



National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information National Adoption Information Clearinghouse



Gateways to Information: Protecting Children and Strengthening Families

Adoption and the Stages of Development

Introduction

Now that you have adopted a child and life is beginning to settle down, you may find your thoughts moving to the future. When shall I tell my child that s/he is adopted? How will s/he feel about it? At what point will s/he want more information? What will s/he want to know from me? How can I help my child feel comfortable about being adopted?

Whether children are adopted as infants or when they are older, whether they are healthy or have physical or psychological problems, their adoption is bound to influence their development. You need to understand how and why.

Learning about the developmental stages of children and what can be expected in each stage is important to all new parents. When your child has been adopted, there are additional considerations. In these pages, we will be looking at specific issues—separation, loss, anger, grief, and identity—and show how they are expressed as your adopted child grows up. Some of these issues will be obvious in all stages of development; others surface at specific times. The more thoroughly you can understand how your child behaves and why, the more likely it is that you can be supportive and help your child to grow up with healthy self-esteem and the knowledge that s/he is loved.

While the stages described below correspond generally to a child's chronological age, your child's development may vary significantly. Some children progress more quickly from one stage to another; others may continue certain behaviors long past the time you would have expected. Still others may be substantially delayed in entering and moving through new stages. Many characteristics of adolescence, for instance, may not even appear until your child's twenties and may persist until your child's identity has formed.

The First Year

The primary task of a baby is to develop a sense of trust in the world and come to view it as a place that is predictable and reliable. Infants accomplish this through attachment to their caretakers. During their early months, children have an inborn capacity to "bond" to ensure their survival. They express it through sucking, feeding, smiling, and cooing, behaviors which, ideally, stimulate loving responses from their parents (or caretakers). These pleasant interactions and the parent's or parents' consistent attention form the parent-child bond and the foundation for a child's sense of trust.

During this period, a consistently nurturing and tension-free environment makes a child feel secure. The most valuable thing you can do is to show, through attention and affection, that you love your child and that your child can depend on you. If you generally respond to your child's cries, s/he will learn trust. If you hug and smile at your child, s/he will learn to feel content.

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse

330 C St., SW
Washington, DC 20447
(888) 251-0075 or (703) 352-3488
naic@caliber.com
<http://naic.acf.hhs.gov>

The Clearinghouses are services of
The Children's Bureau
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



The Second Year

Although the need to attach continues for a long time, the process of separation also begins in the first year of a child's life. A milestone is reached when children learn to separate from their parents by crawling and then by walking. At the same time, babies often become fearful of separation. Psychological separation begins too: babies start, non-verbally, to express their own wishes and opinions. Many experts in child development view early childhood as a series of alternating attachment and separation phases that establish the child as an independent person who can relate happily to family members and friends, and be capable of having intimate relationships with others.

Toddlers continue the attachment and separation cycle in more sophisticated ways in the second year. They learn to tell you how they feel by reaching their arms out to you and protesting vigorously when you must leave them. Anxiety about separating from you heightens, and they may begin to express anger. During this stage, when you must guide and protect your child, you become a "no" sayers. It is not surprising that your child becomes frustrated and shows it in new ways. Helpless crying usually comes first. Later your child may exhibit aggressive behavior such as throwing things, hitting, pushing, biting, and pinching. Much of this behavior is directed toward you but some is directed at the child's peers. Such behavior often puzzles and frightens parents. You may wonder if your child is normal. Adoptive parents often worry that an unknown genetic trait is surfacing or that the "orneriness" has something to do with the adoption. Sometimes they think ahead to the teenage years and wonder if these are early warnings of trouble ahead.

It helps to know that this kind of behavior is typical of toddlers, who have conflicting wishes about their push toward autonomy and their anxiety about separating from you. Almost all children go through a "me do it myself" phase, accompanied by temper tantrums and toilet training battles. Handling tantrums, setting limits, and encouraging language development and the expression of feelings consume most of your time and patience.

In the first 2 years, the stages of attachment, the beginnings of separation, and the expression of anger and aggressiveness probably are the same whether your child is adopted or not. Even in homes where the word "adoption" has been used frequently and the child can pronounce it or even say, "I'm Susie, I was adopted from Chicago," the words have little meaning. What is especially important is that your adopted child has the opportunity to pass through the attachment and early separation stages in the same way as a child born to you.

When older babies or children are adopted, their capacity to form relationships may have been disturbed. A series of caretakers and broken attachments through the first months of a child's life can complicate adjustment and compromise the ability to develop trust. You may need to work much harder to let your child know that you care and that you will always be there. Even if your baby received nurturing care before joining your family, s/he can still benefit from your understanding the significance of attachment and the importance of loving interaction.

If you adopt cross-culturally, it will be helpful for you to learn about attachment behavior in that culture. Consider for instance a family who had adopted a 7-month-old Asian baby. When the baby cried, she could not be comforted by holding; she would only quiet down if she were laid on the floor near her mother and spoken to softly. Once she became calmer, she would crawl into her mother's lap for a hug.

There is another example of a baby adopted from Peru who needed to sleep with an adult for the first few months following adoption. His new crib went unused until he was 15 months old, when his parents were able to help him adjust to sleeping alone. Children who are adopted when they are older usually follow the same attachment and separation paths as other children, but possibly in a different time sequence. This gives you the opportunity to make up for what might have been lost or damaged in earlier relationships.

The first 2 years are crucial to personality development and dramatically influence a child's future. As you grow into your roles as parents, your children also will grow into their place in your family. The next sections provide more information on these techniques.

Ages 2 to 6

If you thought a lot was happening in your child's development in the first 2 years, you will find that the preschool years are filled with activity and nonstop questions. Once children learn to speak, they need only a partner, and the world becomes theirs for the asking and telling. This is when parents begin to feel pressure to explain adoption to their children. It is also when children's ears are wide open to adult conversation and they take in so much more than adults once thought they could. Parents are busy answering as best they can questions such as why the sky is blue, why leaves fall off the trees, why people are different colors, how birds fly, and why a baby brother cannot join the family right now. The more comfortable parents are in trying to answer questions honestly, the more encouraged their children will be to learn. A lack of interest in learning often results from having questions met with too many "I don't know" or the obvious indifference of parents to their children's curiosity.

Sometimes parents feel so embarrassed about not knowing all the answers to their child's questions or are so afraid of giving the "wrong" answer that they ignore a question or change the subject. In doing so, they often miss a chance to discuss critical feelings with their children. For instance, a little girl visiting a museum with her father asked him why a woman in a painting was crying. She wanted him to pick her up so she could see the painting better, but he felt uncomfortable, took her hand, and moved on. This would have been a good opportunity to discuss why people are sad sometimes and why the little girl thought the woman in the painting was sad.

Children between 2 and 5 years of age have fears, especially about being abandoned, getting lost, or no longer being loved by their parents. They also engage in "magical" thinking and do not distinguish reliably between reality and fantasy. They may be afraid of giants, monsters, witches, or wild animals.

Children in this age group become increasingly familiar with separations from loved ones, often because they are attending daycare or preschool programs. They also make new friends outside their family, and their interests broaden. At the same time, they notice that their parents do not know everything and cannot control everything that happens to them. This can be frightening because it threatens their sense of security.

As you observe your children and others, you will notice that both boys and girls imitate their parents' nurturing and care-taking activities. They carry, feed, change, and put to bed their dolls and stuffed animals. They kiss them and sometimes throw them or hit them.

They are mimicking attachment and separation behaviors. If a baby enters the family, many 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds insist that it is their baby, that they "borned" it or "adopted" it. Sometimes a girl will tell you that it is her baby and that Daddy is the father. A little boy might say that he is going to "marry Mommy when Daddy grows up and dies." If you listen, you will see that your child is trying to make sense of the relationships in the family and to find a way to express the strong emotions of love, hate, and jealousy.

It is puzzling for children to understand why mom and dad get to sleep together while they have to sleep with two trucks and a bunny. You are witnessing what is known as the Electra complex in girls and the Oedipal complex in boys. Little girls may feel jealous of their mothers' grownup relationship with their fathers. They experience a mix of feelings which includes wanting to marry Daddy but feeling competitive and fearful that they will not "measure up." Little boys may want to be mommy's partner in everything and show off their developing "manliness." They do not understand why Daddy should be included but worry that Daddy will be upset with them for the way they feel. All of this behavior is normal for children this age.

There is also an aggressive, competitive side to this stage. You may notice behavior that is challenging, stubborn, and argumentative, usually directed toward the same-sex parent. Girls argue with their mothers about what to wear, what toys to leave at home, and who is the boss of the baby. Boys want to talk about what they will do when they grow up, and even in the most peaceful of families, they will turn all sorts of items into weapons which they yearn to use on the draperies, the baby, and, in frequent moments of frustration and anger, on Daddy.

These behaviors are part of children's working out their awareness of their smallness and insignificance compared to their parents and their urges toward autonomy and independence. They want to be big but also want the benefits of infancy. If they cannot be Mommy or Daddy's partner, they want to be their "lap babies."

Gradually, the intensity of these feelings abates. Children's love for their parents allows them to reconcile the Oedipal or Electra complex by eventually exchanging the wish to marry the parent of the opposite sex for the more realistic desire to grow up to be like the parent of the same sex.

Some version of this scenario occurs in most children, even those raised by a single parent. Sometimes the behavior is expressed directly; other times it is subtle, recognizable only through recalling dreams or in pretend play.

Children who have been traumatized or abused may not show the kind of behavior described here. They may be seductive or fearful, uncertain about the appropriateness of being affectionate, or show symptoms associated with sexual abuse. These children need special help from their parents and possibly from a skilled therapist before they can feel safe enough to express loving or sexual feelings in their new families. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC) factsheet entitled "Parenting the Sexually Abused Child" is helpful in such cases.

During the preschool years, you may want to respond to your child with humor and tactfully explain that when your child grows up, s/he will find someone just like Mommy or

Daddy. Adopted children inevitably wonder to which Mommy and Daddy you are referring. Some researchers believe that this is not the appropriate time to emphasize a child's birth family (Wieder, Schechter). It is difficult enough for children to find their place in the family (as the youngest child, the oldest, etc.) and to come to terms with their gender without having to ponder the meaning of birth parents. It probably is not even possible for a child this age to understand this concept yet.

The Facts of Life: Where Do I Come From? How Did I Get Here?

Most 3- to 6-year-olds do not yet understand the meaning of "being born." If they watch "Sesame Street" or "Mr. Rogers" on television, they may have learned something about how animals are born, and more recently, about how babies are born. They may then start to ask questions about this fascinating subject. Although parents traditionally are nervous about discussing the facts of life with young children, the children usually are curious, unembarrassed, and eager for information. This is a perfect opportunity to introduce the subject of where babies come from, how they get here, and how families are formed. This information is a valuable stepping stone in helping your child understand the concept of adoption. It is a time, too, that may awaken painful memories about your own infertility if that was the reason you chose adoption. Discussing birth and the creation of families with your child can be an enriching—and freeing—experience for the whole family.

At this time, adoptive parents must determine what and when they will tell their children about their adoption. Many adoption workers advise parents to introduce the word "adoption" as early as possible so that it becomes a comfortable part of a child's vocabulary and to tell a child, between the ages of 2 and 4 that s/he is adopted. However, some child welfare experts believe that when children are placed for adoption before the age of 2 and are of the same race as the parents, there probably is little to be gained by telling them about their adoption until they are at least 4 or 5 years old. Before that time, they will hear the words but will not understand the concept.

Dr. Steven Nickman, author of the article "Losses in Adoption: The Need for Dialogue," suggests that the ideal time for telling children about their adoption appears to be between the ages of 6 and 8. By the time children are 6 years old, they usually feel established enough in their family not to feel threatened by learning about adoption. Dr. Nickman believes that preschool children still have fears about the loss of their parents and their love and that telling them at that time is too risky. In addition, there is some question about whether a child under 6 years of age can understand the meaning of adoption and be able cognitively to work through the losses implied by learning that s/he was born into a different family.

Although it is obvious to adults, young children often believe that they are either adopted or born. It is important, when telling them about their adoption, to help them understand that they were born first—and that all children, adopted or not—are conceived and born in the same way. The birth came first, then the adoption.

Waiting until adolescence to reveal a child's adoption to him or her is not recommended. "Disclosure at that time can be devastating to children's self-esteem," says Dr. Nickman, "and to their faith in their parents."

Children Who Are Adopted When They Are Older or Who Are of a Different Race

Children who have been adopted when they are older than 2 or when they are of a different race from their adoptive parents need to be told about their adoption earlier. With older children, who bring with them memories of a past, failure to acknowledge those memories and to have a chance to talk about them can reinforce the attachment problems inherent in shifts in caretakers early in life. In these cases, parents should "work to safeguard the continuity of the child's experience by reminding him or her of his earlier living situation from time to time, still bearing in mind that too frequent reminders might arouse fears of losing his present home," Dr. Nickman suggests.

If your adopted child is of a different race or has very different physical features from your family, you must be cognizant of signs that s/he is aware of the difference. Your child may have noticed it, or someone else may have commented on it. You will want to explain to your child that the birth process is the same for everyone but acknowledge that people in different cultures have distinguishing physical features and their own rich heritage. Sometimes children who look different from the rest of their family need to be assured that their parents love them and intend to keep them.

For children with developmental disabilities, explanations about birth may be simplified or adjusted to match their ability to comprehend. When children have expressed no interest in the subject, it may be that they are not yet able to benefit from a discussion about it.

In any case, it takes years of periodic returns to the subject of adoption before your children will fully grasp its meaning. Meanwhile, it is most important that you provide an environment that nourishes and encourages learning and the understanding of all important family issues, such as love and aggression, hate and jealousy, sex and marriage, illness and death. At least two studies (Kirk, Hoopes and Stein) suggest that adopted adolescents were better adjusted if they came from families where all emotional issues including adoption were discussed among family members beginning in early childhood.

Children who learn early that it is all right to ask questions and be curious usually carry this behavior over to school and develop a sense of mastery over their lives. That is why both attachment and separation behaviors should be encouraged and endured patiently by parents. Both are necessary for children to create their identity and to develop and sustain intimate relationships.

Preschoolers' reactions to adoption are almost entirely affected by the way their parents feel about the adoption and the way they handle it with their children. Children of preschool age will be as excited about the story of their adoptions as other children are by the story of their births. To help make your children feel connected and an important part of the family, share with them the excitement that you felt when you received the telephone call about them, the frantic trip to pick them up, and how thrilled everyone in the family was to meet them. As time goes on and bonds of trust build, your children will be able to make sense of their unique adoption stories.

Elementary School Years

Adoption studies of children in this stage of life are contradictory. While some say that adopted children experience no more psychological problems than nonadopted children (Hoopes and Stein), others find that teachers and parents report more personality and behavior problems and find adopted children to be more dependent, tense, fearful, and hostile (Lindholm and Touliatos, Brodzinsky).

In general, children who have been adopted are well within the normal range academically and emotionally; however, emotional and academic problems may be greater if children were adopted after 9 months of age or if they had multiple placements before being adopted. Since these children are at greater risk of having attachment problems, their families should consider early intervention and treatment services similar to those available for other adopted children with special needs.

Middle childhood has often been described as a blissful period when children play and visit grandparents, get involved in interesting activities, and have few responsibilities or worries. Nonetheless, as adults we know from our own experiences, that there is a different side to this period between the ages of 6 and 11. The more worrisome serious period is usually experienced in children's inner lives, as indicated by their dreams and fantasies. There their feelings are played out about themselves and their families, their wish to belong outside of the family circle, to have attributes that make others admire them and seek them out, and their contrasting fears that they are dumb, ugly, mean, and useless.

At the same time, their horizons are expanding and they are ready to learn from school, friends, and other adventures outside of their homes. Competitive games and team projects attract them and make them nervous; they search everywhere and everyone for signs that they are loved and acceptable, while worrying that bad things might happen to pay them back for their seemingly evil deeds and thoughts.

The chief task of elementary school-aged children is to master all of the facts, ideas, and skills that will equip them to progress toward adolescence and independent life. During this time, children are supposed to consolidate their identification with parents and cement their sense of belonging to their family.

It is no wonder that in such a state, even without contemporary pressures resulting from divorce or other family disruptions, that emotional and behavioral problems frequently beset elementary school-aged children. Common problems include hyperactivity, poor school performance, low self-esteem, aggression, defiance, stubbornness, troubled relationships with brothers and sisters, friends, and parents, lack of confidence, fearfulness, sadness, depression, and loneliness. Adoptive parents wonder whether and how much these problems are caused or influenced by adoption or a history of faulty attachment.

Smith and Miroff state in their book, *You're Our Child: The Adoption Experience*, "It is extremely important, and also reassuring, to realize that the most common source of problems are developmental changes which follow a child from infancy to adulthood, not the fact that the child was or was not adopted."

Why Was I Given Away? Loss and Grief in Adoption

Loss is a feeling that runs through the lives of children who have been adopted. It shows itself in different ways at different stages of their lives. But knowing that their birth parents made an adoption plan for them, and then not hearing a lot of information about the birth parents, often makes adopted children feel devalued and affects their self-esteem. Sometimes they feel as though their status in society is ambiguous.

The full emotional impact of that loss comes to children, usually between the ages of 7 and 12, when they are capable of understanding more about the concept of being adopted. It happens because they live more in the world outside of their families and are more tuned in to the world inside their heads. While this is a giant step toward self-reliance, it leaves parents in a quandary about when and how much adoption information to share, and uncertain about whether their child is wanting or dreading to hear it. It is especially difficult at this time to decide what to do or say to children who do not inquire about their birth parents.

Although it may feel awkward, it sometimes helps to think back to your child's life and death questions during the preschool years and introduce the subject yourself. You might preface your conversation with what you would say to an adult. For example, "I just want you to know that if you want to talk about your adoption, I'd be glad to" or "You haven't asked much about it lately, and I thought, now that you're older, you might be thinking about it in a more grownup way." Such an introduction gets across to children that you are interested in talking about the subject and that you are aware of their getting older and more sophisticated in their thinking. In any case, your willingness to "connect" with your children about their adoptions and not to deny the difference between being adopted and being born into a family can help them grieve this important loss.

You can help your children work through their loss if you can be nondefensive about their adoption as well as sensitive to how much they want or need to talk about it at a given time. Do not, however, place undue emphasis on the adoption, as this is likely to make children feel painfully self-conscious about it. But if facts and feelings about adoption are not discussed at all, children's fantasies about their backgrounds may be acted out unconsciously, thus carrying out their unconscious self-identification as an unworthy person.

Once they have understood the biological facts of life, and something about the social and cultural aspects of family life in their community, children of elementary school age begin to imagine things about their birth parents. One 7-year-old asked if her birth mother looked like their 15-year-old neighbor. An 8-year-old boy asked if his birth father could have been a friend of the family. A 9-year-old reported to her mother that she was looking in the shopping malls for a woman who had a nose like hers.

Although preschoolers want to hear how they were adopted and entered their homes, older children discover the reality that their birth mother relinquished them for adoption and ask why. Just as preschoolers try to make sense of reproduction by developing their own theories and mixing them with what their parents told them, older children try to reconcile their own theories with the available facts. What they learn produces a gamut of emotions ranging from incredulity to sadness, disappointment, anger, and guilt. Children may not

express these feelings, but they have to be acknowledged, lived with, and digested before they develop a new understanding of adoption and themselves.

Some researchers think that children must grieve for the loss of the birth parents much in the same way that infertile couples grieve for the loss of a biological baby. Some children feel that they were given up because there was something wrong with them or because they were bad. Some become fearful that they will hurt their adoptive parents' feelings or make them angry if they want to find out more about their birth parents. Where preschoolers would often be quite open about expressing these feelings, older children have a greater sense of privacy and are not sure that their parents can tolerate their questions or feelings. Older children may, therefore, keep much more to themselves.

A common situation in children of this age, which you may recall from your own elementary school days, is imagining that they had been adopted or kidnapped from another set of parents who were usually better in every way than their own. These parents might have been rich, or even royalty, and they did not make you take vitamins, eat spinach, go to bed at 9 p.m., or refuse to let you watch MTV. When life at home was unpleasant, we could daydream about this "better" family to soothe our angry or sad feelings.

These fantasies provide an outlet for times when children are infuriated or disappointed by their parents, and when they do not know how to cope with their anger toward them. Usually, as a child recognizes that love and hate, anger and affection, can be felt toward people without ruining the relationship completely (i.e., the preschooler's—"I won't be your best friend any more" changes to the 8-year-old's, "I'm so mad at Jenny that I won't sit near her at music today"), these thoughts of another family fade. Then your children can continue to identify with your characteristics, activities, and values.

The fantasy world of the adopted child is complicated by the existence of the birth parents, and is influenced by whatever information is available about them. Sometimes the facts make it more difficult for children to idealize their birth parents or put pressure on them to "choose" to "be just like" or "totally unlike" one or the other set of parents.

Psychological Identification

If your child has had several homes before yours, there is often a brief honeymoon period where s/he will try to be perfect to ensure your love. But soon the sense of loss, hurt, and anger surfaces. Your child may, consciously or not, break your rules, steal, lie, or act out physically or sexually. The child's message is "I'm going to leave here anyway, so I'd better make sure I don't get too close" or "Families don't last, and I'm angry about that."

You will need to help your children build trust and gain confidence that you will not abandon them. Part of that job is helping your children to develop the psychological identification that distinguishes them as individuals.

What is this identification process that is so critical to success and confidence in later life? It takes us back to the initial attachment process, when it is important for babies to make an emotional connection that shape their personalities and make them someone who is a unique individual as well as a member of a particular family.

During the elementary school-age years, children's identity comes from a combination of their genetic heritage, their experience with their families, and what happens to them as they try to find their place in the wider world. They want to be like their peers and their families.

The creation of a family tree, a common elementary school assignment which asks children to construct a portrait of their geographical, ethnic, historical, and birth connections, offers an opportunity and a challenge to the adoptive family. This assignment will bring to the surface knowledge and ignorance about your child's background and legitimize discussion of family facts and secrets.

If there has been openness about adoption and a sensitivity to not insisting on discussing adoption when a child is not receptive, parents will be able to discover from their child what can and cannot be included in the family tree assignment. A 10-year-old, after moving to a new school, said she would like to be the one to decide whether to tell new classmates that she was adopted, because now she was the boss of that information. Is it farfetched to think that a 10-year-old is old enough to be "boss" of her adoptive information? At this age, the child's self-esteem will flourish if she can feel her parents trust her as she learns and masters new facts about herself and the world.

Sometimes during the elementary school years, before or after the family tree experience, children learn about heredity, genes, and "blood relationships." At this time, the adopted child realizes at the highest cognitive and emotional level so far, the differences between biological and adoptive relationships. Reactions to this information are probably as varied as the children and include feelings of relief, a sense of enlightenment, heightened interest in learning more about birth parents, denial of any interest, or feelings of loss and grief.

Remember that all adopted children have feelings about their adoption, and that many times in their development they will struggle with why their birth parents made an adoption plan for them. You can help your children by letting them know that they are not alone in these feelings and that it is all right with you if they express them and try to get explanations for what puzzles or troubles them. The more open family discussions have been from the beginning of verbal communication, the more likely it is that communication will continue no matter how intense or complex the subject becomes.

You may also want to remind yourself and your child that learning about adoption, like learning about life, is an ongoing adventure that you want to share with your child as much as you can, but that you understand that some of this learning has to be pursued alone as well. At this point, your child is old enough to choose the pace at which s/he wants to consider these new ideas. However, you as parents, are still in a position to guide, instruct, and set limits. A 9-year-old who wants, suddenly, to look for her birth mother the day after a fight over bedtime can be told that Mom feels she has to do some maturing before she is ready for that step.

Since these are the years when youngsters appear to seriously confront the "sad side" of relinquishment and adoption, opportunities to meet with and talk to other adoptees their age, as well as with adolescent and adult adoptees, are beneficial. It helps children see a bit into their own futures.

Adolescence

Foreign adoptees can benefit from cross-cultural experiences appropriate to elementary school-aged children. Some children are thrilled to attend an adoption family camp or summer program. Others prefer to process their feelings within their adoptive families or even alone. The more sensitive to your child's feelings you can be, and the more experience you and your child have in discussing feelings together, the more consoling and comforting you can be to each other. You will then survive and eventually triumph over this period of self-discovery and grieving.

No sooner do your children begin to understand the wonders of biology than their own bodies begin the surge of growth toward puberty and the awesome stage of adolescence. Adolescence, for all its newness—it was not considered a distinct stage of life until after the first World War—has quickly acquired a reputation as a difficult and trying period for children and parents. Physical growth changes the person from a child to an adult, in preparation for procreation, but mental and emotional development may take years to catch up with the body. Adolescents' behavior is in transition and not fixed; their feelings about the world and their place in it are tentative and changeable, like a chameleon's.

The adolescent's primary task is to establish a secure sense of identity; the process is arduous, time-consuming, and intense. Establishing a stable identity includes being able to live and work on one's own, to maintain a comfortable position in one's family, and to become a contributing citizen in one's community.

It is the nature of all adolescents, adopted or not, to question everything and everyone. It is also in their parents' nature to worry about their children's futures and their own survival in this period. Almost everyone agrees that, although often extremely difficult, open communication can smooth the process.

Adolescence is a time of trying on and choosing in all aspects of life. Two major aspects of adult identity formation will be choice of work and choice of a partner to love. Teenagers look for and imitate role models. They critically examine their family members (as they did in elementary school), peers, teachers, and all the other heroes and anti-heroes the culture offers from rock musicians and movie stars, to ball players and politicians, to grandparents and peers' older brothers and sisters. They idolize and devalue people, ideas, and religious concepts. They often bond tightly with peers in small groups that are intolerant of all outsiders. They vacillate between criticism of others and harsh self-criticism. They are sometimes supremely self-confident and often in the depths of despair about their abilities and future success.

If normal adolescence involves a crisis in identity, it stands to reason that adopted teenagers will face additional complications because of what some have called "genealogical bewilderment" (Sants). The fact that the adoptee has two sets of parents raises more complicated questions about ancestral history now that intellectual development has assumed adult proportions. The search for possible identification figures may cause the adolescent to fantasize more about birth parents, become interested in specific facts about birth relatives, or wish to search for or meet them.

Although all adopted adolescents have to struggle to integrate their fantasies and future goals with their actual potential and realities, foreign, biracial, and other cross-cultural

adoptees (as well as teenagers with physical or emotional disabilities) have additional challenges. They may suffer more from what Erik Erikson calls "identity diffusion," i.e., feelings of aimlessness, fragmentation, or alienation. They may appear outwardly more angry at adoptive parents, and more critical of what their parents did or did not do to help them adjust to their adoptive status. They may withdraw more into themselves, or conversely feel they need to "set off to see the world" in hopes of finding their true identity.

Adolescents often express their reactions to loss by rebelling against parental standards. Knowing that they have a different origin contributes to their need to define themselves autonomously. According to Dr. Nickman, "An adopted son or daughter cannot be expected to be a conformist. If he is, he may be inhibiting an important part of himself for the sake of basic security or out of a sense of guilt or responsibility to his adopters."

It probably helps a child to be told by adoptive parents that they understand their son or daughter's need to take control of his or her own life, and that they stand ready to assist in any way that they can, including giving their blessing to a child who needs to "to go it alone" for a while. Of course, a youngster under 17 years of age might be asked to wait until s/he could realistically manage in whatever environment would be encountered.

Searching for Birth Parents

Current adoption practice has mixed opinions about whether, when, how, and with whose help, adoptees should look for more information about or try to initiate a reunion with birth parents. Information on this process is available through the Clearinghouse. Adoptive parents tend to think about their children's wish to search when they first adopt, and again when confronted with their angry toddlers. The topic resurfaces in adolescence, either raised directly by the child, or when rebellious, defiant behavior such as threats to run away, makes parents wonder if their child is wanting or needing to contact a birth parent. It takes a parent with sturdy self-esteem and more confidence than most of us have to withstand the stony silences and stormy confrontations with teenagers in turmoil.

Parents are often tempted to escape perhaps by abandoning their teenagers who are having toddler-like tantrums, but you and your family will benefit more if you remain calm, stand up for the values you have taught, and continue communication efforts. For some adolescents, searching can be useful, while for many, the urgent activities and decisions of daily life are so pressing that they feel uninterested in or unable to confront such a heavy emotional undertaking. Waiting till they have reached adulthood when their lives will be more settled may be better for the latter group.

Anger, Sex, and Aggression – Again!

Adopted adolescents have the same trouble searching for a comfortable identity as do non-adoptees. Problems involving aggression, sexual activities and pregnancy, delinquency and substance abuse, social isolation and depression are the most common ones faced by teenagers and their families. Although there appear to be more adoptees percentage-wise in adolescent psychiatric treatment programs than nonadoptees, the majority of these patients tend to be the multiply placed children whose problems stem from a variety of sources, often the least of which is their adoption.

Although sexual identity is an issue for all adolescents, adopted girls have the additional burden of conflicting views of motherhood and sexuality. On one hand there is their perhaps infertile adoptive mother and, on the other, the fertility of their birth mother who did get pregnant and chose not to keep her baby, or possibly had her child taken away from her.

No matter how open communication has been, it is often next to impossible for adolescents to discuss their feelings about sex with their parents. Additionally, the adopted girl, unless she has close friends who are adopted as well, would have difficulty finding an ear understanding and sophisticated enough for this discussion. This may be a time to encourage meeting with other adopted teenagers, either through an organized group or informally, to provide your child with support for some of these sticky issues. Looking for solutions outside of the family is also appropriate for an adolescent for whom one major developmental task is to learn to separate and live independently.

As adolescents move toward greater autonomy, a parent's most difficult task is to create a delicate balance of "to love and let go." Although there are many times when you could encourage your toddler—"me do it myself"—or elementary school-aged child to "try things alone" or learn a new skill, an adolescent needs to assert his/her independence by establishing differences from you, and real distance. The adolescent needs to take his or her independence or autonomy, rather than be given it.

This often means a period of estrangement, lessened communication, or outright strife. You may want to listen and talk to your friends who have weathered adolescence with their biological children to note the similarities, and as you have tried to do all along, to understand the differences, acknowledge them, and try to work on them with your child.

No matter how much you wanted to be parents, there are many times during the years of child rearing when you might ask, sometimes in humor, and sometimes in sadness, "Why did I ever sign up for this job?" Sometimes you can only reply feebly, "Well, it sure makes life interesting." But finally, you must have faith that the bonding that occurred in the early years between you and your child, the trust that has built as s/he grew up, and the communication that you have established, will come full circle and provide rich and rewarding relationships for you and your adult children.

When You Need Help

In the last 15 years increasing interest and research in child development and parenting has given adoption more attention. Until recently, once a child was placed for adoption by an agency, little else was offered about general child development or rearing; and if the adoption was a private one, there were no professional helpers. Adoptive parents tried to educate themselves through Dr. Benjamin Spock's 1945 edition of *Baby and Child Care* which offers helpful but brief guidance about adoption.

Now, in addition to the Clearinghouse, located in Washington, D.C., and the National Adoption Center (NAC) located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, there are State and local organizations and programs sponsored by adoption agencies that provide parenting education and other "postadoption" services. Workshops, conferences, and seminars keep parents current with knowledge in the field. There are also support and self-help groups that offer educational and social activities.

The goals of these services are to support and maintain healthy family life, to prevent problems through education, and to make counseling and mental health services available as soon as problems appear. For a list of these agencies, please contact the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse at (703) 352-3488 or 1 (888) 251-0075 or the National Adoption Center at 1 (800) TO-ADOPT or (215) 735- 9988 in Pennsylvania.

How Do You Know You Need Help?

Usually a parent notices that something is wrong, either in the family atmosphere or in a family member. If you have educated yourself about normal child behavior at different ages, chances are you will find yourself questioning behavior in your child that seems out of the ordinary. Sometimes, a teacher, relative, or friend asks if you have noticed a problem. Perhaps your child seems unduly sad or anxious, unable to concentrate, is angry or flies off the handle for no obvious reason. You may see behavior that is unusual or not characteristic of your child; sometimes it is the increasing degree of a certain behavior that is troubling.

Perhaps there has been an upsetting event or change, such as a move or loss of job for you or your spouse. Children react to any parental problems that threaten their security. Elementary school-aged children tend to have problems around school; often that is the setting where problems are noticed. Adolescents tend to have identity concerns and authority struggles with their parents or other adults.

All of these possibilities can occur in any family. The adoptive family has the added concern of trying to decide whether or not it is an adoption issue that is troubling the child. If the child is over 6 years of age, it is usually impossible to distinguish adoption from other psychological, social, and educational issues. Treatment must evaluate the child and family and should consider his or her stage of development and the nature of the child's relationship with you (and sometimes with his or her birth parents).

Finding Help

Before seeking professional counseling, use your parenting skills to discover if you can help your child yourself by listening, talking, or making changes in the environment. If you feel your child cannot communicate with you or that your relationship might be part of the problem, it is wise to seek outside assistance.

Because it is so difficult to disentangle adoptive issues from those of normal development, especially once the child has reached elementary school-age, the adoptive family can benefit from professional helpers who have experience working with adoptive families. There are many varieties of therapy, and advantages and disadvantages to each. Sometimes the whole family needs to be involved in therapy. Sometimes your adopted child needs to deal with problems alone.

Ask your agency social worker, a friend with adopted children, your pediatrician, a representative from an adoptive parent support group, your local mental health center, or your local family service agency for recommendations of appropriate helping professionals. You can also contact the Clearinghouse or NAC for referrals.

This article was written for the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse by Elaine Frank, M.S.W. and edited by Gloria Hochman in 1990.

Bibliography

Books for Parents and Professionals

Brodzinsky, D. and Schechter, M., eds., *The Psychology of Adoption*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Dorman, M. and Klein D., *How to Stay Two When Baby Makes Three*. (New York: Ballentine Books, 1985).

Erikson, E.H., *Childhood and Society*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1986).

Fahlberg, V., "Attachment and Separation" from the series, *Putting the Pieces Together*. (Southfield, MI: Spaulding for Children, 1990).

Fraiberg, S.H., *Magic Years: Understanding and Handling the Problems of Early Childhood*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984).

Hoopes, J.L. and Stein, L.M., *Identity Formation in the Adopted Adolescent, The Delaware Valley Study*. (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1985).

Jewett, C.L., *Adopting The Older Child*. (Boston, MA: Harvard Common Press, 1978).

Kirk, D.H., *Shared Fate*. (New York: Free Press, 1964).

Melina, L.R., *Raising Adopted Children: A Manual for Adoptive Parents*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

Parens, H., *Aggression In Our Children: Coping With It Constructively*. (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1987).

Schaeffer, J., and Lindstrom, C., *How To Raise An Adopted Child*. (New York: Copestone Press, 1989).

Smith, J. and Miroff, F., *You're Our Child: The Adoption Experience*. (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1987).

Winkler, R.C., Brown, D.W., Von Keppel, M., and Blanchard, A., *Clinical Practice in Adoption*. (New York: Pergamon Press, Inc., 1988).

Articles and Research Reports

Aust, P.H., "Using the Life Story Book in Treatment of Children in Placement." *Child Welfare*, vol. LX no. 8, (September-October 1987) 535-560.

Brodzinsky, D.M., "Adjustment to Adoption: A Psychosocial Perspective" in *Clinical Psychology Review*. Pergamon Journals Ltd., vol. 7 (1987) 25-37.

- Cordell, A.S., Nathan, C., and Krymon, V., "Group Counseling for Children Adopted at Older Ages." *Child Welfare*, vol. LXIV no. 2, (March-April 1985) 113-124.
- Kopp, C.B. "Risk Factors in Development" in *Infancy and Developmental Psychology*, 4th edition. New York, John Wiley and Sons, (1983) 1081-1088.
- Kraft, A.D., Palumbo, J., Mitchell D.L., Woods, P.K., Schmidt, A.W., and Tucker, N.G., "Some Theoretical Considerations on Confidential Adoptions: Part III: The Adopted Child" in *Child and Adolescence Social Work Journal*, vol. 2, (1985) 139-153.
- Lindholm, B.W. and Touliatos, J. "Psychological Adjustment of Adopted and Nonadopted Children." *Psychological Reports*, vol. 46, (1980) 307-310.
- Nickman, S.L. "Losses in Adoption: The Need for Dialogue." *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 40, (1985) 365-397.
- Sants, H.J. "Genealogical Bewilderment in Children With Substitute Parents." *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, vol. 37, (1964) 133-141.
- Schechter, M.D., Carlson, P.V., Simmons, J.Q., III, and Work, H.H., "Emotional Problems in the Adoptee." *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 10, (1964) 109-118.
- Wieder, H. "On Being Told of Adoption." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, (1977) 1-22.