The moment that we are startled, we jump, we run, we flinch, we dart, we hide or we prepare to fight.

One second all is well as we are resting on our bed, and with the slamming of a door we immediately switch gears, searching the environment for threat and we get kicked into ‘fight, flight or freeze’ to protect ourselves. This happens even when there is no real threat, for example, a slamming door. And, this happens when there is a very real danger: such as an abuser entering the room. Our initial response to the perceived threat is an unconscious, protective reaction that stems from deep within the brain designed to protect us from potential threat in the environment.

For those of us who have lived in threatening situations, our brains can get stuck in this protective mode, quickly promoting the ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response at the slightest hint of danger. It makes sense to most of us that children who come from histories of abuse may experience a prolonged need to fight for their survival.

However, the same holds true for children who have been adopted and have experienced the trauma of separation from the biological mother, as well as perhaps multiple care givers and or ongoing abuse and neglect. These children quickly enter states of 'fight, flight or freeze' even when there is no visible threat or demand. This phenomenon stems from the earliest history of abandonment and broken attachment.
‘fight, flight, or freeze’

“Stop yelling at me!!,” he yelled at me as I quietly asked him to calm down.

“You always blame me, you love Sam more than you love me.”

“Leave me alone, I just want to be alone.”

Bewildered is the best word I can come up to describe my early years as an adoptive and foster parent. The reactions of my children to me as the best parent I knew how to be, bewildered me!

And then I was introduced to the *trauma of adoption* that renders many of ‘our’ children stuck in *‘fight, flight or freeze.’*

The adoptee comes with a history of *separation trauma* and enters into their new family with an overactive stress response system fearing separation again. The unconscious brain is consumed with the possibility of being abandoned yet again. There is much research and evidence today indicating that the trauma of separation at adoption causes over-development in the areas of fear and anxiety in the human brain.

The brain is user-dependent; the repetition of experiences strengthens the brain's pathways. The earlier the experience the more deeply that experience is laid down in the brain, thus, early experiences have disproportionate impact on how the brain will function for the individual's lifetime. Adopted children will enter states of *"fight, flight or freeze"* easily and often when there is any *perceived separation* that feels threatening.

Most adoptive parents are planning for the addition to their family to bring love and joy. Certainly, the furthest thing from their minds is thinking about how their child’s brain is going to respond to their caring interactions and their discipline. Yet, in order to bring healing to ‘our’ children it is vital to become *adoption trauma informed.*

Children adopted from an institutional setting, orphanage care or multiple foster care providers may respond differently to traditional parenting techniques than will a biological child. For example, the adopted child may be happy in his room, may isolate, not interact well or engage with family. Instead, he may seek to *disengage* from the family. **When stressed, his brain wants to go into "flight."** Many adopted children, even from birth, will prefer to be alone, not interact with family and may be perceived as defiant when in fact they are doing the best they can to calm themselves.
Another common reaction from ‘our’ children is anger or aggression. At a simple question such as; “Where is your notebook?” "Did you eat your sister’s candy?” "Why did you take his shirt?” your child begins to escalate, fear takes over and he is kicked into fight mode as he yells at you. In response, we often escalate and fight back only adding fuel to the fire. "I'm talking to you!” "Don’t argue with me!” Many parent readers can relate to this scenario. The problem is, your child reacts to simple questions or commands as if they are attacks. A child with an over active stress system becomes hyper vigilant and is prone to ‘fight, flight or freeze’ the instant they feel threat. The part of the brain that should help them determine whether or not the threat is real, becomes hijacked by the more primitive part of the brain and the child is literally incapable of calming himself down.

This unconscious/involuntary reaction may appear as defiance, anger (instead of fear) or intentional manipulation. ‘Our’ children are often completely unaware of why he or she responds this way, and unable to correct the behavior on their own.

As parents working to heal the trauma of adoption, it becomes necessary for us to focus not on the child’s behaviors, but instead we learn to focus on the fear, stress and trauma under the behavior, and our response to the behavior.

**Consistent Calm evokes Change**

Regardless of how escalated our child may be become, calm exchanges are essential to healing the brain and the behaviors of the adopted child. The slightest hint of conflict sends the child deeper into ‘fight, flight or freeze’ and more negative behaviors occur in these states.

Below I offer some suggestions for making the transition from chaos to calm in your homes, your therapy offices, your classrooms and in life.
TIPS

Trauma Informed Parenting Strategies

There are some simple means for creating a healing environment in which we can mitigate the ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response. A few of them are:

- ‘Your anger will not become my anger’; as our children’s fear of being abandoned again shows up as anger, it may be easy to respond with your own anger. Instead, write this paradigm on a sticky note and hang it around your home or office.
- I Am Peace; remind yourself often that your peace can become your child’s peace.
- Slow and Low: Slow and Low is a strategy that I teach which mandates that for healing to begin, the parent must slow down, lower their tone of voice, slow the rate of speech and provide a calm response. Under these circumstances, the brain can begin to reorganize itself, and the child’s system begins to heal.
- Relevant, Rewarding, and Repetitive Parenting brings healing:
  - Respond to your child’s relevant developmental age, not birth age. Children who are stressed will regress socially, emotionally and behaviorally. Treat them at this age for 30 days and watch them develop through this stage!
  - Reward your child through your relationship 10x more than you discipline them. A child will seek out a rewarding relationship that provides safety and acceptance.
  - Repetitive parenting reminds us that the brain learns through repetition and that our patience will be needed through years of repetition~ keep it up!
- Stop, Drop and Roll: when you feel yourself getting escalated, stop talking, stop moving, stop arguing, and drop into your breathing and back into your spirit; stay in your breath until you can roll back into relationship in a calm manner.
- Sensory experiences either calm us down or fire us up! Bring as many calming sensory experiences into your home as possible. What our children hear, see, taste, touch and smell can quickly bring ‘fight, flight or freeze’ or can quickly bring peace.

You and your child are meant to be together. The lessons you have to offer one another are greater than you can imagine. Learning your child’s language of fear will provide the space for your child to learn your language of love. Fear and Love do not coexist. Your calm, constant, trauma informed Love will, over time, cast out your child’s fear.

If you need help, an adoption parent coach may help; we can be reached at coaching for LIFE! www.coaching-forlife.com or in our Denver office at 303-431-0604