**Caring for Families Who’ve Adopted a**

**Child With Special Needs**

**By Scarlet and Brandon Hiltibidal**

We don’t travel. We don’t really even leave our house much unless we need to pick up some fro yo or queso. We stand united in our philosophy that going places for any reason at any time is almost always not as good as not doing that.

So, flying fourteen hours to China to adopt our daughter was perhaps the farthest outside our comfort zone we have ever been, and that is without even factoring in all of the challenges our little girl actually brought with her.

It can be easy to look away, but learn something, lean in, and love the adoptive family through the unique challenges of their special need. She was born without any ears and completely Deaf. She was almost four-years-old, but couldn’t walk, wasn’t potty trained, and had learned no form of communication. That was all we knew about her. That and that God wanted us to go adopt her.

We already had two biological children, but God broke through our fears and gave us a desire to bring this little Deaf girl on the other side of the world into our family in Middle Tennessee.

It was hard even after we got back home to our fro yo. Adoption is challenging. Special needs adoptions are uniquely challenging. But, we absolutely felt held together by the way the body of Christ supported us before, during, and after we did what God told us to do.

We hope that by sharing our challenges and experiences with you, you might be better equipped to adopt or to love and serve the families in your church who adopt children with special needs.

LEARN ABOUT THE NEED

There are so many unique difficulties — physical, emotional, and mental — facing orphans all over the world. We said “yes” to deafness, but we said “no” to down’s syndrome and heart problems and something called “sacrococcygeal teratoma.” Every special need comes with its own difficulties and learning curves.

Because we were adopting a deaf child, we starting learning sign language. We took classes and got a tutor and downloaded all the apps. We’ll never forget the day we learned how to sign “I need more queso, please.”

And we weren’t the only ones learning. One of the sweetest ways our people loved us was by trying to learn some sign language. When we go to church, there are volunteers who know sign language that serve our kids, and there are other church members who try to communicate with our girl.

Regardless of the challenges and frustrations a family steps into when they adopt a special needs child, there are things you can learn about that need and ways you can support that family. It can be easy to look away, but learn something, lean in, and love the adoptive family through the unique challenges of their special need.

UNDERSTAND ATTACHMENT

During the adoption process, families are required to read books and watch videos about the effects of trauma and neglect. They take mandatory classes where they listen to parent after parent discussing attachment struggles and explaining how it was hard to fully feel parental feelings toward the new child.

We watched the videos. We did the paperwork. But, faced with this precious daughter who we had never met, who was in such bad shape medically, it was hard to feel what what we thought we should.

But our church loved us during that time. For one thing, other adoptive parents were open about their own struggles with bonding. Knowing we weren’t alone was extremely comforting.

The other thing that stood out was the lack of judgement from friends. We have both sat with friends, confessing that we didn’t always feel compassion toward our new daughter when she struggled to communicate.

When battling those common feelings, what wouldn’t have helped is condemnation or judgement. We were giving plenty of that to ourselves already. What helped was friends listening and saying, “I get that.”

Serve the family struggling to find healthy attachment with their newly adopted child by being a kind face and listening ear. Commit to pray with and for them. Don’t be shy to bring it up and ask how it’s going, if they’ve invited you into that struggle.

SERVE IN SIMPLE WAYS

It has been so powerful to be loved by our friends understanding our fears and entering into Deaf culture with us. But, equally powerful and comforting were the simple gestures of love. There are things you can do regardless of the special need.

Our church walked with us through the process by praying with us. When the doctors said we were crazy, our friends said, “We support you.” They gave us financial support, even plane tickets to and from China. One of my friends set up a meal train, so we had a month without cooking.

We were all broken and fatherless until Jesus came and gave us a future and a family through His death and resurrection. We remember recovering from jet lag and the thirty-hour travel day back home. Fighting to keep our eyes open to handle the basic needs of life. Somewhere in there, the phone dinged. It was Caroline texting to let us know dinner had been left at the door.

Not just any dinner, but homemade “Soup Noodle.” She figured out how to make Joy’s favorite food from China and left it hot and ready at our doorstep.

The moments that we felt most loved were moments like those. Moments at the airport, when our whole small group stood with handmade signs, wearing our fundraiser t-shirts with sign language I-love-yous on the front.

There are so many simple things that can feel huge for hurting hearts sorting through the new life of a special needs adoption.

POINT BACK TO THE GOSPEL

As you are learning, understanding, serving, and caring for a family during an adoption, take every opportunity to reflect on how these relationships echo the gospel. In God’s eyes, we were all orphans with special needs.

We were all broken and fatherless until Jesus came and gave us a future and a family through His death and resurrection. As you walk this path with your people, remember.

Remind your friends, and your own heart as you serve them, that everything they do for the child and everything you do for them, Christ has already done for us all.

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father!” – Romans 8:15 (CSB)

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The above article, “Caring for Families Who’ve Adopted a Child With Special Needs,” was written by Scarlet and Brandon Hiltibidal.

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This article may not be written by an Apostolic author, but it contains many excellent principles and concepts that can be adapted to most churches. As the old saying goes, “Eat the meat. Throw away the bones.”