

*About Deborah Hage:*

*Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.*

*The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.*

*To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit [deborahhage.com](http://deborahhage.com)*

*If we could read the secret histories of our enemies, we would find in each person's story enough suffering and sorrow there to disarm all hostilities.*

*Longfellow*

*For wounded children everywhere, who, while denying the facts,  
have no trouble recognizing the truth.*

**Deborah Hage, MSW**

## **Compassion**

When one is in love it becomes necessary to love the person while not loving everything that person does. People do it with their spouses, children and friends as a matter of course. No where is this concept stretched to the limit than when a parent has adopted a hurt child whose behavior is hurtful. They need to find a way to love their child while seeking ways to help the child behave in less destructive ways. If they distance themselves from their child because of the child's behavior the adoption and the family relationship is doomed.

How to get to that point where a parent can love their child while not loving their child's behavior? How do parents find the compassion to stay the course? Foundational is an understanding that children behave the way they behave because they think the way they think. What a child is thinking about an event or an interaction or a person is going to determine what the child does regarding that event, interaction or person.

The same is true for adults. Parents and therapists are no exception. What a parent believes about a child's behavior is going to determine what they do about the behavior. If a parent believes the child is behaving in a certain way because he can't behave any differently they react completely differently then if they believe the child is behaving in a certain way because he doesn't want to cooperate, he is stubborn, he is angry, etc. A child in a wheelchair is not expected to walk so is not expected to walk quickly. A child who dawdles for no discernible physical reason is irritating. A parent is not going to discipline or consequence a child in a

wheelchair for not coming quickly, yet will search for ways to discipline a child with two strong legs who does not come when called.

Likewise, what a therapist/parent believes about a child's behavior will determine the direction he or she takes in therapy.

How do we develop a compassionate mindset?

- By seeing negative behaviors as positive strivings
- By seeing a child stuck in a form of non verbal communication indicating their emotional age, not their chronological one
- By understanding the brain development involved in child's behavior
- Determining emotional age
- Engaging child with choices, contracting to work

Helping parents to develop or find their lost compassion is an ongoing piece of the healing. First, validate that it is normal for them to be angry. They feel betrayed because they have been! The adoption process often involves this "fairy tale" that is sold to parents. Some feel called by God and then let down. Some have fertility issues and believe they just need to have a child to love to fill their emptiness and then receive an empty child with a bottomless pit to try to fill with love. Some are TOLD by professionals that it is a "period of adjustment" and it will go away. Others are lied to that RAD and attachment problems are rare among adopted children. The children lie and say I want you for my parents and then reject over and over throughout the day. Spouses begin to doubt each other and healthy, happy marriages start to crash and burn. Inept therapists tell parents it is their anger or parenting that is the problem. When we are compassionate and understanding about their anger it helps to begin the healing process. "Ahhhhh, someone understands what it's like. I am not alone. I am not crazy. I just need some help." Their defensiveness is then dissipated and they can listen and learn and understand and grow. I often use the example of a puppy in the road to help them have a paradigm shift. Have the parent name their favorite dog or cat in their life. Use that name as you have them picture that pet crying out for them as they lay in the road clearly hit and injured by a car. What would they do? They answer "go get them out of the road and take them to a veterinarian". Right, but when you go to move them and they are in pain what can happen? "they could try to bite." Right! Is it because ..... is a bad dog? Is it because ..... hates you and wants to hurt you? No. It is because..... is in pain and when you try to move them to safety and get them help it stirs the pain more and they lash out because of the *pain!* Just as your child is doing to you, lashing out because of the pain. Can you picture that this week to help you from taking those arrows to your heart? You are not the target. You did not run them over, but you will be the one they will go after.

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