“I did join a few adoption groups on Facebook that were really supportive. It was nice to hear that we weren’t alone in our frustration, sadness to still be waiting, etc. I wasn’t able to find a Wisconsin-specific group though, so I started one! (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/544218055637015/>) It’s still a small group, under 150 people, but it’s very supportive and a huge resource on discussing state-specific things. Plus,

it’s nice to know local families that have similar dynamics to ours!

“One thing I’m really happy we did was meet with three-four agencies, review policies from each, and ask a ton of questions before committing to one. Each agency has such different policies and the social workers are obviously so different! We wanted a social worker who we were comfortable with, so that played a big part in our decision.”

Becky and Ben have kept in touch with their son’s birth mom, Izzy. They all cherish the open relationship, learning together along the way.

“Open adoption is beautiful, but there is no guidebook! Every birth parent, every adoptive parent . . . we’re all so different. So there is a lot of getting to know each other, navigating a difficult, emotional situation, especially at first, while everything is so new. For us and Izzy, communicating frequently is the best thing we’ve done. We try to build a relationship based on our son and on getting to know her, as an important person in our life.

“So, for our son’s first birthday, my husband had to work, so Izzy and I took the baby to the zoo together! [Ben and I] also surprised her at work with a card and gift before Mother’s Day. Most days I try to send her a Snapchat photo or video (or 10 of them!), because I know how much she values contact from us.

“At first, it was scary to share so much and we worried that it would hurt her to see him with us, but she has told me several times that she loves seeing him happy and loved by our entire family. We also were worried that it might be tough to set stronger boundaries later if there were any issues early on, but she has been so respectful of us as his mom and dad. Likewise, we respect her importance as our son’s first mother, and are so thankful for her choosing us to be his parents.

“We’ve known each other for a year and a half now, and it gets a little more comfortable, a little easier, every month. I can’t wait to see what our relationship looks like in 10 years!”

We’d like to thank Ben and Becky for their willingness to share their family story for this issue of Partners.

The Hardest *Best Decision*

Very often, we share a lot of stories about foster care and adoption from the perspective of foster parents, adoptive parents, child welfare staff members, and experts in the field. The voice that is sometimes not as prevalent, is that of the birth parent. In this issue of *Partners*, we are sharing several stories from parents – a family that adopted internationally, a family that adopted domestically, and a family that adopted from foster care – who are sharing what they learned on their personal journeys, and the “tools” that they found helpful along the way. This story is from a birth mom, Izzy, who made an adoption plan for her son, Jacob. She shares why she decided to pursue adoption, how she found the right family, and what “tools” helped her the most throughout the process.

“Deciding to pursue adoption was not an easy thing to do,” said Izzy, a Wisconsin birth mom. “In fact, it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I had to put my feelings and needs aside to do what was best for my son. So I knew from the first day, when I found out I was pregnant with Jacob, that I wasn’t ready to be a parent. I wasn’t emotionally or financially ready to be a parent; I wasn’t stable whatsoever.”

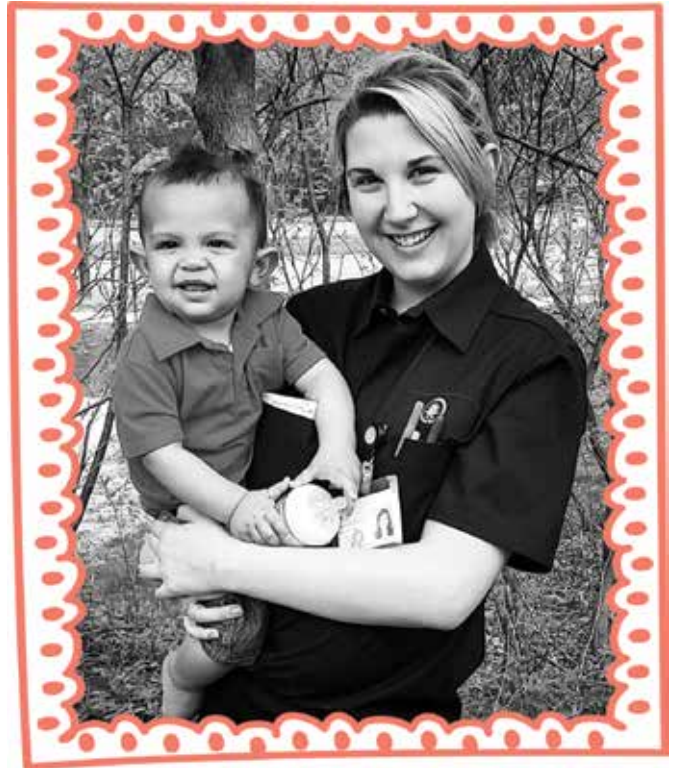
Izzy was a senior in high school when she got pregnant and did not have a continuing relationship with her son’s birth father.

“I was 17 years old and terrified about the whole idea of me carrying this child inside of me and the idea of child birth and having a baby at such a young age,” she said.

Even so, Izzy did her homework before choosing to take a path toward adoption. She said she, “looked at all my options, and they all overwhelmed me.” When she decided to focus more seriously on adoption, she said that she had so many questions running through her mind:

- “Is this what’s really best for him?”
- “Will I still be in his life?”
- “Will he hate me?”
- “How will I find the right people to raise him?”
- “How will I handle not being his ‘parent’?”

Ultimately, Izzy knows that, “it took a lot for me to decide to have someone else raise him, but I knew inside it was the best possible thing for him and I still think that to this day.”



Izzy met the couple who would adopt her baby through her high school teacher. “My teacher knew that I was considering adoption, and she knew Becky and Ben were looking to adopt. So she pulled me aside one day after class and asked me if I was still interested in [adoption]. When I said yes, she gave me Becky’s name and number and we started talking.”

Izzy took her time and got to know Becky and her husband, Ben. To start, Izzy, Becky, and Ben got together at Becky and Ben’s house so Izzy could see their home and get to know them. “Over the process of us talking, we grew a friendship,” Izzy said. “I began to be more and more comfortable with the idea of them raising Jacob. It took a little time, but I picked Becky and Ben because, honestly, they are great people and I couldn’t think of a better couple to raise him.”

Throughout her journey, Izzy pulled strength and support from her friends and family, which she said is a “big thing” in the process of adoption. She also said that it was, “very helpful to have a social worker to talk to about the whole process. [The social worker] knew all about adoptions and the pros and cons to it.”

Becky, Ben, Izzy, and Jacob have formed a strong relationship and Izzy is very much a part of the family. “Becky is so open with the adoption, and she was from the beginning,” Izzy said. “She [and Ben] made me feel like I was a part of her family and not just Jacob. It really made it so much easier for me. All in all, I couldn’t have picked a better and more loving family to raise ‘our’ little boy.”

HOME TO STAY:

Parenting with an Open Heart

James and Alex met in 2002, while Alex was attending bible school. At the time, James was working in a Christian bookstore and, soon after meeting, they fell in love. Although, at that time, the laws did not allow gay couples to marry, James and Alex knew they were committed to each other and hoped to grow and start a family of their own.

“Pretty much from the get-go we knew we wanted to have children in our home, but we weren’t sure how. We ordered books from Amazon that talked about a lot of different options, including surrogacy,” they explained. However, the couple felt that a lot of the options they read about were not good fits for building their family. In 2003, James saw television personality Rosie O’Donnell, who is also gay, talking about her experience as a foster parent. He was inspired by Rosie’s story and brought up the idea of fostering children to Alex, who was immediately receptive. “I liked the idea of helping children,” said Alex, and he signed the couple up for an informational meeting in Waukesha to learn about becoming foster parents.

As foster parents, James and Alex make a point of being supportive of reunification efforts; however, they always held out a hope to adopt, as well. They credit their workers with helping them to understand that most of the children who become available for adoption through foster care are older, school-aged children or siblings who need to be adopted together, and the couple said they were open to that possibility throughout their fostering journey. Together, James and Alex fostered several children who experienced successful reunifications. And then they accepted placement of Elliot, who was only a few weeks old.

As Elliot’s case progressed, the efforts to reunify him with his birth family floundered, and James and Alex were asked to consider adoption. Since the couple was not able to legally marry, state statute only allowed one of them to be the legal adoptive parent. James and Alex decided that James would serve as the adoptive parent for Elliot, and that Alex would be the one to serve as the adoptive parent if they were to adopt again.

After their adoption of Elliot, Alex and James continued to accept placements for foster care. After a few years, eight-week-old Belle came to stay with Alex, James, and Elliot. When she became available for adoption, Alex and James welcomed the opportunity to make her a permanent member of their family. This time it would be Alex who would be the legal adoptive parent.



After Belle’s adoption, James and Alex decided to take a break from foster care and focus on their two children. They settled into the routine of family life and even achieved another dream, by opening a salon together in Wales, which they named ElleBelle, after their two children.

Elliot and Belle grew and flourished and James and Alex began to think about adopting once again. However, this time things would be a little different. “I know a lot of couples have qualms about adopting older children, but we thought that caring for a baby would be a bit of stretch in our family, especially with Elliot’s needs,” said James. (Elliot has autism.) “We decided to have an open mind and look to adopt an older child.”

Sure enough, within a few months, the county called about Adam, who was eight years old at the time. The adoption plan with the family currently caring for Adam was falling through and the case worker was hoping James and Alex would be interested in meeting the boy. Adam came for a respite weekend, and James and Alex knew right away he belonged with them. “Adam came to us on Thursday, and by Monday we registered him for school and decided he would stay with us,” said Alex.

After adopting two younger children, Alex and James did have some concerns about adopting an older child. “We knew that Adam came from an abusive background,” James said. “So we were concerned about him possibly acting out around Elliot and Belle.” However, as James explains, adopting Adam was actually great for Elliot and Belle. “It’s been good for Elliot, because it has kind of helped him come out of his shell and be more interactive, and it also gave Belle someone else to play with. They do butt heads a little bit, but that’s a good thing, it’s normal.” He continued, “I know people have a lot of qualms about adopting older kids, but that kid [Adam], he just fit in; with our kids, with the neighborhood. It was a

different experience than adopting younger children, because I think he kind of knew he wanted a home, he wanted a place to belong . . . the change in his personality since that adoption date was final has been amazing. It's almost as if he had a fear in the back of his mind that things might not happen, that they might fall through again. So he settled down a lot after the adoption day."

There are still a few challenges that James and Alex face in their day-to-day lives, many of which are familiar to many adoptive families. "Some of the questions the kids get asked are challenging. Like, on the bus, a girl asked them 'are you adopted? You don't look like each other,' and we have to help them come up with answers to that, and tell them that they don't have to hide that they were adopted."

James added, "It's also hard to try and find a balance with birth parents. Belle's mom has been in prison, and we try to keep in touch through letters and pictures." James and Alex stress that it's important to set boundaries in those relationships. "Elliott's mom sends text messages and we send pictures. She seems happy that he is doing well. You try to keep it simple and make it work."

Several years after the adoptions of Elliot and Belle, not having both partners legally recognized as adoptive parents of both children is still an obstacle. Elliot was diagnosed with autism, and requires a lot of services to meet his unique needs. Because he is the only legal parent, James is the only one who can authorize those services. After Elliot's adoption was finalized, the couple petitioned to have Alex gain parental rights, but were denied under the statutes at the time. However, despite these setbacks, James and Alex persevere. They were married in 2014, when same sex marriage first became legal in Wisconsin. The couple shared that, for same sex couples, things are changing and becoming easier. "Adam was the first child that we were able to adopt together, and both our names are on his birth certificate," they said. Both

James and Alex are hoping that, with recent rulings by the United States Supreme Court, new avenues will open up for them both to be legally recognized as adoptive parents for Elliot and Belle.

James and Alex do have some advice for other LGBT couples who are considering fostering and adoption: "Just don't be afraid," said Alex. "I think we were Waukesha County's first gay couple who became foster parents and it worked out." James added, "Just keep an open mind, there are so many kids here in Wisconsin that need your help. Even if it does not wind up being an adoption, you will know that you helped a kid. Kids need attention and love, to know they are heard and to know they are safe."

"The number one question we get about our kids is 'where are they from?'. People think they are from these exotic places, but they are from here in Waukesha. Most people forget that there are children in their neighborhoods who need a home."

Nearly a dozen children have come to James and Alex through foster care and three have stayed forever. "When your kids are being naughty or sassy and you are dealing with the day to day things, you can kind of get lost in all of that," Alex said. "But then you hear from people that you have a good family or that your kids are great. Those are the proudest moments. You think things like 'you didn't eat your vegetables,' or, 'you're being disrespectful,' but then you realize none of that really matters because your kids are safe and they are happy." For James, the most rewarding thing is, "just seeing them grow, seeing them run around and be happy and free kids."

James and Alex participated in the Jockey Being Family® Home to Stay™ program. If you have recently completed an adoption from the child welfare system and would like to take part in the Home to Stay program, please contact us at 414-475-1246 or 800-762-8063.

Resources

Tip Sheets

The Coalition has an extensive list of tip sheets on a wide variety of topics. These tip sheets can be found at www.wiadopt.org/resources/tipsheets, and make wonderful additions to any foster or adoptive parent's tool kit.

Books

- *Silent Embrace*, by Ann & Amanda Angel
- *The Greatest Gift: Reflections on International and Domestic Adoption*, by Betsy Buckley
- *The Ultimate Insider's Guide to Adoption*, by Elizabeth Swire Falker
- *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell it Like it Is*, by Abigail Garner
- *Adoption Parenting*, by Jean MacLeod & Sheena Macrae, PhD
- *Are We There Yet: The Ultimate Road Trip Adopting and Raising 22 Kids*, by Sue Badeau

Additional Information

- Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA) <http://www.wfapa.org/>
- Wisconsin Hopeful Adoptive Families Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/544218055637015/>
- Post Adoption Resource Center: <http://postadoptccyf.org/>

do additional research and line up her specialists sooner, rather than later.”

- Don't be afraid to ask your agency questions! Consult with the international adoption medical clinic and add the doctor's follow-up questions to your own. Gather as much information as possible! Looking back, Julie says she wishes that she and Mark would have been a little more assertive in looking for answers to medical questions. “I don't know if we necessarily could have forced the issue or not,” she said. “However, when questions came back unanswered and medical tests were not run, I would have pursued the issue a bit more. I realize you'll never get an answer to all your questions, but I still wish we had forced the issue more.”

Travel Preparation

- When it comes time to book flights, Mark and Julie recommend Adoption Airfare (adoptionairfare.com), as well as cross-checking with multiple travel agencies; there are big variations in airfare prices available.
- Pack as lightly as possible. “My husband made me downsize packed items three times,” Julie said. “And he probably should have made me do a fourth!” It can be challenging to make it through all the airports. If at all possible, you might consider traveling with carry-on only.
- Apply for your VISA early! Don't wait until the last minute. “The adoption process is filled with lots of paperwork and lots of waiting,” Julie said. “Just when you think you're done with paperwork, you realize how wrong you are!” She shared that, five days before they were scheduled to travel to China, she and Mark received a packet of papers that needed to be filled out for their home study. Thankfully, nothing hindered their plans, but it's best to plan and apply for those travel documents as early as possible.
- Stock your freezer. Spend some time preparing crock pot and other freezer-friendly meals so that, after you return home from travelling with your new child, you don't have to worry about cooking for a little while.
- Line up your child's first pediatrician appointment and appointments with any specialty clinics they may need. Many doctors book several months out, so start now while you have time and aren't sleep deprived.
- Prepare your friends and family members for the possibility that it may be a while until your child is ready to meet them and/or accept affection from them. Let them know your anticipated plan of how you'd like them to interact with your child and also let them know that it may change once you return home.

When Mark and Julie returned home, they slowly began introducing Ellie to the rest of her new extended family. “She acted pretty shy, but generally enjoyed the interactions for a short period of time,” Julie said. “However, we noticed that she got overwhelmed quickly, so we kept visits very short, calm, and spread out.” They knew Ellie had so many people

who wanted to meet her, but followed their daughter's lead and simply asked friends and family members for patience and understanding.

- Get together with friends, go on date nights, or take a quick get-away with your spouse if you can. Life will change drastically when you come home and it might be a while until you can do those things again.

Transitioning back home

- At the top of Mark and Julie's list? “Don't be afraid to ask for help!”

Treat your return home like arriving with a newborn. Julie suggests enlisting the help of friends for things such as:

- Leave money and a grocery list for someone to stock your kitchen the day before you arrive home
 - Set up play-dates at a different houses for older siblings; it can help keep a sense of normalcy the first several weeks home
 - Arrange for friends to transport older kids to/from extracurricular activities or practices so you can focus on slowly transitioning your new child into your regular schedule
 - Accept offers of meals. Depending on how your child responds to others, either welcome friends into the house with open arms or have a cooler waiting on the front porch
- Take time to just simply have fun with your child. It's okay to turn down invitations and simplify life for a while.
 - Follow your child's lead when it comes to integration into the community and guests to your home.
 - Stay in close contact with your social worker, other adoptive parents, and other support or resource groups to help you as you encounter unexpected behaviors.
 - Let friends and family know how your child is doing. Be very clear about how they handle meeting new people, how you'd like them to interact with your child (e.g., can they pick up your child, should they wait for your child to approach them, can they give your child food, etc.). Mark and Julie kept friends and family members updated on their adoption journey and Ellie's progress through a closed Facebook group. They posted updates before travelling to China, photos while there, and progress reports after they returned home.
 - Take care of yourself! Make time for each spouse/partner to exercise and have a little downtime.

Perhaps the best piece of advice that Mark and Julie shared was the last one:

“Enjoy the process and do your best to cherish even the hardest days. As you and your child transition through the challenging emotions and behaviors, you'll grow closer to one another and you will both appreciate your bond even more. Remind yourself on the hard days that each stage is temporary.”

developmental thing, or is it adoption-related, or should we have her tested for other issues?"

Sometimes it's hard to tease out the root cause underlying the words, feelings, and behaviors children present. We can get stuck in the mud of confusion. Paralyzed by the fear of doing the wrong thing, we do nothing. Children are further traumatized as a result. While it is important to do our best to understand what is going on with our children, we cannot be afraid to act. We must forge ahead, applying parenting strategies designed to foster attachment, nurture healing, and support healthy development, even when plagued with unknowns and uncertainties.

"I will go before you." The best sources of information for planning a road trip are not always found in travel guides, but rather by talking to others who have been down that road before us. We need others as mentors, guides, and companions. We need their leadership, expertise, experience, and fellowship. Throughout our journey as foster and adoptive parents, such travelling companions have helped us learn how to cope with a child on a feeding tube, a pregnant teen, a son in prison, and a dying child. What a precious gift to have such companions to go before us and travel with us. Foster, kin, and adoptive families need these connections. Support groups, both in-person and online, buddy-families, respite providers, mentors. Families will have a more successful journey when they are able to learn from and share in the experiences of others.

"Slow down!" We live in a fast-paced world; we're used to everything being instant, from the news to text messages – we never want to wait. Yet, sometimes, the best advice we can heed is the voice inside that is urging us to "slow down, go at the pace of the children . . ."

In our journey, we've learned that there are two ways to travel: to focus on the destination, or to enjoy the journey on its own terms. Each road trip will be filled with delays and detours. But when we focus on the journey, these detours can become "teachable moments," not simply hassles to be endured. Sometimes we discover that what we thought was a detour is actually the best way after all.

Our children may not achieve developmental milestones at the same pace as other children. Healing from trauma takes time. Do not rush the process. Give children time, give parents time – time to attach, to heal, and to thrive.

Let me illustrate these life lessons with a couple of stories from our own family journey.

On one trip, when the kids were small, we hiked in the Appalachian Mountains. We covered a short distance on an easy walking trail.

I noticed many hikers passing us equipped with everything needed to make it to the top of the mountain. I grew envious. As I looked over my motley crew, my eyes fixed on my small son with cerebral palsy - a child who was predicted to never walk - picking his way along the mountain path.

My eyes filled with tears. I realized that he was every bit as successful as the pros with their fancy equipment. I learned an important lesson that day: it's not about getting to the top, it's about putting one foot in front of the other, and continuing the climb.

Sometimes, while on our journey, we get into accidents. The second story I'll share involves a road trip with one of my daughters and her infant son. At three in the morning, I was getting sleepy and fighting my eyelids as they threatened to close.

The next thing I knew, I was in a ditch, upside down, pinned between the steering wheel and door. My grandson was crying and my daughter was unconscious. I was terrified that we'd never get out. Who would see us at this hour? From time to time, I'd see the glimmer of headlights on the road above. No one stopped.

Finally, a trucker stopped. He couldn't fix us, but he stayed with us until an ambulance came. We all survived, although some scars remain.

What touched me so deeply was that the trucker stopped and stayed – not knowing if we could be fixed. It cost him time and set him back on his route. I think of him often when I get discouraged that I can't always "fix" everything for my children, or when I don't see complete healing from the damage and injuries they sustained by all kinds of brutal early life experiences. I'm reminded to look beyond the "wreck" – to see hope and possibilities for healing, just as the trucker did for us. I am reminded of the value of being the one who stops and stays even in the midst of seemingly impossible circumstances.

These are just two of the lessons we've learned from taking road trips with our family. The precious memories have endured. We've also learned that, when travelling, you better take along a **really good tool kit** because, inevitably, you'll experience flat tires, get lost, the brakes will quit, etc. I hope you can join me at the *A Place in My Heart* conference on November 7 in Wisconsin Dells. I'll share a bit more about our tool kit to help you think about what goes into yours.



A Place in My Heart Conference

An annual conference offered by
the Wisconsin Post Adoption Resource Centers

Beyond GPS and Jumper Cables: Developing the Tool Kit for the Lifelong Journey of Adoption



Saturday, November 7, 2015
9am-4pm

Wisconsin Dells, WI



Register online at:
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