

6 Questions Every Adopted Teen Wants Answered

Every adopted teen will have some questions.

Here are some of the most common, and what you can do to help.

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Prior to adolescence, children are extremely curious about their adoption stories. Although they question the circumstances that led to their adoption, most of them seem to accept the answers calmly. But adolescents often demand fuller and more factual answers. They understand that most mothers love, nurture, protect, and keep their babies. Why not in their case? Was there something terribly wrong or unlovable about them?

Now that they are more sophisticated critical thinkers, adolescents revisit their earlier vague questions and refine them into a very personal (and sometimes painful) exploration of the question, "Why did my birth mother and birth father leave me?" This process begins early in adolescence, a period of heightened upheaval and confusion for most youngsters. The already-stressed adolescent reconnects with the powerful awareness that, to have been adopted, someone had to give him away.

Here are six common adoption-related questions teens have, and ways you can help:

1. Why was I adopted?

The minds of adopted teens are filled with questions like, "Why was I given away? Was there something wrong with me? Did they give me away because they did drugs or abused me? What does this mean about me? Why couldn't they have worked things out and taken care of me?"

One of the hardest challenges for adoptive parents is to explain their child's adoption story. While parents begin with the best intentions in mind, they often stray off course just at the point when the information might reveal aspects of the story that may be difficult for their child to hear. Sam's mother said, "I am leery about telling Sam the whole story. I do not want to upset him." It is an understandable dilemma. By adolescence, however, it is no longer adequate to recapitulate the simplified adoption story that was given when the child was younger: "Your birth mom could not take care of you, and Daddy and I wanted so much to be parents, and we adopted you."

In this developmental period, almost all children seek to expand their understanding of their own story, especially when it comes to knowing the reason why they were relinquished. Unfortunately, this is often the very piece of the story that most parents find most difficult to share or explain. In fact, parents often do not know the true reason that led the birth parents to relinquish. In such a situation, it is better to acknowledge to your teen that, in fact, you don't know. Then you can discuss and speculate on the reasons together.

A parent might say: "I can imagine how frustrating it is not to have your questions answered. I wish I had more that I could tell you. However, from the little we do know, what do you think things were like for your birth parents at that time?"

2. What's the truth about my birth parents?

Younger children are comfortable living with broad, general ideas of their birth parents. Adolescents seek the facts — the detailed facts. They want definite information about why and how they came to be relinquished. They may ask questions like, "Why was I abandoned? Do I have any brothers or sisters? Did my birth father care about my birth mother, or was it a one-night stand?"

Parents may be hesitant to share information that they regard as potentially upsetting or damaging. But when there is a void, teens will often begin to fantasize about their birth parents and, quite often, the fantasies may be more damaging to a teen's identity formation than any fact — including difficult facts. In almost all cases, the truth is freeing for adolescents.

Barbara knew that her son Jason's birth father had a dependency on alcohol and had been physically abusive to his birth mother before he abandoned her and Jason. Barbara had told her son that she did not know anything about his birth father. "I worried that he would somehow think he could grow up to be like him." When Jason was 17, he began pushing for more information, and Barbara told him the truth. Jason was relieved that he finally had some knowledge about his birth father, even though he felt sad to hear about his poor choices. Jason had secretly believed that his birth father was dead, since no one spoke of him. The new information opened the possibility that maybe one day he could meet his birth father.

Therapists are often asked for advice on the correct timing for sharing difficult information with children. There is no cookbook answer. Each child's temperament and emotional and intellectual maturity will determine his readiness for processing distressing information. Certainly by adolescence, parents should reveal all the details

they know about the adoption story. Adolescents have a new cognitive capacity to process information and to consider facts and feelings.

A parent might say: "I think it is time to tell you some more information about your adoption story. You may be mad that I have waited to share this, but it was important to me not to overwhelm you with information you might not be ready for."

3. Why do I feel different from everyone else?

Feeling different from peers is the worst curse of adolescence. Nowhere else along the developmental stages of life do people so desperately want to fit in, to be a part of the group, as they do in adolescence.

Being adopted creates a sense of being different in many ways. Adoptees may be of a different race or cultural background than their family, and may feel different from peers who are being raised in biologically related families. For transracially adopted teens, this sense of belonging and loyalty may be hard to achieve.

Katherine, 14, wanted very much to connect with her cultural origins. She sat at the cafeteria table where the Korean girls would congregate. She was flatly rejected as soon as they realized she "wasn't really Korean," meaning that she couldn't speak the language. "I knew very little about their culture — the only thing we had in common was that I looked like them." Katherine went to the Korean food market with her mom and learned how to make some Korean dishes. "I shared the food I made, and they began to talk to me! Of course the adoption question came up, but I was prepared." Katherine was slowly accepted into the group. Eventually, the girls invited her into their homes and taught her more about her birth culture, customs, and language. Katherine's sense of self-worth soared.

Adoptive parents are often surprised to learn from their transracially adopted teen that the world is not the wonderful, embracing place they believed it to be. Pedro was adopted at 18 months from Guatemala, and grew up in a fairly diverse neighborhood, but was uncomfortable being in a transracial family. "The fact that my skin color is different from my family's draws attention no matter where we are," said Pedro. "It used to be OK, but now that I am older, it seems more complicated. Sometimes, to avoid questions from people at school, I say that the woman who came to pick me up is our neighbor, not my mother."

What was missing for Pedro was a repertoire of survival skills necessary to combat discrimination. Long before adolescence, parents should be preparing their child to

cope with racism. The Center for Adoption Support and Education's WISE Up! tool teaches children that they have the power to respond to unwanted questions through the four **W.I.S.E.** choices: **W**alk away; say, "**I**t's private"; **S**hare something about the adoption story; or **E**ducate with general information about adoption. Go to www.adoptionsupport.org to learn more. Parents will need to bring up the subject, because teens will usually talk about racism only if they are directly asked.

A parent might say: "Are kids saying anything unkind to you, especially about being Hispanic? Do you notice anything about how you are treated by anyone at school because you are not white? I really want you to tell me, because I don't want you to go through this alone."

4. What will happen when I leave home?

Often in late adolescence, as many teens prepare to leave home for college, work, or other opportunities, they begin to ponder the longevity of the parent-child relationship. They may think that, since the adults have almost completed the job of raising them to young adulthood, the relationship will soon come to an end.

Adopted teens may be especially vulnerable to separations of any kind. They may think, "If my birth parents gave me away, it could happen again," or "When I go to college, will my parents be there for me?"

Lynn's parents were talking about how much fun it would be to have a place in the mountains. Lynn, age 15, had been listening to the conversation. She had tears streaming down her face and said, "I knew you could leave me one day." Lynn's mom was incredulous. "We were just daydreaming about our retirement home! Where in the world would you come up with the idea that we would leave you?" she reassured her.

Like all children, adopted children need to know that they are loved and that the love is forever. However, adoptive parents may need to reinforce the issue of permanency more often. Whenever a conversation about college or leaving home comes up, assure your child that you will always be his parents — no matter what.

A parent might say: "I may not be 'in charge' of you anymore, but I hope that I will always be your best consultant. I'm only a phone call or e-mail away."

5. Who am I?

Two questions pose particular challenges for adopted children: Who am I and where did I come from? Not only must adopted adolescents think about how they are similar and

different from their adoptive parents, they must also think about how they are similar and different from their birth parents.

Many adopted adolescents ask themselves: "Am I like my adoptive parents or my birth parents or both? I know little about my birth parents, so how can I possibly figure out who I am? What does it mean that I am Hispanic/Korean/African-American? Who would I have been if I had stayed with my birth family?"

Our identity is molded from our values, beliefs, capabilities, talents, intellectual capabilities, sexual self-image, racial and ethnic heritage, personal goals and expectations, and, of course, our physical characteristics. All teens develop an awareness of these elements of self by determining how they are similar to their families and how they are different from them.

In biological families, similarities and differences are typically discussed more readily. Tell your teen what similarities you see between yourself and him. Teens are often amazed by parents' perceptions, and hearing about these perceived similarities helps them feel a stronger bond.

A parent might say: "We are so alike — we are very perceptive (or messy, laugh at the same jokes, love shopping)." And don't forget to celebrate the differences, too: "I wish I could be more like you, you are so much calmer (or musically gifted, outgoing)."

6. Is it OK if I think about my birth parents?

Many teens experience guilt related to their frequent and intense thoughts and feelings about their birth parents. Teens think, "I have so many questions about my birth parents, but if I ask my parents, will they get upset?" Fearing the disapproval of their parents, teens may hide their feelings and struggle alone with their emotional connection to their birth parents and the questions they have about them.

The frequency and intensity of these thoughts may vary, depending on the adolescent's personal adoption story, but all adopted children ponder the existence and character of their birth parents at some point in their lives.

Parents need to understand the depth of these thoughts, the emotional significance of these thoughts, and the difficulty that teens may have in sharing them. Thinking about birth parents does not mean adolescents love their parents any less. "I am so afraid to tell my mom that I think about my birth mom," said Amy, 16. "I love her and don't want to hurt her."

A child's need to consider the significance of the other set of parents is by no means a reflection of diminishing feelings for her adoptive parents. Parents need to present clear messages to their teen, supporting the quest for information. Initiate conversations about the birth parents, and affirm their importance. By demonstrating to your teen that you are not afraid to talk about her birth parents, you can help diminish her feelings of conflicted loyalty.

A parent might say: "I always think about your birth mother on this day (Mother's Day, child's birthday), and say a special prayer for her, to thank her with all my heart." Or, if there is contact: "I am so glad that Amanda (birth mom) is part of our lives."

Excerpted with permission from Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens, by Debbie Riley, M.S., with John Meeks, M.D.