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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 3

ADOLESCENTS AND ADOPTION

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C AND DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT

WHO AM I?

Many parents dread the time when their children become adolescents because it is typically associated with turbulence – negativity, rebellion, and change. The added pressure of adoption issues combined with adolescence may lead adoptive parents to experience even greater trepidation. Understanding the interplay between adolescent issues and adoption issues is therefore critically important for adoptive parents.

Beginning in the preteen years and continuing on into adolescence, youngsters face the daunting task of figuring out their own identity. They begin to take a more critical look at their parents, deciding how they are alike and different from them. They contemplate the ways in which they may want to be alike or different from them. The task of forming an identity helps teens begin the process of separating from their parents, developing independence and preparing for adulthood. In order to form unique identities, and to separate from their parents, teens may choose vastly different options about how to dress and behave. They are greatly influenced by their peers. All of this is normal and to be expected.

WHO AM I LIKE?

Adolescence can be especially challenging for those who were adopted. During this key developmental stage, adoptees begin to connect adoption to their sense of identity. Not only do they need to consolidate their identity – see how they are alike and different from the parents who raised them – they also must consider how the genetic package they inherited from their birth parents contributes to their concept of self.

Integrating two sets of parents can be a bewildering task – particularly for those who have little or no information about their birth parents. Imagine trying to define who you are without having the basic information about where you came from. That is why it is critical for adoptive parents to provide teens with all of the information they have and – in the process – bring to light reality vs. fantasy and honesty vs. secrecy. In essence, adolescence is the life stage during which parents must provide their teens with any “missing pieces of the puzzle.”

While they work to form their identities, adolescent adoptees often think about their birthparents and what they are like (or fantasized to be like), especially with regard to values, behaviors, decision-making, etc. When the birth parents’ known (or perceived) values or lifestyles are very different from the adoptive parents, adoptees may choose to identify with their birth parents – at least for a while. Factors such as knowing (or not knowing) their birth parents and having a lot (or little) information about them will have a great impact at this stage. They may try to over-identify with a known (or perceived) characteristic or trait their birth parent possesses.

Adolescents who were adopted into families of a different race, culture, or heritage have additional challenges to face when it comes to identity formation. Because teens are highly conscious of the physical differences between themselves and their families, they struggle to integrate ethnicity and culture with the picture they have always had of themselves. While all teens may resist parental authority and alternate between periods of distance and neediness, the adopted teen may become more extreme in this behavior because of these additional complexities.

THE ROLE OF SEXUALITY

Beginning in puberty, issues related to sexuality become prominent for all adolescents. They are faced with many choices with regard to their sexual behavior. Adopted children who were placed voluntarily as a result of an unplanned pregnancy will likely have additional issues to consider because of the obvious questions that arise about the birth parents’ sexual behavior. Will they identify with their birth parents – who they may think were sexually irresponsible or promiscuous? Or will they identify with their adoptive parents – whose possible infertility suggests asexuality? Research indicates that adolescents who were adopted are at higher risk for teen pregnancy. In situations where teens have little information about their birth parents, the need to experience an unplanned pregnancy may help to fill in the many unknowns, such as how their birth mother felt during pregnancy, and how she came to place her child for adoption.



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CHALLENGES

As teen's knowledge about adoption becomes more sophisticated and complex, his or her feelings may manifest themselves as anger. Feeling different is a challenge for teens, but is especially difficult for those who want desperately to fit in with their peers. On top of it all, teens who were adopted often struggle with anger over the fact that important life decisions—decisions in which they had absolutely no say or control – were made on their behalf.

Some adolescents will verbalize their anger. Others will demonstrate it through their behavior. Still others will internalize it all, and be more prone to moodiness and depression – something all teens may experience to a greater or lesser extent. The adopted adolescent may be more prone to act out his depression through indirect, but negative behavior including substance abuse, loss of interest in school, etc. Additionally, the adopted adolescent may be more prone to overreact to other losses experienced during this time, such as the end of a friendship or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend. Adopted adolescents may experience more difficulty leaving home because the sense of loss or even rejection can activate the sense of loss/rejection inherent in adoption. The adopted teen may not be at all aware that this overreaction to loss is related to the losses experienced in adoption.

Teens in open adoption may certainly also struggle with identity issues—again, especially if there are vast differences between their birth and adoptive families—racial, etc. In their desire to feel independent of the family imposing rules and expectations, they may have a great need for belonging with their birth family. Both families may struggle to set appropriate limits and boundaries.

COMMON FEELINGS

- 1) Confusion over who they are, growing sense of self;
- 2) Anger, especially over feeling a loss of control. May be toward birth parents, but is often directed at adoptive parents;
- 3) Oversensitivity to losses, fear of further rejection;
- 4) Trepidation about the future, particularly when it comes to leaving home for work or college; feeling uncertain that their family will remain their family forever;
- 5) Fears of intimacy related to feelings of abandonment and rejection;
- 6) Desire to search for /meet birth parents (either for information and/or to understand the reasons for the adoption).

With regard to meeting birth parents, it is important to take the teen's interest seriously and explore his motivation and need. There is no more "wait until you are 18." This can be scary as parents often believe their child is "not ready." In fact, it may be the parent who is not be ready. However, parents need to determine if their teen is. Professional assistance is advised to explore your teen's request, readiness, expectations and preparation for reunion if that is going to occur. Teens are turning to social media to find birth family, especially if they believe their parents are not on board with their interest. Before that happens, we encourage parents to ask their teens not to leave them out of such an important life event. Parents should clearly give their teens the message even before adolescence that parents will assist them with search and reunion to the best of their ability when their child tells them they are interested.



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RESOURCES

Research shows that teens consider their parents to be the most important relationship in their lives. Adoptive parents need resources and support during this especially challenging stage in order to learn how to “let go” and connect with their teens simultaneously. Adoptive parent groups that focus on the teen years can be especially helpful. You can also learn more about this topic in the following books: [*Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*](#) by Debbie Riley, M.S. and David Meeks, MD; *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter and Robin Henig; *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew* by Sherrie Eldridge; *The Family of Adoption* by Joyce Maguire Pavao.

Teens are often interested in exploring the subject of adoption independently. Look for teen groups that focus on adoption, as well as community/cultural opportunities to meet other adoptees and adults who were adopted.