

## ADOPTION & ADOLESCENCE

Adoption can add to the complexity of parenting adolescents. Parents often worry about their children while they are going through the turmoil of adolescence. You are likely to have additional concerns as the parent of an adopted adolescent. Will your teen be confused about their identity? Will a sense of abandonment and rejection replace feelings of security and comfort? Will inner turmoil from the past affect your teen's behavior? Adopted teens may need extra support in dealing with several issues.

### IDENTITY FORMATION

An adolescent's primary task is to establish a secure sense of identity and it is the nature of all adolescents, adopted or not, to question everything and everyone. If normal adolescence involves identity issues, it stands to reason that adopted teenagers will face additional complications because of what some have called "genealogical bewilderment". The fact that an adopted teen has two sets of parents raises more complicated questions about ancestral history, specifically now that the intellectual development of teens has assumed adult proportions.

Some common identity concerns of adopted adolescents may include:

- Wondering where they got their particular characteristics
- Asking questions that may not be able to be answered such as: Where do I get my artistic talent? Was everyone in my family short/tall? What is my ethnic background? Do I have brothers and sisters?
- Teens feeling anger at adoptive parents
- Teens feeling the need to withdraw or stray far from home to find his true identity
- Difficulty moving ahead without knowing about the past

- Questions about birth-family health history

## FEELINGS OF NOT BELONGING

During adolescence, adopted teens can become more aware of how they are different from their families and their non-adopted friends.

Common concerns of feeling different may include:

- Teens being sensitive about not looking like parents, siblings, or other relatives
- Teens feeling alienated from the family because of differences
- For adolescents who have a different race or ethnic background from the adoptive parents, struggling to integrate cultural background into self-concept
- Doubting their authenticity as being a “real” family member

## NEEDING TO CONNECT WITH THE PAST

It is natural as adopted teens mature, for them to think more about how their lives would have been different if they had not been adopted or if another family had adopted them.

Common concerns about connecting with the past may include:

- Teens wondering who they would have become under different circumstances
- Teens having an increased need to try on different personalities
- Teens wanting more information about their biological families

A note on curiosity about birth families and searching: Decision-making about searching for birth parents is part of the normative developmental process for adopted adolescents and young adults. This does not mean that every adoptee will search, but it does mean

that they will likely need to consider the decision to search as part of the process of their development. Curiosity about birthparents and a strong desire to meet them does not negate adolescents' positive views about their adoptive family.

## ADOPTED AT AN OLDER AGE

Issues for teens adopted at an older age are even more complex, because they may have endured abuse or neglect, lived in several foster homes, or moved from relative to relative before finding a permanent family.

Common issues in this scenario often include:

- An increased sense of loss and rejection
- Low self-esteem
- Severe emotional and behavioral difficulties at home and school
- Intense memories of times before joining the adoptive family

## WHEN SHOULD PARENTS BE CONCERNED?

Adopted adolescents and teens do better when their parents understand their curiosity about their genetic history and allow them to express their grief, anger, and fear, etc.

The following behaviors may be indicators that a teen is struggling with adoption issues:

- Competition and comments about being treated unfairly compared to the family's birth children
- Exhibiting new problems in school, such as trouble paying attention or falling grades
- A sudden preoccupation with the unknown, specifically death/suicide
- Having problems with peers
- Completely shutting down emotionally and refusing to share feelings

## TREATMENT & STRATEGIES

It is imperative for parents to seek professional help if they notice any of the following behaviors in their adoptive adolescents or teens:

- Use of alcohol or drug abuse
- Drastic drops in grades or sharp increases in cutting school
- Extreme withdrawal from family and friends
- The use or threat of violence
- Risk-taking
- Suicide threats or attempts

If your family has a long-standing history of openness, honesty, and has shown comfort with adoption, chances are good that you'll be able to help your teen work through adolescence. If openness has not been your family style, or if you see alarming behaviors, you can start by seeking professional help and guidance.

You can also:

1. Educate yourself through books or workshops run by agencies with post-adoption services.
2. Join an adoptive parent support group. Consider a support group for your adopted teen.
3. Start talking openly about adoption issues when your child is young. If you have not been comfortable doing that, it may be especially difficult by the time your child is a teen. However, it is never too late.
4. Consider seeing a therapist who specializes in adoptive families. In addition, several out-door and wilderness therapy programs have been shown to remediate a smoother transition or help in recovery.

Mental health experts are confident that adopted teens can confront and resolve their developmental issues just as their non-adopted peers do. With parental support and

understanding, and a team of professionals when necessary, adopted teens can forge strong family bonds and continue to nurture their family relationships.

## ADOPTION / ATTACHMENT ISSUES

### ADOPTION

Parenting may be the world's most difficult job, and sometimes it can feel that even all the love in the world seems not enough to raise healthy, well-adjusted children. In the case of adoption, this tough job can be even more difficult for a variety of reasons that range from emotional to legal, making it important to recognize that adoption is not the same as growing up with one's biological parents. Adoption encompasses all involved – the child as well as birth parents and adoptive parents, all of whom suffer from issues of loss, rejection, guilt/ shame, grief, identity, intimacy & relationships, and control (mastery)/ gains in their own ways.

The search for identity begins in adolescence and is a life life-long journey. For adopted children, this complex and confusing time may be more problematic as parts of their identity – like family ties to biological parents and relatives – are not there, leading to feelings of abandonment even if adoptive parents have provided a loving home. Abandonment issues could become attachment issues later in life – even in cases when adoption took place at birth, so that as young adults, adoptees have relationship difficulties.

### ATTACHMENT ISSUES

Attachment is described as the mutual bond between an infant and its parent (or primary caregiver). Bonding with a child is not always simple, immediate, or easy, but rather it is a process that builds over time that is influenced by several factors including people's characteristics, situations, and even health. Some children may exhibit attachment disorder, in which they have difficulty forming lasting relationships, don't

have the ability to be genuinely affectionate with others, and have very deep trust issues.

Attachment issues arise from a variety of causes, many of which are negative experiences that occur in the first three years of life such as abuse or neglect. While adoption is a beautiful thing, separation from birth parents can be a traumatic experience whether the adopted child is aware of it or not and which may have lasting effects. Abandonment and attachment issues can emerge later in life; adoptees who are now young adults may show signs of hesitance towards creating relationships and pull away from being close to others so as to not experience further loss.

## SEEKING HELP

Asking questions about identity and ancestry, wanting to connect with their past, or wondering about other adoptive scenarios is common for adolescents and young adults who've been adopted. They may or may not choose to seek out information, but it is a decision that is part of the adoptee's development process.

Parents should become concerned if these normal questions and actions change. Whether an adolescent or young adult, changes in mood and attitude, experimenting with drugs, drastic drop in work performance, withdrawal from family and friends could signal a child is struggling with issues arising from his/her adoption.

Though failing to form attachment isn't exclusive to adoptive situations, it also is not necessarily a given; however, the complexity of adoption means that adopted children may have more concerns. Treatment for adoption issues need to take into account this complexity.

Parents should have an open line of communications and talk with their child about the impact of adoption. Ask your young adult about their personal relationships – or lack thereof, and whether they're experiencing anxieties about abandonment and struggling to connect with others personally or professionally. Today parents have access to a wealth of information about adoption from books to online resources or from adoption support groups for children and parents.

Parents or young adult adoptees may also seek out help from therapists who specialize in adoption issues or a therapeutic program such as wilderness therapy, especially ones emphasizing whole-person wellness. Parents should keep in mind that many factors play into parent-child relationships, but with understanding and support, adoption and attachment issues can be overcome over time, and young adults can learn to quell their anxieties, develop trust, and build relationships for happy and healthy lives.