Personal Essay: Adoption Boot Camp

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"What will you do if your ten year old starts wetting her pants again?" the facilitator asked. I looked at Ethan and he stared back at me blankly. We were stumped.

Two weeks into our state-mandated pre-adoption training program, I was starting to wonder what the hell we were getting into. It's not that I didn't want to be a dad — we've known from early on that we'd have kids — it's just that every time our instructors opened their mouths the prospect of adopting from the rough and tumble state foster care system got a little scarier.

We'd carefully considered our other options. Surrogacy was a nonstarter — there are already too many kids out there who need good homes, and while I loved the idea of plucking an infant from some third-world backwater Brangelina-style, these days international adoptions are open primarily to married, straight couples with the license to prove it.

Private domestic adoption is easier, but feels too transactional: papers exchanged, money deposited, baby delivered. More like buying a mortgage-backed security than having a baby. And while you can't put a price on love, $30,000 per child seemed steep.

That left the Department of Social Services, recently rebranded as the more cuddly-sounding Department for Children and Families. In lots of ways, adopting through the state foster care system made a lot of sense for us. Ethan's a doctor at an inner city health center and has made a career of caring for people who've been dealt a crappy hand. We live on an ethnically diverse street in a neighborhood clogged with same-sex couples wearing secondhand Baby Bjorns. For a child with two daddies likely to have another color skin, it seems like a good place to be. The more we thought about DCF the more excited we became.

We signed up for the state-sponsored fall training, hoping to adopt a child under two the following year. Our thirty-hour class required us to spend four beautiful New England weekends jammed into a chilly conference room with a crew that included three other thirty-something couples, a hip Grandma type, and a single, mid-forties IT guy. It wasn't the warm and fuzzy lovefest I'd hoped for.

Hour after long hour we sipped weak coffee while our facilitators Karin and Rosemary told it like it is. Adopt a child who's been taken from his family because of abuse and neglect and there will be problems. Karin and Rosemary made sure we knew all of them. Our adopted son might stiffen like a board or go linguini-limp when held. He could secretly horde food in his closet until it rots or sleep all day because he's learned it beats being awake and hungry. He'll rage one day and completely withdraw the next. Theft, pyromania, and violence might be part of the package. Because he's had a set of experiences totally different than those of most other children, he'll need to be parented differently, too. You can't send a child to his room if that's where his mom used to lock him for days at a time. And you can't force a bath if it's in the tub where the molestation usually happened.

Then there's the legal risk. Work with DCF and you're adopting from an agency whose mission is family reunification. Which means that while Ethan and I are home changing diapers and mashing organic green beans, caseworkers are out searching for a grandmother, aunt, rehabilitated parent or other blood relative able to care for our little bundle of joy. If they find someone, we'll be packing up the diaper bag for good. "In Massachusetts, a judge will almost always side to the birth family," Rosemary told us during class, reaching for a dish of candy corn. "Right or wrong, that's how it is."

What scares me most isn't the night terrors, behavior problems, or court hearings — it's the prospect of

separation from my family and friends. They all want to be involved in our child's life, but what if they can't? Time and again we hear that our child will interact differently and act out differently. If that means he can't spend the afternoon with Gran and Grandpa or have a play date with his cousin, doesn't distance from the people we love become inevitable?

By the time Halloween rolled around I was having serious doubts and dreading our final session, a panel discussion with five families who'd been through the process. Sure enough, they came bearing the horror stories I feared most: troubles at school, regression, detachment, and my favorite — the ten-year-old twins with "toileting issues." But these parents also brought something to the DCF table that Karin and Rosemary's gloom and doom curriculum didn't: the joy of being parents. For every suspension from school or unexplained freak out, we heard about a family vacation, a movie night or an afternoon making snow angels. These parents watched as ever so slowly, their kids begin to heal. One step forward, one step back — but then, eventually, another step forward.

It was enough to renew my faith in what we were doing, but it also made me wonder if people who adopt through the state do it because they have a bit of a savior complex. Why else proceed down such an uncertain path? Have Ethan and I confused becoming parents with being superheroes? I don't think so, but I won't deny that loving a child who others have left behind somehow feels inherently right. And I also think a little part of me is determined to disprove the lessons of Karin and Rosemary's grueling pre-adoptive boot camp. We will love our child so deeply that the trauma we've been told to expect will simply never present itself. We will laugh attachment disorder in the face and it will skulk away. It's a foolish notion, but it's there.

We're in the home stretch now. We've completed a forty-page questionnaire that covers everything from room sizes and role models to health issues and household income. Which family rules can never be broken? Will our families support us unconditionally? What if the behavioral issues are just too tough to handle? Answering the questions with Ethan confirmed that we're not always on the same page (he thinks walking around the house naked is okay. Me? Not so much), and that made the exercise important.

Our social worker has turned the responses into the profile she'll use to find us a child. Now the waiting begins. "It will start to get frustrating if we're still looking in a year," she told us nonchalantly during our last visit. I nearly threw up in my mouth. It feels like we've been pregnant for two years — I don't know if I can bear another.

It would be easy to dismiss this whole long, grueling process as government bureaucracy at its worst, and when I'm doing things like scheduling a pre-adoptive cholesterol test it sure feels that way. But in truth, the classes and stories and endless paperwork have forced us to look at our impending parenthood from every angle: to examine our motivations and expectations, consider the risks and rewards, and think carefully about how our lives will change when baby finally arrives. Would we have done this so consciously and methodically if it hadn't been mandatory?

It's been messy at times, but getting through it has convinced us — and the state — that this is where we're supposed to be. We're terrified, of course, but we're going in with eyes wide open. And that, we hope, can only make us better parents.