



Global Access Conference 2015 Workshop
The Special Needs of Foster & Adoptive Families

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Joni: Hi, I'm Joni Eareckson Tada. You're listening to a resource from the Global Access Association, sponsored by Joni and Friends. Learn, connect and share at www.gaa.joniandfriends.org. Global Access, where disabilities and possibilities meet.

Shannon: I'm going to go ahead and get started. Thank you all for coming. We have been talking about at Key Ministry, where I do some work and consulting with churches about adoption and foster care, for a while.

What started as an organization, Key Ministry, to support families who are in churches, as they're including kids who have mostly hidden disabilities. The less obvious and the sometimes less understood areas. So, mental illness, ADHD, developmental disabilities. Kind of a wide range. To be honest, whatever people ask for help with, because there's a wide range of experiences that we're drawing from on our team.

But what we've begun seeing a whole lot lately is, as churches are rightfully getting involved in adoption and foster care at higher rates, and family preservation as well... that is creating a need in churches that didn't have a whole lot going on with special needs, as they are having children enter their children's ministries or youth ministries via special needs adoption or an adoption that wasn't expected to be special needs, but is.

Then they go, "Oh, what does this look like?" As they're saying, "Yes" to families, as they're encouraging families to say yes to adoption and foster care, we want to be equipping the church to say, "Yes" to those families once they're showing up.

To go ahead and give a little bit of a framework, you all have my cards there. As I mentioned to some folks as they were coming in, I have some great handouts that are in North Carolina. If you would like a copy of anything, you don't have to feel like you have to jot down everything that's on the screen. There are a couple, especially when I'm going to be talking about trauma, of text-heavy slides. Shoot me an email, I'll shoot it your way. You don't have to get everything down.

This was my family in 2007. Around that same time, or shortly before, was when our special needs ministry was really getting well-established. Our church has always been considered an inclusive church, but we weren't doing it with excellence for kids and youth until around then, or a little bit before. We are a little different in that most churches start with little ones and work their way up.

We had a lot going on with adults, and then ended up working our way back to doing things with kids and youth.

I'm seeing there's not tons of chairs. I don't need this one.

So, to give you that story, and I'll let you know where our family's at now, to give you the full context. Around that time, Josiah, and he was not this big then, he is the one who really changed things for our church, who God used in a big way. Josiah and my daughter have a little bit of a flirtation. This was several years ago now.

He came to Vacation Bible School. Our church is big into work, so Super Summer Adventure, in our world. He was put in my class because, "Shannon teaches Special Ed and has a Masters in this stuff, so it'll be good." They said, "He'll have a buddy with him," and I thought that meant he would have someone who knew him. That wasn't the case. They showed up and said, "So, tell me about Josiah." I went, "Hmm, okay."

So he showed up, and honestly, by everybody's outward view of what was happening, it looked like we had succeeded. He got dropped off, he got picked up. No big catastrophes or anything else happened. But I realized, as I finally sat down at the end of the week to reflect how things went, that we had just done a really terrible job. We had failed to do anything more than physically include him.

He was in the room, but our efforts to really include him in teaching, include him in friendships, include him in relationships, include him in all the ways we aim to include every other kid that week, we didn't do it with Josiah. We realized, as my husband and I were talking, that we weren't really doing it in other contexts either with some of the other kids in our church. I'm so thankful for parents like Josiah's mom, who hung in there anyway. We didn't realize it for awhile.

I wasn't going to share this, but this is a picture. They went to one of his baseball games. We pulled up, and he plays for this league that is for kids with special needs. Jocelyn asked... I mentioned that Zoe, our daughter, who has Cerebral Palsy, might play there someday. She said, and looked a little confused- this is one of my favorite Jocelyn stories- "Why would Zoe play there and not us?"

I was explaining things, and I didn't understand what she was ... She said, "But no, I don't get it. Josiah doesn't have special needs, he has an extra

chromosome.” I went, “Oh, okay, you're getting it at a better level than I am.” Her shirt says, “Friends don't count chromosomes.” Rocks out with them, and they have this sweet friendship that he's just been able to do a lot of things, and opening eyes, then opened doors that weren't being opened.

This is our family this past Easter. We first adopted Zoe in 2012 from Taiwan, then adopted Patience, Philip, and Patricia, a sibling group from Uganda at the end of 2013. I sometimes say that while some people have surprise pregnancies, we have surprise adoptions. God had some plans that were not what ours were.

We always talked about adoption, maybe around now-ish we would be starting an adoption. We always were involved in the special needs world, as I taught Special Ed and trained Special Ed teachers with Teach for America, and did a lot of stuff on the professional side. I figured that was the direction we'd go in, then some friends of ours kind of called us on that, saying, “Hey, there's this little girl we're advocating for and hasn't been able to find a family to say ‘yes’ because there's a lot of uncertainties.”

That's our Zoe, the one with the big smile, who was described by specialists before we adopted her. He reviewed all her records and said, “I just really want to be honest, so you're prepared, but this child is going to be horribly devastating.” No one has ever referred to her that way since. He and I have had some words since, too, so he doesn't either.

That's the reality for some kids, just big question marks. In Zoe's case, and in the case of many other disabilities, we had a diagnosis of what her brain injury looked like. We had a diagnosis that it would probably be Cerebral Palsy. That didn't tell us any prognosis, so a lot of waiting kids, we don't really know.

Audience 1: I'm not the only international here. You speak very fast.

Shannon: Okay, I can slow down.

Audience 1: So, when you say something funny ... It's not very easy. Whenever it's something funny, I have no idea.

Shannon: I will work on that. If you can call me on that, if I forget, please do.

Audience 1: Just when something is funny.

Shannon: Thank you for saying something.

The reality with her, that picture didn't show, but I had a picture of her there as well, but we've also had some challenges with trauma because our newest three, our oldest was almost seven when she joined the family. She had this life and this history in Uganda before us.

We have other families at our church who adopted domestically and didn't have the same cultural changes, though there were those too. But also had these full stories, these full histories, before they arrived in our family. Even for Zoe, who arrived in our family at eight months, she had eight months and the time prenatally spent with her first mother, and that matters.

That changes what the dynamic is, and what it looks like to minister to families and what it looks like to minister ... This is kind of a newer thing that churches aren't talking about, what it looks like when adopted kids grow up. There are some great, just lately, I've seen some adult adoptees speaking a lot more. I'm excited to hear more and more of those voices, and amplifying them as much as I can.

I want to start off by defining and discussing what special needs look like. Some of the stuff, when I speak at other conferences, I have to go a little more deep on some of the special needs stuff. I won't have to go as deep with you all, given we've got a little bit more of a knowledge base here. On some of it, I will.

Then, talking about family ministry and diverse local and global context. And finally, what does that look like? What are the implications? That's a hard thing to talk about, especially at a global conference, because each of our ministry and church contexts look so different.

At that point, some of that stuff will be me framing some questions for you to be thinking about what things look like, rather than giving you the answers. I can give you a lot of answers about what it looks like at Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC, but that's not going to help you where God has you placed.

Before we dive in, I want to give a biblical context, but another context first. Right now, after poverty, disability is the second-most common factor leading to a child's placement in foster care or adoption. That comes on multiple fronts. On one front, that comes not just for a child's disability, but also adults with mental illness, with disability, and who are lacking supports, often.

They're in a place where they're more vulnerable and more likely to place a child for adoption than if they had the necessary supports to parent, they might make

a different choice. That also, in the case of Zoe, as I was sharing, sometimes that means because of a child's disability, that is what leads to an adoptive placement.

I want to make sure we are framing this well, especially as we're thinking globally. When we're talking about children who are in vulnerable places, and children who often end up in foster care or other informal care, or in adoptive placements, adoption is not the answer and is not as what we ought to hold up as the ideal for all cases. There are times that no matter how many other things globally we address as the Church, that adoption will be necessary.

Obviously, I'm a proponent of adoption. Our family would not look like it does if I wasn't. But, if we're being the Church- and that's the global Church not just the American Church- if we're being the Church truly, then we're going to care about things like, watching the Ebenezer video last night, not having wheelchairs and that creates difficulties. That then leads people to go, "This child can't grow up in this community."

There's things that we as the Church can be doing to have other solutions to help vulnerable families who could stay together. A lot of people in the adoption world, they're starting to talk about how there's things we can address about poverty to help that not be a reason for adoption. I think that's great.

There's things we can address about disabilities and cultural supports and church supports, and how that is framed both in a biblical world view, and what social and physical supports, what all of those things that help our family thrive, could look like in Uganda, in Taiwan.

I want to make sure, as we're looking at this, that we're not immediately jumping to adoption and foster care as being what the aim is. That's a reality of a broken world, but that's not what needs to be the end point for a lot of families.

For the biblical foundations, I'm going to go through these pretty quickly, especially because some of them are ones that are setting more of the framework around what our worldview is, our biblical view of disability, and we've been doing a great job of setting that stage in the past few days. I'm not going to spend as much time with that.

From the biblical foundation of God has adopted us. When we were a mess of needs and sin, that when we were children, we were enslaved and God sent forth His Son, that we might receive adoption as sons, so we're no longer slaves but a son. If a son, then an heir through God. As we think about adoption,

where we're coming from as a church is not a context of, "Oh, it's so great that these people adopt," or anything like that, and looking at that. We're all adopted in Christ.

God has knit together each one of us from the womb, some of us with special needs. Psalm 139, "You knitted me together in my mother's womb." Exodus 4:11, "Who makes him mute, deaf or seeing or blind, is it not I the Lord?" Then, the reality for some kids, with things related to trauma or abuse, develop special needs or disabilities through others' sins and through the brokenness of the world. Sometimes it's not the reality, increasingly so, in adoption and foster care where... There are a lot of situations in which it's not just being born, but rather some experiences that happened to the child.

God calls us to care for orphans. There's a lot of other verses, that's one that's used a lot, and I love to draw people to the fact it talks about widows, too, so this isn't just about kids. God is clear that the marginalized- and we're talking a lot about that here- the groups that are often marginalized, people with disabilities, orphans, people who don't have the societal supports, that's what the Bible talks about again and again.

We're called to say, "This isn't just. What can we do as a Church to follow the One who is just? What can we do about that?" And to welcome those with special needs in. The Luke 14 feast passage, as well as I think the welcoming children, "Let the little children come to me." I feel like right now, when it comes to adoption and foster care, a lot of churches in the U.S. are doing a pretty good job of saying, "Let's welcome them in," and not always doing a good job after that.

Not out of any malicious attitudes or anything like that, but just a lack of knowledge. What does this look like? We love those pretty pictures, like the one I said was us last Easter. Everybody smiling, except for Robbie, who's got this cute grumpy old man face going on. It's cute, you know? Because I love my kids, I don't share as much of the things that are not as cute, because that's their stuff and I don't like people to broadcast my stuff.

We hear all those cute things, and then when we're doing life with someone in church and in community and in friendship, and realize there's more than just this cute outer shell, because all of us have more than this cute outer shell, then we don't know what to do with that.

The encouraging thing, and this can encourage parents, churches, other ministry leaders, that as we don't know what to do with that, we do know that God

promises to supply every need of ours according to His riches in Christ Jesus. In those moments when we're going, "Okay, I don't know what to be doing with this," that we can draw, with confidence, near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace and help in the time of need. I dwell on those verses a whole lot.

I'm preaching to the choir here. Special needs are one way the works of God can be displayed. The Church is defined as many members, each with a unique role, including those the world views as lesser. God weaves the word "all" all through Scripture, and never adds, "Except for those who don't look or act or behave or touch like you or I do or did." As we're thinking of things, we like to think about ourselves. But that "all" isn't just you, it isn't just me, it isn't just the people in this room.

Just to really sum that up, God loves vulnerable children and families. God's banquet table includes people of all backgrounds and abilities. Because of sin, our world is broken, and because of that brokenness, adoption and foster care exist.

I'm saying adoption and foster care a lot. I know that in different, global contexts, foster care might not be the words used. I'm going to be talking about kinds of placements in just a moment to help open that up so we're not just looking at it with a Western mindset. Because I am operating from a Western mindset, I default to the words that are familiar.

Just as I start with that context, I want to make sure we're framing this as not an orphan issue, not an adoption issue, that will solve everything, but it's a cultural worldview thing. It's a social resource thing. It's a gospel issue of us saying, "Do these children matter?"

I wasn't a large session. I imagine they directed you this way, or directed you to the fact *The Dropbox* is going to be shown later today. I've gotten to screen that, in doing an endorsement for it. It is done with excellence and really just tells the story of the ministry going on there in South Korea with Pastor Lee, and captures in a way I haven't seen before some of the hard things, without feeling like they have to be tied up in pretty bows. That's just not the way the world is a lot of the time. If you don't get to see it, then I believe it comes out March 3. If you can't see it during lunch today, I would encourage that.

Just as I said, I would have loved if circumstances had been different. If medical options for their parents had been different. If a whole host of other things, and I'm not going to go through all of those because those are my

children's stories to tell and not mine, then my Zoe could have grown up on the streets of Taitung, Taiwan. My Patience, Philip and Patricia could have grown up in Luwero, Uganda, instead of our family.

I would have so missed being able to be their mom, but they would have missed out on a lot of the hurts and challenges and not as pretty aspects of adoption. Just coming back to that, that I already said, that adoption is a good thing when it's needed. When we can make it not needed, that's a really good thing.

I ended up having some issues with my computer, and I'm using someone else's and having to use Google Slides, so some things are not loading.

Kinds of placements... I wanted to go through these quickly because oftentimes when we're talking about adoption, when we're talking about foster care, we really focus in on what we're familiar with. Churches that have a lot of internationally adopted kids talk about international adoption. Churches that have a lot of foster care going on talk about foster care. People who have a friend whose cousin adopted her sister's kids talk about kinship adoption.

We have a tendency in everything, but in adoption, to talk about what we know. Just to go through... In the U.S., we often say international and domestic. In global contexts, usually inter-country and intra-country are the terms used. The picture isn't here, but I tried to ... All of these are pictures of my friends' adopted families. Included, Marinna Kay's family would have been there, and one of the reasons I wanted to include that is we get stuck in what an adopted family looks like. Marinna Kay and her husband are black and have adopted black children.

Oftentimes the memes you see are families like mine that have white parents and children that are of a different ethnicity. I just want to make sure we're thinking not, once again, in a context we usually see, but what the reality is.

Infant adoption and older child adoption. The realities look different. There is research, as I'm talking about trauma, a lot of people go, "Well, that doesn't apply to infant adoption." There are neurological affects of trauma that are seen in kids who are born after a stressful pregnancy because of the amounts of stress hormone they're exposed to. There are realities of having heard a mother's voice from the womb for nine months and then not hearing that voice anymore.

I'm not saying that's always the case, and I promise I'm not trying to do doom and gloom here, but I feel like we do a really good job with the happy, smiling

stuff with adoption, so I'm trying to give the other side and balancing things.

Then, we've got no known special needs and known special needs. I like to use the word "known" in there because oftentimes that is, as with birth, just not known. There's a family in Taiwan, who live there and adopted there, their daughter, their youngest is adopted. I have sweet friends who have a daughter with some limb differences, who would have been in the other picture.

And then some other kinds of placements. Kinship, stranger, that's not really a perfect continuum, because things follow along there. There's other known folks who are not kin. Formal and informal placements. Sometimes things are temporary, but not as official as foster care. Short-term and permanent.

As the Church, as we have families that are saying "Yes," we don't get to say, "You're going to do this because I know international adoption, so it's a lot easier for me to minister to you if you do that." The reality is, we're going to have situations that encompass all of that. If we're ministering to families, then it's helpful to know that what your context is; it needs to be a broad as what the realities might be.

Looking at special needs and adoption, I'm not going to camp out on the blue one today in this visual. The usual ones, those recognized in other contexts. The disability areas, special needs areas, we talk about in schools and educational systems, and in a variety of other contexts. Today, I'm going to talk more about the short-term ones, so adoption-related, but resolved after transition. Some of those families might think they're short-term and then they realize no, they're the long-term ones. They're adoption-related and life-long.

For the common disabilities- this is true for inter- and intra-country adoption, I want to point that out- a lot of times, when we talk about special needs adoption we go, "Oh, these international orphans. These other countries, and the Dropbox story and the story of my Zoe." We go, "In this country, they just don't adopt kids with special needs." If you look at foster care, kids waiting in this country and in this country, people don't adopt special needs, if we want to use that same mindset.

Knowing this is a need here in this country and in every country, that there's disability things, common disabilities, that contribute to a child being available for adoption. Visible disabilities are the most common, especially for young child placement. Those- you can see- those, especially in some cultural contexts, are more stigmatized. If a limb is missing, it's obvious. If a child has Down syndrome, there's some obvious features there, that's obvious.

Ones that are readily seen ... My friend, who's the one in the picture, who isn't going to be on here, it's going to be a boy, they just came home from China with a little boy who has bilateral atresia of the ear, so he doesn't have an ear canal or outer ears. That's a visible thing. As soon as he was born, his family could see this was different.

The reasons for this, we like to go, "Oh, this is horrible." Especially when I do that... I'm coming from a community that has a lot of supports for my kids. I'm coming from the mindset of a church that already has a special needs ministry. Because I didn't know God was doing the story as He was, but we were creating the special needs ministry for our kids long before we knew our kids were going to be served by it at our church.

We need to be aware there's cultural acceptance issues, social support issues, financial stress, parent choice. There are a lot of different factors that lead into it. Joni shared a story I've seen through my feed a lot, about Samuel Forrest and the birth of his child. The mother saying, "No. He has Down syndrome. I'm going to divorce you. We're not going to raise this child here." I would encourage you to ... She's now spoken out and has a different take on it. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

The reality is, it's really easy to sit in a place where we do have supports and we do have the means to support special needs here, and other disability areas, and what would it look like somewhere else? What would it look like if Joni and Friends didn't come with wheelchairs to Ebenezer? What would that look like?

For the short-term ones, there's initial transition stuff. During that initial transition time, you have no idea whether those are going to be ongoing mental health, attachment, trauma-related things, or whether it's just the craziness of, "Hey, you've been uprooted from this one place to another. Meet your new parents."

There's language learning for some kids. There are cultural norm adjustments. I'd like to emphasize here, when you're going from one community in the U.S. or one family in the U.S. to another. It's not just from one country to another.

There's a lot of learning of what things look like. I'll get to this in practical implications, but one thing to be really mindful of is that families don't and shouldn't share all of the information with everybody about their kids. These initial transition things that are happening, and cultural norm adjustments, for example, you might not know what those are, and you don't really have to know

what those are.

More and more I hear from families, “My church doesn't get it, and I feel like I need to share things about my kids that are personal that I don't want to share about them for them to be able to get it.” I would encourage you to trust parents when they say, “This is a cultural thing they're struggling with. This looks different than what parenting looks like in your previous experiences, but I promise this is what my kid needs, and this is what I'm learning from various contexts.”

Be aware that you won't know about the trauma. You won't know about all the cultural norms. You won't know about all the changes. You won't know about the rages or shutdowns or attachment-related challenges. All of family ministry involves trusting parents and letting them be the experts of their kids so we can equip them in doing that. I say even more so with adoption and foster care because they know more of the nitty-gritty.

For some long-term special needs, fetal alcohol syndrome disorders, reactive attachment disorder, disinhibited social engagement disorder, and trauma-induced neurological, physiological and behavioral effects. All of these things can occur outside of adoption and foster care. Don't think they're just adoption things, but we see these at a higher rate. Along with, as I unpack a little more of the trauma stuff, that means we see higher rates of mental illness. That means we see higher rates of other things as well that go along with that.

As we're looking at things, a lot of these, like I said in that initial transition time, we don't really know what the case is. Some people come, some kids, as did one of ours, come with a social history, so we know fetal alcohol syndrome is probably going to be somewhere on a diagnosis list at some point. That exposure has occurred, a lot of times families don't know, and realize maybe through various things, or don't realize, but suspect.

Being aware of these things, I don't think the Church's place is to be experts in all of these things. There are folks, in the same way that if someone has a broken arm or strep throat, we're not going to try to fix it. What we need to know is these things exist and how can we help the hurting families get to the place, get to the resources they need.

I'm going to camp out on trauma for a little bit. If you weren't in the room yet when I mentioned that, as I sent cards all around, my email address is on those. I will be happy to email these to you. For this section, I do what I almost never do in presentations, I'm putting a lot of text on the screen. The reason for that

is, while I read up a lot on trauma, first professionally and now as a parent, trying to piece some things together with our kids, this isn't an area I'm the one who's doing the research or leading the way with. I want to make it clear and be getting things with the accuracy and excellence you all deserve in sharing that.

This is from Harvard, that toxic stress, a strong, frequent prolonged activation of the body's stress management system, especially from adverse effects that are chronic, uncontrollable and/or experienced without children having access to support from caring adults, can adversely affect brain development, chemical balances and physiological responses to stress long after that stress has ended.

In these next few slides, this one included, it's going to sound like I'm setting up a stage where you should treat every child who is in formal foster care or adoptive placement as totally broken. Kind of. However, I want you to do that with the context that every person in this room is totally broken. As I'm sharing this, I'm saying we all are broken and here's a particular kind of brokenness that we sometimes gloss over as we're portraying these smiling, happy, adoptive families, and as we're saying "Do this."

I'm really, despite some folks not agreeing with this, from some recent blog posts we've put out with Key Ministry, I really don't think this is going to discourage folks from going after adoption and foster care. Perhaps it will discourage folks who maybe shouldn't be, and aren't equipped for that.

I think there are plenty of hard things we do as the Church. There are plenty of hard things we're called to do in Christ. So, me saying this is hard, totally not saying it's not worth doing. Just saying this is hard, and we need to know. If we're adopting, if we're considering foster care, as a family, we need to know. Nothing has challenged our marriage as much as adoption and foster care has. As we're serving families, if we're saying we love these families, we love these kids, we need to know what could this look like.

On the last slide, I'll expand on this more in this trauma section, but every kid is completely different, too. One kid can have huge amounts of toxic stress and cope pretty darn well. Then another child can have one traumatic incident that, to the outside, if you're doing comparative, it doesn't look like very much, and it affects them in a major way.

Just as all of us have various things that have occurred in our lives that affect us in different ways, for kids, even knowing some of the traumatic things some of my kids have been through, some of them cope better in different situations than others. Some of them do great. One did really well for the first year and

then stuff started coming out. One, stuff was coming out from the beginning. Things are going to look completely different.

For some, nothing's ever coming out. My friend Susan will go, "I love that you're writing and talking about this." She was adopted. "But I don't really have any of that stuff." And that's great. That's going to be the reality. As I'm talking about this, don't go, "Okay, this universally applies to every single kid," because nothing universally applies to every single kid, right?

In the extreme, such as cases of severe and chronic abuse, especially during early and sensitive periods of brain development, the regions of the brain involved in fear, anxiety, impulsive responses may over-produce neural connections, while the regions dedicated to reasoning, planning, behavioral control may produce fewer neural connections.

This isn't just me saying, "This is hard, so my kid's acting out." This is me saying, "This was hard for them, so their brain is operating in a different sort of way, so that's why this is hard." This helps in convincing church leaders. This helps in advocating for kids. This helps me as a parent to go, "Okay, this kid's not just being a punk. This is a real thing, and this parent isn't just being sheltering. This is a real thing."

That's not to say we drop expectations to the absolute lowest they can be. It's that we parent and we minister within the context of knowing, "Okay, we might approach this a little differently. We might offer a little more grace," which we probably should just about everywhere.

Early childhood exposure to trauma can have a lot of different outcomes. I'm not going to read through this whole list. Essentially, you'll see almost every, or maybe every area of life. Research shows that there are outcomes related to, somatoform means sleeping. I think most of the other ones are fairly clear.

Social stuff, attachment, anxiety, re-victimization because of a difficulty understanding danger cues. Research has shown that the way our brain is wired, with the medulla and a couple of other things that- this is not my field, so I'm not going to go through, but if you're curious, I've got the link and I can send it your way. The way our body and our brain perceives danger and then responds to it is completely different for adolescents who experience early childhood trauma.

When we're talking about anxiety and when we're talking about understanding what danger is and responding appropriately to it, that's an area that really can

be a lot more challenging and not very visible for us to see, “Oh, this is why.” Which is why I'm really thankful there are really smart people doing this research and looking at brains and going, “Okay, this is what's happening here.”

The Connected Child is a book I highly recommend on this topic. I think every adoptive parent should have it. I also think every person ministering to adoptive families should. I will add, in addition to that, this is the one that's usually recommended.

Empowered to Connect is a Christian ministry that works with Dr. Purvis to provide resources around this book, coming from a Christian perspective. *The Connected Child* is the book, Empowered to Connect is the organization. They also do conferences that partner with it.

Heather Forbes is another, *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control* is the name of her book. She is the one I read a lot in the beginning, and I read this one a lot now, as an adoptive mom, but our pastors have read both because we said, “We've gotta understand this and we've got a lot of adoptive families in our church now.”

Audience 2: Could you repeat that book?

Shannon: Heather Forbes, and it's *Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control*. One of the things she does best, I feel like, and she does a lot of good things in there, she helps us to realize that in helping kids through trauma and helping kids through transitions, that often stirs up a lot of our own traumas and transitions and issues.

It helps us go, “As we're ministering to families, there's going to be some stuff that's being stirred up in mom and dad, too. It isn't just a reaction to what's going on with their kids, but could be a reaction to what went on when they were a kid, and a whole host of other realities.” She helps set that framework well.

This quote I want to draw our attention to is, “Disturbing behaviors, tantrums, hiding, hyperactivity, aggressiveness are often triggered by a child's deep, primal fear. Youngsters can be physically safe in their new adoptive home, but past traumas encoded within their brains are easily reactivated.”

There are certain times of year for some kids. There are certain settings. There are certain situations. For a lot of kids at our church, we've observed that as they get more and more comfortable at church, we start seeing more and more

behaviors. A lot of kids, out of a survival instinct, if they grew up in an institution or an orphanage or in foster care, are good at pretending. Once they feel safe enough not to be pretending, we see some hard things.

That's good, and I try to encourage churches to think that's a good thing. Sometimes we like it when they're pretending because that's a lot easier, and we don't have to be accommodating or changing anything we're doing. As kids get more comfortable in a family context, as they get more comfortable in a church context, then sometimes they feel more comfortable.

I know with our newest three, we were super-excited when they finally were comfortable defying us. It was this weird parenting moment, because we'd been parenting for ... We had three kids already. When one of our kids just outright was "No!" we were like, "Yes!" We were still being mom and dad, so it was later we had our "Yes!" moment. They feel comfortable enough, they're okay challenging authority, and they hadn't been allowed to before, and that's pretty cool. A lot of times in church, in the Sunday School class, that doesn't seem pretty cool at the time, but still pretty cool.

It's not all bad news. A study from Indian orphans, *White and Grey Brain Matter*, and if there's anything you want me to unpack further, if you email me and are asking me for stuff, I can send you the links. I'm a big data person, so I don't just want to tell you that this exists. I want to point you to where it exists.

Romanian orphans who had been institutionalized, once they were placed in a high-quality foster care environment, their white and grey brain matter was measured before and after. While their white brain matter did improve the amount after being placed in a high-quality foster care environment, their grey brain matter didn't, and the white didn't improve comparable to other kids in a control group.

I promise this was a not-all-bad-news slide. It's not sounding like it. The good news part is there were responses, and it wasn't tracked over a long period of time, so there were some things seen pretty quickly. As things are being tracked further, and I believe this is a study they're looking to be able to continue, so we might see more data on that.

Additionally, the whole concept of neuroplasticity, when we're talking about neurological changes and the concept of behavioral therapies and all that, is that things can change. This is all coming from more of a secular mindset. We all know about the God factor, too. Things can change. We don't have the promise that God's going to heal everything this side of heaven, but things can

change.

Some things have been proven to change in research: exercise, healthy nutrition, adequate medical care, safe touches, multi-sensory environments, reduction in a child's fear, allergy management, and research-driven therapeutic interventions. Especially that last one.

I want to remind us once again. The Church is not called to do everything for everyone, and if there are good people we can be pointing toward, we need to be doing that. If we're not equipped, and most churches aren't, to be offering the research-driven therapeutic interventions, be honest. Say, "I'm not equipped, and here are some places I can direct you toward."

Another thing on this is just to be aware of, this is part of trauma but it's also something we need to know about in the church. Because we like to look at families like ours, where we got a referral and eventually we brought a child home. Then we got another referral and we eventually brought a child home and everything was good.

There's multiple placements, and that's the way foster care is designed, and not always in a bad way, because family reunification is the primary goal. So, there will be kids who have multiple placements. Sometimes that's an ugly thing, and sometimes that's just the reality, that they were in their home and now they've been placed here and there's been some juggling around.

Then there's something we don't talk about a lot, when we talk about adoption and foster care. That's disruption and dissolution, which is when an adoption ends. A child who has been adopted is ... The best comparison I can give you is like a divorce in marriage. That a child needs a new adoptive home, that they're not able to stay in that home.

I know families who have gone this road and who I 100% have been in support of them. We need to know this is something that happens and it's not always a bad parenting sort of thing. In one case, it was a situation in which a child they adopted, they had no idea he had Autism. They already had a son with Autism. The two boys, it was not a good environment, and things were spiraling down for both of them. It was in the best interests, especially for the one who was new to the placement, so it wasn't going to be as disruptive. It's going to be disruptive regardless, and we've got to say this is rough, but for a new placement to be found.

There are stories in the news about sketchy things being done with this. There

are right, legal, proper ways. There was a big report a year or two ago about re-homing. That's not what I'm talking about here, where I'm just going, "Hey, my kids are rough. Can you take them?" Signing a piece of paper and not checking things out. That's not what I'm referring to, though that's a reality we need to know, too.

What happens more often, I included a picture of my Facebook page. Second Chance Adoptions is an agency that does it in a very visible way. Every adoption agency I know of does it to some degree, because as they're following up families who have adopted through their agency, often the family will turn back to their agency and say, "Okay, this just isn't working. I think it's healthiest for my child for a new placement."

I'm not saying all disruptions or dissolutions are great ideas and the parents could have made a different choice, but I want to be clear that we have no idea the circumstances. The one I shared, I know because she's a very good friend of mine. There's others I know because I've got other good friends that have walked that road, because I'm involved pretty deeply in the adoption and foster care community.

Then there are some I know, or I think I know, but I probably don't know as well as I think I do, because I just know some of the more visible parts of it. This agency in particular, all the kids they post are kids who are in another adoptive home and are in need of re-adoption, or in need of being adopted by another family.

I know we don't have as much time left, but intentionally I wanted to spend a lot of time on that front end looking at family ministry in a diverse local and global context. I'm not going to spend enough time to really do total justice to what is up there. Just to give us a little bit of framework of what that means when we're talking about adoptive and foster families.

First, God created two institutions for His glory. One is the family, and one is the Church. We can be working in a complimentary way to the Church to be equipping families, that they may disciple their children, and the family to be being plugged in, so we're all together, the Church. There are some unique ways we can do this, and not to say the Church doesn't disciple kids directly. We do, but God created the family for a purpose.

As we're helping families, especially in that initial attachment phase, especially when their kids might be really confused about who they're supposed to listen to and who they're supposed to trust, they need for their mom and dad to be the

people who they're trusting and listening to.

Which means, more so than any other family, we in the Church need to be going, "How can we equip you to be being that? It's not going to be helpful for your child and their attachment to your family for us to swoop in and start confusing them as to who's in charge here. What can we do?" That's a lot of showing up, and showing up, and offering to show up, and continuing to show up, when things are crazy and they cancel again.

A lot of making sure that we are being mindful of the fact God created the family. Sometimes initially with adoption stuff and initially when they're adjusting, that feeling might not be in the Church. We in the Church need to be coming to them and being the Church.

In family ministry, we're aiming to support families. We're aiming to equip families. We're aiming to disciple. And oftentimes that's discipling parents so they can be discipling their kids. We're aiming to counsel, and that's more front line. Some churches, especially large churches, are equipped to do beyond front lines. That's great. I'm not saying you can't do counseling in your church. What I'm saying is let's be mindful that, especially if you do not have someone who is knowledgeable in adoption and foster care issues, first you should correct that and become knowledgeable.

Secondly, you need to realize what your limitations are and know you're not going to be supporting families in the way they need support if you think you know what you're doing, but you're not really.

There's different kinds of families we're supporting here. So often we talk about the adoptive families, the foster families, but there's first families. Sometimes that's called birth families. We kind of use different words when we talk about Zoe's birth family because she never really lived with them. We talk about Patience, Philip, and Patricia's first family because they had this first family context. A lot of people prefer different words. It's one of those things, just like in the disability community.

People get persnickety about some words. Just know that these different kinds of families that exist. There's foster families, and that might not be an official foster family. There's a ministry that exists in the U.S., and actually a few other countries, called Safe Families, that is sort of a foster environment, but is not within the government system. I would also include foster families as a temporary thing. I know situations where someone has lived with the family for a little bit because they needed to kind of have a reset, then they moved back in.

Then adoptive families, where there's a little more permanence, hopefully. Additionally, when we're talking about adoption and foster care, we need to be mindful that yeah, there's a lot of two-parent households, but there's single-parent households. This is my friend Jenny, who if you saw their faces, he is the most adorable child ever. Well, maybe seventh most adorable child ever.

He has Down syndrome and he was adopted domestically. They are fostering this little guy, who also has Down syndrome. She's a single parent. I have other friends who have adopted or foster as single parents. We need single parents doing this because, especially as I was chatting somebody on the shuttle over here, in talking about teenage girls who have been victimized and aren't feeling safe in a family that has an adult male. In that instance, in order to be loving kids in vulnerable places well, a single-parent household is what really is kind of ideal.

A lot of times I've talked to a lot of single parents about adoption, who go, "Churches don't know what to do with me. Sometimes I get lectures because how dare I adopt a child because kids are supposed to be in a two-parent household." There's a lot of stuff put on them. There's obviously responses like, "So an institution is better?"

It's something to know and be aware of, especially if you're a church that's really big into families and two-parent households and talking about that sort of thing. You need to know that a single-parent household in this instance isn't necessarily because of divorce. It isn't necessarily because of the internet.

A lot of adoptive single parents are doing it by choice. Sometimes, it's that they're ready to be parents and want to help a child and want to be a family for a child when marriage hasn't come, in the case of one of my girlfriends who is a single adoptive mom. It's a different dynamic than what single parenthood looks like for a lot of our other parents.

Then, grandparent or relative-headed households who were not expecting to be parenting again, or to be parenting these particular children.

Largely, I'm setting the stage of saying, "Think about these families, think about what it would look like in your church." I'm not going to tell you what that family ministry looks like. For some of you, you go, "Oh yeah, single-parent households, we're doing that pretty well. I don't think that's something that would require a paradigm shift to love these families well."

For some of your churches, that would. Think through, as I went through all those lists, what would it look like? Where are we not doing what we could be doing and how could that be leading us to do something a little differently?

Finally, when we're talking to families, when we're talking about families, what you say about adoption and foster care unveils your theology on disability. Unveils your theology on a lot of things, but especially when people gush about "how great we are because of taking on Zoe with all her disabilities," and go on and on and on. We're saying Zoe isn't as valuable as some other kid. We're saying that because of disability, and the way some people have said it, they're not meaning to communicate that.

For the most part, we haven't run into people who are being nasty on purpose, or who are being nasty even. But, they're not thinking through. It makes us go, "Wait. I'm really thinking of them as lesser." In the verses where it talks about that it "seems lesser," that the world perceives it as lesser. I'm not saying that certain groups of people are less in God's economy. It's saying in our eyes, in the world, that's the case.

Think about... There's a lot of different, and sometimes I contribute to this, sometimes I say, "Let's not be so easily offended." A lot of different lists that say what not to say. We like to talk about that. Rather than giving you a list of things not to say, because lots of things aren't necessarily bad given a different context.

Just think about what the meaning is behind your words. Think about when you say, "Oh, I could never do that." If God called you to do it, I'm pretty sure He'd equip and provide for that. Think about what those words, what those reactions are. There have been some things I feel like I'm fairly enlightened with it, with disability, with adoption.

There have been some things here at this conference that pushed me, where I go, "Whoa!" That shouldn't have surprised me and been a "Whoa!" moment, but it kind of was. Wow, my theology on that wasn't what it should be, and isn't aligned with what the Bible says. We need to be willing to be challenged in that, and to receive it with grace when a family says, "Hey, that kind of hurt when that was said."

The implications... our response to special needs and foster and adoptive families. The first one is to know. That's where I spent a lot of time camping out on what this looks like. At adoption conferences, I spend a lot of time camping out on what disability ministry looks like, because that's the piece they

need.

We need to know, we need to be aware. It's great to be reactive in ministry, there are plenty of times where we're not going to be able to be proactive. But, as much as we can be, as families are adopting and doing foster care, they are not, especially in the beginning and especially in those in-the-trenches times, they're not in a place where they have a whole lot of bandwidth to be educating you.

To know, to seek out those resources, to be willing to say, "What was that book again? *The Connected Child*. What was that book again? *Beyond Logic, Consequences, and Control*. What are those websites?" Key Ministry, which the website is on the card that you have. We're trying to push stuff as much as we can to equip churches in this area because there's just not a lot there and we want there to be stuff there.

Families have a lot going on and don't need to be educating the Church on all of these issues, especially when they're in the very beginning stages. Churches have a lot going on, and don't need to be doing all of the research on their own. As much as we can be equipping and helping from Key Ministry, we want to be doing that. I know that Joni and Friends shares that heart too.

Next one is pray. We skip this a lot, or we think it's just an afterthought. I love the Oswald Chambers quote, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work, prayer is the greater work." Be praying, because that's where a lot of times the things I'm not aware of, that I don't know, where God convicts me and brings me to that knowing place, so we can go and do what He calls us to do with that knowledge He's equipped us with.

Prevent. This is not one a lot of people always talk about when we talk about adoption. As much as possible, we can prevent the need for adoption, for foster care, if we can be providing wheelchairs, if we can be doing whatever it is that God's calling you to do where you're at. Whatever God's leading you to do, maybe where you're not at, so vulnerable families who might consider adoption, who might fall apart and require foster care, then that's prevented.

A lot of that looks like us doing a lot of what we've been talking about here, of saying, "There's adults who the church needs to be not just including, but befriending, being a part of." We need to all be belonging together, all the parts of the Body, as Christ intended. When that happens, there's a lot of adults who could be able to parent a child, if they had some more supports. What would that look like?

We're going to show anyway the really cute picture of the kid with the bilateral atresia of the ears... was going to be there.

Offer what we can. This is the next point, but I've talked about it a lot. Be honest in things we can't offer, and be willing to take people there. We have gifts, we have finances. We have time, we have attention. Sometimes we don't know what to do, and that's okay to feel that way, but don't let that stop you and say, "I'm not going to do anything."

We've had folks who have said, "Okay, I'm sure with six small children, you have laundry. I would like to come and pick up a couple of bags of laundry and take them and do them." It was really humbling, and some families might say, "no," and that's okay too. I said, "yes," but there's concrete ways and sometimes a lot of that isn't just saying, "What can I do to help?" Honestly, a lot of times I don't know the answer.

But, when someone goes, "Can I bring you a meal?" My favorite, which is something I never thought to do for people, and I do now, friends occasionally will call and say, "Hey, I'm running to the store and I know sometimes grocery shopping with little people is hard. Do you need any milk? Do you need just a couple of staples?" Occasionally, I give them a longer list.

But, offering what we can in ways that are simple. Honestly, for me a sweet blessing has been a text to say, "Hey, I'm thinking of you." Facebook message. Letting us know, especially when families are feeling isolated and you might not know they're feeling isolated. We are raging extroverts except for one of our kiddos, who I'm really thankful feels comfortable separating himself when he needs to.

It looks like everything's good, so a lot of people, when I reach out and say, "Hey, we're feeling really isolated," they go, "What?" Knowing there's an isolation sometimes, especially when you're hunkering down and always have a child attached to you because you're working on their social and psychological attachment. That starts with a lot of physical stuff. Being able to say, "Hey, I know you're still there. I remember you. I miss you when you're not here."

Then, be willing to connect outside the church for what we can't. I will say, and this is not technically ... It's outside of a church building sort of thing, but Empowered to Connect is within the church, as being a para-church organization. They do a good job of helping to connect things there. But, there's a lot of other places.

I would suggest one really proactive thing I ask every church to do, if they've got any families that are fostering or adopting, if they think that's going to happen, which is kind of most churches, is to identify what mental health professionals or therapists in your area are already familiar with adoption and foster care. You will be surprised there are not as many as there should be, if it's anything like most of the areas I've worked.

Being able to say, when a family asks, "Who could we go to? We're having a really hard time and we don't know what to do with this," or "The sibling of the child we adopted ... We had a child first, and they're having a rough time," or "The child we adopted is having a rough time," or "I'm having a rough time as the mom," or "We're having a rough time in our marriage." All those different things, and there's so many different aspects. While counselors with all sorts of training can help, somebody who knows what they're talking about is a real gift.

Just to sum it up, disability is interwoven into adoption and foster care at pretty much every stage. Not in every single adoption or foster care story, but as we look at pre-placement, as we look at placement stuff, as we look at post-placement stuff, that's a big part of it. Families need to be known and loved at every stage. That's true for every family, but as we're talking specifically ministry to families within this context.

A biblical response is not just advocacy, but lifelong ministry. It's not just saying, "Hey, the Bible says we ought to be about adoption and foster care," it's saying, "We're going to continue to walk this road with you after the child is in your home." Something we like to call, at Key Ministry, "post-placement grace." Not just the beginning, not just the advocacy, not just, "we ought to do this," but what does that look like afterwards?

Once again, none of these are earth-shattering. Lifelong ministry instead of just advocacy applies really well to disability context. Applies well to a lot of different contexts, but being mindful that if we're saying this is a biblical thing, we need to realize we're called not to just read some parts of the Bible, but to look at what the full Bible says and what God's calling us to do after that.

I would love to answer any questions. We have a little bit of time, not a whole lot. I will admit, though, in answering questions, there are some things that either I will point you to a different resource, or I will, if there's anything that applies to my kids, I might shape in a different sort of way and tell you we can talk about it off-mic.

Audience 3: [Inaudible.]

Shannon: Thank you, we hear that a lot from people who go. We haven't seen this, and we wanted this. It breaks my heart when it's people who have been walking this road for awhile and they go, "When we were adopting, we wish these sorts of things existed."

Audience 3: The other thing I wanted to say is I'm adopted myself, and be careful when you talk about adopting kids when you're referring to them. Because my parents adopted me at [inaudible]... when I was adopted, but it doesn't mean how a label stays with me. That was an act, I'm their child now. Be careful how you always refer to them as being adopted.

Shannon: That is a great point. When I talk about my kids, usually I talk about my kids, I'm not talking about my adopted kids. In a context of presentations, it's hard to be really mindful of that wording. I'm not being a good model for folks who are going to go out and not realize I'm only specifying, referring to kids as adopted kids or biological kids because I'm talking about that right now.

Very good point, that when you're interacting with a family that has children who are in their family by adoption or foster care, it doesn't feel good to always be called the adopted kid or the foster kid. My kids are my kids. Especially for kids like mine who are pretty conspicuously not biologically related to me, they get called out and noticed enough without us calling them out with those words.

Audience 4: I wanted to ask... We're developing another step in our special needs ministry in our church. We are developing specifically for our kids with special needs, then round-tabling with all of our leadership in the children's departments. What if we reversed it and we just have it for everybody, not so much ... How do think that would play for those in the foster-adopt families? We have a lot of foster-adopt in our church. We thought it would be really great.

Shannon: Just to repeat, because they want to capture everything on the audio. We're talking about intake forms, and does it make sense to say it's a special needs ministry thing or it's an everyone thing. A lot of times, families in adoption and foster care aren't going to identify themselves as special needs. Even though there is some information that would be really helpful to capture on that intake form, they're not going to fill it out. There's a lot of people who have children born to them who are not going to identify as special needs, so it's helpful to have that filled out.

I find in churches that works differently in a lot of different ways. I don't know

if it's one specific answer. In any form you have, I think having some sort of basic form so when a child's information is being collected, having something to check at minimum is helpful. A family might not offer, but if they're being asked, "Is there anything extra I need to know about your child?" they might offer something you're not expecting.

One thing to be mindful of especially, that I should have mentioned, but when we were talking about foster families, they may not be allowed to share certain things. There are privacy things, by law, that they will not be allowed to disclose. I'm not saying don't ask for any information they're able to share, but be mindful that if they can't share things with you, they can't share things with you. That's totally okay.

It can work either way. It depends. I'd love to talk to you a little more. What that intake form looks like, I know some churches that have a really long one. I've got six kids and I don't really want to fill out a long form for six kids. Sometimes it's a really short thing, and that works great to have everybody do it. It kind of depends on what that intake form looks like.

Audience 4: Two-page, keep it simple. Even the beginning, first time in, make it really short. Two-page. Then, when we see things, then it's sit down with the parents and go through it. Get more from them. We want to make it, if there's safety issues, if there's medical issues we need to be aware of. Also, what does your child like? What do they like and what are some things we need to be aware of? With any child, trigger behaviors.

Shannon: Great questions. Yes?

Audience 5: If I may, I'd like to offer this objection, from my own experience. I've adopted, with my wife, and have foster kids. Sometimes we see people have a very romantic idea about adoption and fostering could be. They are prepared to put a lot of love to the child, which they expect to be returned somehow, possibly better sooner than later, they might be [inaudible]...

There's one thing I would suggest, it's good to know. Besides love, as we understand love as adults, there's something very important for the children, it's the identity issue and it's the stability issue. From the perspective of identity, [inaudible]... to adopt or foster more than one child. If you have two or three of your own, you would say, "Oh, it would be great to give a home for another child." She or he will feel different. We realized it was so easy for them to share a similar background, it helps a lot.

Shannon: We've seen that as well. You're sharing that you've got five children who are adopted and five foster. There's things they can relate to with one another that I can't, as much as I do research and learn things, and that you can't as a dad, that are not your experience. It's helpful that's not always going to be a reality for a family, or a possibility.

One thing I encourage, and one way the Church can provide some of that, is by providing spaces and places and connections for families who have adopted or are fostering, to be connected with other families, helping that to happen. In our family, it has been absolutely fantastic to have four children who are adopted, who were adopted, past tense. Who are part of our family in that way and who get each other in a different way, and have a different perspective on some things that I can't empathize with as much.

You're completely right. The way we show love or think about love as an adult, and try to pour out love on kids, they might not be ready to receive if they haven't experienced love in that way. As ministry leaders, if we're not mom and dad, we might be hindering some attachment and parenting things by trying to pour out love and trying to pour those things into a child who really needs to be getting that from mom and dad, initially, to learn what that looks like.

I'm not saying don't love kids, but one recommendation I give to churches is, especially for newly adopted kids, is high-fives not hugs. That touch is a big attachment thing and we don't need to be trying to interrupt that. There's great ways we can show love and show we care about them without coming in and smothering a child with that love. That's what it feels like to them.

Audience 6: I also want to thank you for your seminar and your leadership in this regard. I think a lot of us who've adopted find ourselves at the intersection of disabilities and adoption. We have three adopted kids, but our oldest biological son has Autism. So, from age two, going through all the therapies and all the special ed, we brought home a four-and a half year old son from Uganda, who in those early developmental years manifested very similar issues.

His didn't really present themselves until we started school. We home school, so we're in the process at our church of developing a special ministries program alongside children's ministries. We benefit greatly by engaging the special education professionals at our church in the process as well. Those things are also presenting in a classroom setting at church. I wanted to just ask if you had any insight on that, or recommendations.

Shannon: Definitely. We have seen that involving special ed professionals and being able

to troubleshoot things, I also would say, as I was working with therapy professionals, my background, my training is in special ed. I didn't get this stuff there. While accommodations and modifications I use in the classroom, I use ... We've got six kids, sometimes it feels like a classroom. I utilize, in a lot of our special ed ministry stuff, we utilize with our kids.

One thing I would encourage is, they've already got the tool set, and sometimes if your special needs professionals or special needs ministry folks, or folks who are already familiar with that world, occasionally they need the little extra context, because behavior is communication. Usually at church we're dealing with behaviors. The communication is coming from a different place, often, when it's a child that's been adopted and is dealing with trauma stuff, than it is the case of a child who was born into his family and is dealing with some other special need.

Helping to give a little bit of a framework can help polish that a little better. Some parents are equipped to do that. Some parents are really good at saying, "Hey, here's what's going on and here are some helpful things." Some parents aren't, so that's where a lot of specialized professionals and clinicians, therapists who know this world, can help speak into things in a way that parents might not be equipped to, or might just be too exhausted to do so.

So, that was a great point. You're welcome. Okay, I got the motion we are done, but that doesn't mean the conversation needs to end. Feel free to talk to me afterwards or pick my brain by using that email address there.

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