

Adoptive parents for kids, age 13 and up, wanted

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Mark and Joseph experienced the same situation with their boy. They had to take measures to help their child feel comfortable in his new living situation, including counselling, arranged visits with his brother and, most importantly, having the confidence to be honest with his son about where he came from.

"A lot of us operate under the idea that young people just forget about stuff. We strongly believe that the greatest amount of age appropriate openness as possible is what is going to keep our son a fully fleshed out, well-rounded, resilient human being," said Joseph.

Rheault said one of the most important things adoptive parents can do is help kids understand what happened to them in the past and guide them through it.

"It's difficult for them to move forward if they can't process what happened to them in the past and why their parents couldn't care for them," she said.

Duncan's situation was a bit different — his son was old enough to remember packing his bags, changing schools, leaving his friends and being separated from his own sibling. Duncan has already had to endure episodes where his son's memory is triggered and the reaction is "troubling".

"He would throw things around, slam doors... just throw a temper tantrum. When you have a 15-year-old that acts like a three-year-old, it's hard to understand," said Duncan.

Holly Simmons, an adoption worker with the Halton Children's Aid Society, said, "under stress, you regress" when it comes to children in care.

Duncan cited one instance where his son was defiant because he bought a new house and the two were packing up their belongings. According to Duncan, his son was very keen on moving, but when the packing started, it brought up memories from the past. His son refused to help and left the house.

"A lot of our children do that. They go back to old strategies that were helpful to them in abused trauma, but it's not good for living in families that actually want to take care of them," said Simmons.

"I thought I was prepared," said Duncan.

"It's challenging. It's been challenging."

The CAS said it does its due diligence in making sure that prior to an adoption, there are sufficient checks in place to ensure the child and future guardians are well suited for each other. This process alone takes at least a year. There's a home study conducted by CAS where an adoption practitioner assesses the guardian or family. The

practitioner then decides what characteristics of children would be most appropriate.

"We look at children's needs and the applicant. We learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the family. We also consider race, culture and religion. We look at as many factors as we can before we match families," said Rheault.

There's also PRIDE training — Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education. It is a nine-module program that teaches parents how to deal with attachment, loss, child development, family relationships, placement challenges, discipline and the impact of adoption on the family.

"The training really helped. When our child is in a mood or showing poor behavior, we have this phrase — 'wonder what's under' — you really have to look at what the root cause is," said Joseph.

Despite the lengthy evaluations, the paperwork, the hours of training and then the eternal wait for the phone to ring, none of the guardians

or families would do anything differently. Duncan said that just because his son was more challenging than he initially anticipated, the CAS was more than helpful in providing dedicated resources, education, attachment therapy and support.

Anthony agreed, adding, "I think that for both of us, Jen and I and Mark and Joseph, we would say that our children are remarkably different people now than when they came into our lives. But getting here...it was a lot of work."

"If I had any advice for couples that are embarking on this journey, there is going to be hiccups, things that seem completely insurmountable and lots of stomping and frustration. But when you want something so badly and you're both in it wholeheartedly, it goes by quick. Just be patient," he said.

There are almost 7,000 children and youth in the care of the CAS across the province waiting to be adopted. In 2013, 977 children and youth were connected through adoption. Almost 2,300 children are on paths to a permanent residence through legal custody, kinship care and customary care.

The biggest issue for the CAS is finding the Duncan's of the world — adoptive parents for kids 13 and up.

"A lot of the older kids coming from foster care have a stigma. But they need families to care for them too. If you take the time to understand their loss and trauma, you can really turn their lives around," said Rheault. "They just need a stable hand and a connected person."

For more information on public adoption, visit www.HaltonCAS.ca.

'I thought I was prepared. It's challenging. It's been challenging.'

—Duncan, an adoptive dad—

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