

ADOPTING OLDER CHILDREN

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There are many reasons why prospective parents choose to adopt children who are older (defined as typically three and up.) Marla, 47 mother of two adopted children, ages 8 and 10 says, “Everyone wants babies...We felt that older children are sometimes forgotten. They need good homes, too!” For others, caring for infants and young children is either not that appealing or doesn’t feel practical. “Doug, father of 9 year old Anthony says, “My wife and I work full-time and have no family in the area to help out. We felt that an older child would fit more easily into our lives.”

Whatever the motivation, the decision to adopt older children must come after careful consideration (KNOW THYSELF!) and education as to both the many rewards as well as the challenges involved. Older children come with histories – whether having lived in foster care, orphanages, or with birth family. Their pre-adoptive experiences may leave them with unresolved emotional issues. Such issues include significant loss – of birth family, possibly including siblings, previous caregivers, and sometimes – culture, religion, etc. In addition, some children may have experienced trauma – physical, emotional, sexual abuse; neglect, witnessing violence, substance abuse, parental psychiatric disturbance, etc.

All adopted children need help to grieve the losses they have experienced. Placed in permanent families where they experience their new parents’ commitment and loving support, they are often able to address their issues. Empathetic listening, compassion, and patience from their parents can help them to heal and to further develop the resiliency they already have that enabled them to survive difficult life experiences.

PREPARATION FOR ADOPTION

Parenting older children is therefore a very special and important job. Key to the success of older adoptive placements is preparation, according to Madeleine Krebs, former Clinical Director at CASE. She notes, “Both the parents’ and the child’s expectations need to be carefully explored and adjusted for what the realities are likely to be. For example, a child coming from an orphanage may never have lived in a family and therefore may have no idea as to how a family functions. Having experienced multiple caregivers, he may have no model for being able to understand what a “Mom or Dad” is. On a practical level, for example, he may never have ridden in a car with a seatbelt, or been to a grocery store. And of course, he is experiencing these cultural differences in a foreign language.”

Ms. Krebs notes that children may be very excited, and/or scared about the new changes, and have difficulty adjusting to parental expectations. They may be confused by how the reality differs from their fantasies of what life would be like after adoption. Ms. Krebs describes how one seven year old girl moving into a family with older siblings was terrified of them because in her birth family, the older children were often in charge of the younger ones and were quite hurtful to them. The parents' knowledge of their daughter's experience enabled them to prepare the older siblings to adjust the ways they interacted with their new sister until she grew comfortable with them. This meant a great deal to the girl and enabled her to learn that the roles of older children – siblings – in her family included that of protection of younger siblings, helping her to feel safe.

An older child who has experienced multiple foster care placements will have multiple models of what parents are like and unfortunately, some of their experiences may not have been positive ones. They too, may have a mix of feelings of excitement, fear and confusion. Ms. Krebs says, "One little eight year old boy with a history of physical abuse, adopted by a single mother, would hang his head and become mute whenever he was upset, and then later get into trouble with aggressive behavior toward peers at school. It was likely that his birth parents told him to keep quiet and that his silence kept him from further abuse." With therapeutic support from his therapist and loving encouragement from his mother, he learned how to verbalize his feelings. He eventually became more confident in expressing his feelings in new and positive ways.

Children involved in concurrent planning, where the plan may have been reunification with the birth family, are likely to be quite confused about this plan and show signs of anxiety that may be difficult to understand. Again, parents need to take into account the earlier chapters of their older child's life experiences for clues to make sense of present day behavior or emotions.

HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST

Ms. Krebs notes that in light of this understanding, parents need to be very patient with themselves and with the children. Older children will go through many changes as they learn how to develop reciprocal relationships with their new family members. "It just takes time," she says. "It helps tremendously if parents have a good understanding of the child's pre-placement history and are prepared to listen to their child's stories from the past. They must also be prepared to do a lot of teaching about what is expected in their family – Parents must continually state, 'In our family, we don't do _____. This is what WE do. One ten year old boy stated that in previous placements, everyone ate dinner in their own rooms. He had to adjust to the fact that in his adoptive family, family members were expected to eat dinner together. Of course, it is equally important that parents be open to incorporating some of the child's wishes (such as traditions and rituals) into family life."

PARENT ADJUSTMENT

One of the most difficult aspects of parenting older children is the patience required for the time it may take for a mutually satisfying attachment to occur. In her book, *Attaching in Adoption*, Deborah Gray notes that it can take up to one to two years for the love to come. Many children who have been traumatized may be quite resistant to love for fear of being hurt and rejected. For adopting couples, for some --remembering how long it took for their courtship to lead to a committed relationship may help them to have more realistic expectations of themselves and their child.

Parents often report feeling guilty when there are times when they have negative feelings about their children. Others feel lonely when family or friends do not understand how hard it can be sometimes. Support is critical for parents to know that what they are experiencing is normal, and important for helping them to persevere.

INCORPORATING A NEW DEFINITION OF “FAMILY”

Another significant aspect of adjustment for adoptive families is when there is going to be continued contact with birth family members, post-adoption. Very often, adoptive parents do not get enough education, preparation and ongoing support to understand the changes that have occurred in adoption practice. Many adopters still believe that traditional closed adoption is the norm and how it is ‘supposed to be.’ Most people do not know that, historically, adoption in cultures both here and abroad was informal and open. Adoption practice, or “closed adoption” began in the 1930’s to protect against the shame and stigma of birth outside of marriage. It was not based on any research/knowledge of the impact of closed or open adoption on adopted children. In domestic adoption today, most adoptions have some degree of “openness.”(Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, “Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birth Parents in the Adoption Process” by Susan Smith, Nov. 2006)

It is therefore not surprising that there is often a knee-jerk reaction by some adoptive parents to deny the significance of birth parents. They don’t want to compete for “realness –for authenticity.” Adoptive parents learn that they must “claim” their children – and develop a sense of “entitlement” – meaning they must ensure their right to parent their child and to fully embrace their parenting role, and create for their child a secure sense of belonging to the family. This is a process that takes time, as does attachment. Again, not surprisingly, many adoptive parents do not know how to incorporate the significance of birth parents as they work to master these parenting tasks. Even the most secure adoptive parents can fear that continued relationship with birth family will interfere with the child’s ability to attach to them. Some adoptive

parents just want to protect their children from painful feelings that might arise around birth parents – sadness, loss, hurt, confusion, being different, etc. And finally, adoptive parents may have fears about birth parents when they are so very different from the adoptive parents in terms of race, socioeconomic status, religion, values, etc.

Parents of children who were placed at very young ages may wonder how a child can care about and grieve the loss of someone they barely knew. Others wonder how a child can still care about/love/ a birth parent who mistreated them or allowed them to be mistreated by others.

WHY OPEN ADOPTION?

We know from years of research and practice, that adopted children think a lot about their birth parents. In C.A.S.E.'s Lifelines federally funded research project, services were provided to families with children moving to permanent adoptive homes. In a survey that was conducted, the children reported that they think about their birth parents much more than parents would think. In our individual and family counseling, and groups, children and teens share their many questions: "Does my birth mother ever think about me? Why did she give me up? Where are my birth parents? Can I meet them? What do they look like? Do I look like them? Am I like them? Do I have any brothers or sisters?" The list goes on and on. We see the grief in their behavior – the anger, the sadness, the confusion. In counseling with adults, they share the pain they still feel at never being able to talk with their parents about their birth parents; how they have to hide their desire to search and/or their experiences of reunion. Sometimes these adopted adults struggle with loyalty conflicts, but often their loyalty conflict is based on reality – on sensing how threatened their adoptive parents feel at the mere mention of birth parents.

Pauline Boss, author of *Ambiguous Loss*, explains the impact of loss of someone significant who is physically absent but psychologically present. She describes the anxiety and confusion that can be experienced when there is loss with no closure. In adoption, unless the birth parent is deceased, there is loss, but the possibility of undoing the loss remains. It is no surprise then that a study conducted by Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy (*Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections*, 1998) showed that children who had no contact with birth family, spent more time thinking and fantasizing about them than children who had contact with birth family. In therapy, we also see that when a child knows that their birth parent(s) continues to struggle with adult

problems, that child often has an easier time comprehending the reasons for their placement. They are less likely to “blame themselves.”

HELPING CHILDREN WITH BIRTH FAMILY

Moving adoptive parents from a place of fear, mistrust and anxiety is therefore critical for the well-being of adopted children and their families. It is imperative that parents reconsider their OWN needs - - whether it's a need for simplicity, or to fulfill their dreams of what family life would/should be, or to protect their children from pain, so that they can incorporate into family life what their children need. Adopted children and teens need their parents to be their guides in helping them identify, understand, and cope with *their* feelings about birth parents. Over and over, adopted adults tell us that what they needed as they were growing up was guidance and support, not protection.

Connections to birth family are critical for teens to form cohesive identities. Debbie Riley, C.A.S.E. CEO, and author of *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens* states, “It is especially hard for teens to figure out who they are without knowledge of their birth parents. For some teens, the need to search is really the need for information. For others, that need can only be satisfied through reunion with birth parents.” Indeed, at CASE, we are receiving more calls from frantic parents whose teens have connected with birth parents through FACEBOOK.

To assist their children, parents must learn how to communicate with their children around birth parents. There are many excellent resources available to assist parents. Parents are encouraged to read, attend webinars and workshops, and talk with other parents and professionals around sharing the adoption story, especially when talking about birth parents involves what they perceive to be “difficult information”: mental illness, drug/alcohol abuse, incarceration, rape, etc.

Decisions regarding “open adoption” and maintaining connections with birth family is not a one size fits all phenomenon. The old “wait till your 18” to connect with birth parents is a thing of the past. There is no right time/right way for these connections to occur. We also know that these decisions and these relationships can be scary and very complicated, and that parents may need professional support to navigate these unique relationships. Especially in foster care adoption, post-adoption services needs to include this assistance for everyone involved.

Of course, many families will not have the opportunity for contact with birth family. (However, it is important to note that today, many families in international adoption are finding ways to connect with birth family.) There will be situations in which continued contact is not in the children's best interests. For children adopted through foster care, maintaining connections with previous foster parents may be equally important. Taking into account a variety of factors, every individual adoptive family will determine what is right for them. Sometimes the connection may only be through letters. Sometimes there will be face to face visits. A visit might take place only in a public place or only in a therapist's office. As family members get to know one another, hopefully trust will develop. And of course, decisions around contact may change over time.

In her keynote address "Honoring Children's Connections" at C.A.S.E.'s 2005 annual Kids Adoption Network Carnival/Conference for parents and children, adoption expert and author of *The Open Adoption Experience*, Sharon Roszia wisely advised the audience of adoptive parents that when they think about adoption and birth family, they should always remember to ask the right question: It is not "Who does this child belong to?", but, "Who belongs to this child?"

Adopting an older child can bring great joy to both parents and the child. The willingness to work with unique challenges is not right for everyone, but for those who choose to bring an older child into their lives, the hard work can bring great happiness.

RESOURCES

Parenting the Internationally Adopted Child by Patty Cogen

Adopting the Older Child by Claudia Jewett

Attaching in Adoption by Deborah Gray

Nurturing Adoptions by Deborah Gray

Building the Bonds of Attachment by Daniel Hughes

Healing Parents by Michael Orlans and Terry Levy

Adopting the Hurt Child by Gregory Peck

Parenting the Hurt Child by Gregory Peck

The Connected Child by Karyn Purvis, David Cross and Wendy Lyons Sunshine

The Open Adoption Experience by Sharon Roszia Kaplan and Lois Melina

Making Room in Our Hearts by Mickey Duxbury

Wounded Children Healing Homes by Jayne Schooler