A photograph of a woman with short, light brown hair hugging a young boy from behind. The woman is wearing a black long-sleeved top. The boy is wearing a blue and white Adidas jacket. They are sitting on a wooden deck with a wooden railing. In the background, there are large, leafless trees and a building. The overall mood is intimate and supportive.

by Paul Freedman
& John Cooney

THE PRIMAL WOUND

(where is mum when it hurts?)

A CONVERSATION WITH NANCY VERRIER



Chances are you know someone who's adopted. Maybe somebody in your circle of friends or family. Maybe one of your own kids.

Ever wondered what it feels like to discover that your mum and dad are ... well, biologically anyway ... strangers? That you aren't actually even related?

Wouldn't you wonder who you really are? Wouldn't you want to know what your first mum, your birth-mother, is like? Does she have your dimples, your sense of humour? And your dad? Is he into music, poetry, art (the stuff that pushes your buttons but no one else in the family seems to 'get')?

Nancy Verrier is an author, mother and psychotherapist who began thinking about these sorts of things as she struggled, many years ago, to understand her adopted daughter. Later, when that thinking grew into research with many hundreds of adoptees, she developed ideas that made a lot of sense. She learnt that, no matter how genuine and good and welcoming an adoptive family might be, a child who's been relinquished for adoption can suffer a real sense of loss. And, unless this loss is understood and addressed, it may cause issues that can last a lifetime, plus a heap of problems and pain.

Nancy calls this loss *The Primal Wound*. Teaching, counselling and writing – not just about the problem, but practical ideas for healing and coping as well – has become her life's work. And she's helped thousands of adoptees, adoptive families and birthparents the world over.

Nancy admits that she made lots of mistakes at first in handling her adopted daughter. But, with honesty, patience and persistence she reached the stage where, today, she, her daughter and her daughter's first mother have a great relationship.

We caught up with Nancy recently and asked her to tell us more about *The Primal Wound* ...

NANCY VERRIER: My first real understanding came when I gave birth to our second daughter, two years after adopting our first. It was only after going through that birth experience that I realised how incredibly difficult it must've been for both my first daughter and her first mother to have been separated from one another.

I simply couldn't *imagine* being separated from this little girl I'd just given birth to – or how she could tolerate being separated from me!

That led me to think more about the profound connection between a mother and child. Babies know their own mother at birth: her voice, her smell, her skin, her heartbeat – and they're psychologically still part of their mothers for a great part of their early life. This mysterious prenatal bond happens with *all* mammals – you see it often in wildlife programmes on TV. And I began to realise that when babies, for whatever reason, are separated from their mothers, they're left feeling confused and disoriented.

In babies' brains, there are a hundred billion neurons being connected up during the first three years of life, which all have to do with our experiences after birth. And if your *very first* experience is your mother disappearing, that must have a huge impact on the neurological system.

Of course, the loss occurred, in most cases, too early for you to remember, but you're still left with a subconscious feeling that you've been abandoned.

GRAPEVINE: This subject must have been very personal for you – after all, you were an adoptive mother yourself ...

NANCY: I was totally naïve when we

adopted our baby. The social worker said, "Take the baby home and love her and everything will be fine." And I really believed that would be true. And, of course, it *is* true that adopted children need love! But they also have a kind of empty hole inside that's left when the first mother disappears.

It would be nice if we could just substitute mothers and all is well. However, I've talked with thousands of adoptees in the last 25 or 30 years – and this just *isn't* the way things go.

Don't get me wrong: many of them *do* feel loved and cared-for – many of them enjoy a good life, and *really* love their adoptive parents. But, time and time again, they've told me they never quite felt they fitted in. It's called 'genetic confusion' ... and it leads to adoptees being unsure how to react and how to communicate easily with the adoptive family.

GRAPEVINE: This primal wound – you believe it's caused not just in the case of adoption, but whenever a child is separated from its birth mother?

NANCY: Absolutely. The situation's much better now, but they used to take the babies away and put them in nurseries ... babies that should've been with the mother right after birth. Children who were premature, for example, used to be put in neo-natal intensive care units, and years ago they wouldn't let the parents in there. I'm sure those babies, too, were left with a kind of primal wound.

I don't base my opinion just on the troubled adoptees I see in my practice. You've got no idea how many emails and letters I receive – thousands and thousands! I get correspondence from people who don't or won't or can't talk to anybody else ... but



Wanting always to be in control is another common symptom. People often say that adoptees are very controlling. Well, yes, they want to be in control because they can't risk another devastating loss. And what's interesting is: even though they *want* to be in control, they're not always very good at controlling their own lives. It's one of those paradoxes that happen often in adoption.

they trust me, perhaps because they've read my book, *The Primal Wound*.

And what I keep hearing, again and again, is that, even when they've had a good life, there's always been this aura of sadness which they couldn't explain – and nobody had a clue they had a problem! Their parents didn't know ... the people they work alongside didn't know ... lots of them are very successful in their professions – but that's not how they feel inside!

GRAPEVINE: What does this 'wound' look like? How does it show up in, say, an adopted child or young adult?

NANCY: Well, a lot has to do with trust. When your first mother just *disappears* (and, for a baby, that's how it must feel) ... it's very hard to trust that anybody else is going to actually stick around when you need them. And distrust often makes adoptees hesitant or resistant when it comes to intimate relationships. If you don't, or can't, trust people, you're not going to get close to them.

Another symptom is loss – a subconscious feeling of being abandoned, being rejected – fear that it could happen again – the need for constant vigilance.

And some adoptees harbour lots of guilt and shame, which leads them to feel, "I'm not okay ..." "I'm not good enough ..." "I'm not really lovable ..." I've had many adoptees say things like, "I was a bad baby ..." So I get them to imagine they're holding a little baby in their arms – and I ask them, "How 'bad' can this little baby really be?"

GRAPEVINE: You claim that, in disproportionate numbers, adopted children can often be seen 'acting-out' – do you mean not co-operating, provoking, rebelling, that sort of thing?

NANCY: Yes. 'Acting-out' is putting your feelings 'out there' where people can know you're in trouble and not happy – especially your more negative feelings of anger, sadness and pain. So defiance, rebellion, parents not being able to tell them anything – these are all common

ways of coping with those deep-down feelings of rejection.

I've actually observed two categories:

These children who act-out, I call them 'DEFIANT'. They respond to the sense of being abandoned – and the fear of it happening again – by being stiff-armed, disruptive, even aggressive: "I don't want to get too close to anyone in case they leave me!"

But some do the opposite, and I call these ones 'COMPLIANT'. When they're little they may be very clingy (we sometimes refer to them as 'Velcro babies'): "I need to hang on so tight that she can't get away!" Then as they grow older they're often anxious and tightly controlled, feeling they're walking a tightrope, trying to be perfect and not make waves.

I'm not suggesting that all adoptees are at the extremes of being defiant or compliant – just that there are both tendencies. And a child may swing from one to the other. I remember hearing one adoptee say, "My brother 'acted OUT' – and I 'acted IN'!"

GRAPEVINE: What's your advice to parents who are struggling with a defiant, acting-out, adopted child?

NANCY: Ignore the acting-out if you possibly can – and realise that all the hullabaloo has to do with *pain*. These kids are often just crying for attention: "Look – I'm hurting here!" And if the parents can understand that, if they can stay steady and keep saying, "I can see you're having a really hard time. I just want you to know that I'm here for you. Let's see if we can find some way of making you feel better ..." there's a much better chance that acting-out can come under control.

Now, the younger the child is, the

easier that'll be. When they get to be teenagers, they don't want to talk to their parents – and even compliant teens will start acting-out the differences they feel with their adoptive family. This is more than just 'normal' teenage behaviour, and it can be very painful for all concerned. It helps to have a support group where adoptive parents can compare notes, keep things in perspective, and avoid personalising the issues.

Wherever I go in the world, I hear the same thing from adoptees: "We just want our parents to understand our loss and pain – because we feel so *alone* in it!" They can't easily talk about it, of course – they don't know how. But parents can tune-in by noticing what kind of music are they into? ... what kind of songs do they write? ... what kind of poetry do they read?

I remember a 16-year-old girl who came to me. During the counselling sessions she'd be bright and cheerful and everything was just great! But her mother said to me, "Has she ever brought in any of her poetry?" And when I looked at some of her poems it was all about loss and pain and yearning – important things she'd never even mentioned in therapy.

But this isn't something you want to challenge them about or "set them straight."

GRAPEVINE: You seem to imply that these kids experience stages of grief ... just like bereaved adults do?

NANCY: They do. But lots of them, as they're growing up, can't *resolve* that grief. They don't really know what they're grieving for ... and they never get to the end of those stages.

I used to give talks to paediatricians



something upsets him, his anger's often way out of proportion to the situation.

I well remember a parent with twins: one was acting-out and the other was acting-in. They were six. The acting-out one didn't want to eat what the mother had made for breakfast, wouldn't put on the clothes her mother wanted her to wear, and then refused to go to school.

Because I'd been encouraging them to empathise with their daughter's feelings,

about adoption, because they would put kids through all sorts of tests to try and find out why they were, for example, projectile vomiting ... having stomach problems ... showing all these symptoms that they couldn't find a physical explanation for. And, of course, a lot of the reason is anxiety. These kids are worried most of the time. Something awful happened to them: they don't remember what it was, but they have to really make sure that it doesn't ever happen again ...

GRAPEVINE: So where does discipline fit in – and how can adoptive parents find the right balance?

NANCY: These kids don't respond the same as biological kids to their parents' attempts at discipline. And what I tell adoptive parents is: first of all, validate and empathise with your child's feelings. That feeling, whatever it is, may not have a lot to do with what's happening right now – it might well reflect that 'baby-rage' about mum leaving and never coming back. But the child can't *tell you* that. So, when

the mother said, "Andrea, you're having a really hard time today aren't you? I'm wondering if you're in any pain?" And the little girl replied (and this is a quote!): "Mummy, you'll never know all the pain that's in my heart!"

Now that's enough to make an adoptive mother weep!

GRAPEVINE: It sure is!

NANCY: But it really opened up their relationship! She said the right thing to her daughter, who could respond to her honestly. Instead of laying down the law – "*Get in there and eat your breakfast and put your clothes on!*" – she zeroed-in on the *real* problem. After that, they were able to get closer and bond more.

This is the kind of thing we need to do with these kids.

GRAPEVINE: What's your advice to adoptive parents who might worry, after reading your book, "Maybe it would've been better if we'd never adopted ..."?

NANCY: Well, I rarely get that kind of letter from adoptive parents. I get letters



HOT TIPS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

(adapted from Nancy Verrier's website: www.nancyverrier.com)

- Be alert to signs of loss and grieving – and see her sadness, confusion or anger as a cover for pain.
- Never say, “You shouldn’t feel that way.” Her feelings are valid – just help her find appropriate ways to express them.
- If possible, stay home with your child – she doesn’t need one more disappearing mother.
- Don’t employ ‘tough love’ – and never threaten to reject or abandon her, no matter how provocative she becomes.
- Don’t be late picking her up from school, activities, etc (you may trigger her abandonment-fear).
- Lack of trust may keep her from letting in love – be patient, and try not to feel rejected. (It’s not personal.)
- Allow her to be herself – value the differences between her and other members of your family – and encourage her talents and interests, even if they’re different from yours.
- Talk to her about adoption before she knows what it means – and, as she gets older, answer her questions honestly.
- If you can, stay in touch with her birth family – it may help her to have that ‘mirror’, to see herself reflected somewhere.
- Don’t try to take the place of her birthmother – her birthmother is real, even if she doesn’t talk about her. You’re her adoptive mother, a different person and very important in her life.
- Prepare her for any changes in routine – she’s likely to fear surprises (e.g. your disappearance).
- She needs strong boundaries and limits, even though she may fight against them – she needs to feel safe, contained and cared for – just be fair and consistent.
- Try to understand her way of coping: acting-out or compliant – and try to separate this behaviour from her true personality.



that say, "I wish we'd known about this sooner. I could've responded to my child differently." They realise that they *weren't* bad parents after all – they just had no idea that their child was suffering this loss.

In fairness, no one ever told them that parenting an adopted child often means 'parenting-plus'. No one told them they were assuming responsibility for a child who may be afraid to connect – because of the trauma of being separated from the first mother. No one told them they may find themselves doing a difficult dance with this child – the dance of learning *how to be* with each other.

But, on the other hand, as these behaviors are understood and worked with, patiently and lovingly, adoptive parents can have a wonderfully positive impact on their child. They can give unconditional love and, at the same time, create the safety of limits and boundaries. They can encourage the child's special talents and aptitudes, even though they're probably different from theirs.

And those differences can bring new opportunities – and new levels of understanding and compassion – into the parents' lives.

GRAPEVINE: What do you say to birthparents who feel guilty that they inflicted this wound ... for reasons they probably couldn't help or didn't understand at the time?

NANCY: Unfortunately we live in a punitive society. No one knows this better than first-mothers who were once criticized for wanting to keep their babies. Many of them would've grabbed at the chance to keep their children if they could've – and they often tell me they feel they were betrayed: "*I had no choice! The social*

workers and my parents and everybody was telling me I had to do this ..." They didn't realise that their children were going to feel that loss as well. But what they've also come to realise, after reading my book, is that their children have never forgotten them – and will always have a sense of the first-mother with them.

I sometimes do these intensive birthmother workshops where we talk about things like guilt and fear, listening strengths, reunions, rituals and symbols, how to talk to our inner selves, learning to forgive ourselves and each other. And it's interesting: birthmothers all blame themselves – but yet they *don't blame each other!* So I have them work on that – to escape from that guilty place and find a way to forgive themselves.

Every adopted child has two mothers. The birthmother was and always will be the child's first mother – no one can take that away from her. And the pain of the disconnection can sometimes be tempered with the hope of a meaningful reconnection.

GRAPEVINE: Speaking of reconnection ... does a reunion between the adopted child and the birthmother help bring about healing?

NANCY: Yes, that often happens. Because the child now has a mirror, and can get some idea of who he's biologically connected to. Back when we adopted our daughter, nobody thought about this – at that time it was all about nurture, not nature. But since then we've learned a whole lot more about genes and DNA. We've learnt that lots of things that are true about us have to do with our DNA. We're born with certain tendencies ... abilities ... mannerisms even. And you

can often see it when those children meet up with their first mother.

GRAPEVINE: Do you counsel that reunions are advisable ... or good?

NANCY: I do, yes – but I don't try to talk anybody into it if they're not ready. On the whole, I think the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. But, of course, if the birthmother doesn't want a reunion, if there are secrets going on or she can't get past the trauma of a child she had long ago, then a reunion can be very difficult.

I believe, however, that everyone has a right to know who they are. I think secrets in families are always harmful – and what must a child think when they're told they can't know anything about their original mother and their background? The more open people are about things the better it is for everybody.

Lots of adoptees, when they reconnect with their biological family, suddenly feel as if their feet are planted on the ground. It's like that genetic connection gives them a reference point. They're not just floating any more ...

GRAPEVINE: When adoptees have all this explained – about the Primal Wound, and so on – does it help them get on top of things and do better?

NANCY: It does when they get older. That's why I wrote my second book – *Coming Home to Self*. Adoptees often say to me, "Well okay, I now know WHY I'm the way I am, but what do I DO about it?" And I like to offer them a number of suggestions.

- As an adoptee, you have to be as honest as you can about what's going on inside. You may want to say, "*This doesn't bother me. I'm fine.*" But, although you

can't consciously recall the event, you suffered a loss that's probably had a big impact on how you've seen yourself, your emotional responses, your behaviour, and your ability to trust other people. Your world, in those early years, may have felt unsafe and unfamiliar – and the need for constant vigilance may have filled you with anxiety. Maybe you became compliant and tried to be perfect – or maybe you acted-out and tested everyone who was important to you.

- You must learn how your beliefs differ from reality. It helps if you can convince yourself that you're *never* going to be abandoned like that again – because you're never going to be a helpless little baby again. And this can be a terrible fear. I've seen a 40-year-old man just curl up in the foetal position because his girlfriend left him.
- As a child, you needed someone to understand the roots of your behaviour and work with you patiently and lovingly (which is hopefully what your adoptive parents were able to do). But, as an adult, it's now up to you to realise the impact your harmful actions have on others – and (though it won't be easy) to take responsibility for those actions. Adoptees can be super-sensitive about how other people affect *them* – but they're often *not* very sensitive about how *they* affect their partners, parents or friends! It's like there's a double-standard, and it explains why many of those relationships fail.
- You need to learn to love yourselves. You really can't love anybody else until you can love yourself, because you won't trust that anybody can really love you.

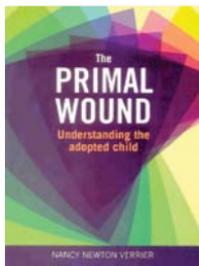
And you need to take some chances with relationships, knowing that none of life's knocks are ever going to be as bad as the one you had when you were a newborn. (Just as a child may vacillate between defiant and compliant behaviour, adult adoptees will often do the same thing in their relationships, swinging back and forth: being clingy and needy when their partner isn't paying them attention ... then being distant, disrespectful and hurtful when the partner gets closer.)

- As an adult, it is time for you to gain control in your life. By *you* I mean the *mature-adult you, not the wounded-child you*. (You wouldn't consciously put a three-year-old in charge of your life – right? But, in the past, you may have unconsciously done just that!) You have to begin to distinguish between your child and adult selves, and act from your mature adult self.
- Finally, remember: **You are important, and your life does matter. You deserve to be treated with love, respect, and dignity. And you deserve to treat others with love, respect, and dignity.**

GRAPEVINE: Can people move on from this and find closure?

NANCY: Yes, for sure. Healing is a process, and it doesn't happen overnight – but the brain is more adaptable than we once thought. New patterns can be formed, and negative thoughts can be challenged with positive thoughts. Instead of falling into old ruts, we can create new beginnings by taking risks and doing something new.

You will be surprised how liberating this is! ❁



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRIMAL WOUND, NANCY VERRIER, HER BOOKS AND IDEAS, VISIT WWW.NANCYVERRIER.COM.



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