

Identity Formation and the Impact of Adoption and Guardianship



ASSESSING A YOUTH'S SELF-IDENTITY

Adoption researcher, Dr. Jeanne Howard, describes one's "sense of self" as being derived from a combination of our own internal appraisal and messages from others. Our self-identity emerges from the integration of multiple selves into a coherent whole:

- Our physical self
- Our psychological self (personality, intelligence)
- Our social self (self in relation to others)
- Our self-esteem (judgments about self)

Imagine what it would be like to look in the mirror and have no idea who you look like, where you came from, or why you are not with your birth family?

The Impact of Past Experiences on Identity

Adverse childhood experiences shape children's development and self-identity in negative ways, often leading to a fragmented, confused sense of self, negative self-esteem, and incomplete mastery of developmental tasks.



Choose a foster or adopted youth from your own practice and assess their mastery of the important developmental tasks and adoption

tasks in life stages according to this resource:



Psychosocial Model of Adoption Adjustment.

- What experiences, external messages, and internal beliefs have shaped his/her self-identity? What does he think about on birthdays or what other triggers pose challenges? How does this influence his/her social interaction with parents and peers? How might this model affect your assessment and treatment planning for this youth?

Adoptive Identity & Communicative Openness

Adolescence is a tumultuous period, and this is a time when identity is central. Important issues in a teen's past often resurface as their cognitive abilities expand, and they rework the meaning of losses, traumas, and adoption.

Parents' openness in discussing the youth's family of origin, adoption, race and other important issues is critical for youths' adjustment and sense of identity. Consider this quote from a Korean adopted adult:





"I am who I am because of, you know, how I started out and...I got to the point where I'm proud of it.... I'm not ashamed of it anymore. I think when I grew up being adopted, my mom made me feel like I should be ashamed of it only because she wouldn't let us talk about our past."

"I feel like there's a lot of mental health issues that can come without knowing where you come from. I know, for me, I struggled with depression. I struggled with anxiety. At the time I didn't know it was anxiety, but when I think back, I was obsessed with who they were. I was obsessed with did I have siblings, just what my story was." Temera



Review the resource, **The Effect of Family Communication Patterns on Adopted Adolescent Adjustment**. How can you apply this in your practice?

Telling the Truth About Youths' Histories

Youth are entitled to all known information about their origins. It is important for parents to share this over time in a developmentally appropriate way, but adoption experts advise sharing before adolescence, when youth are struggling with many other issues and can be thrown by a difficult disclosure.

The most common issues where adopted youth and their parents may get stuck are explored in **Lessons 2 and 5**. These include:

- Reason for adoption
- Missing or difficult information
- Difference / Identity
- Loyalty / Permanence



Choose a youth from your practice in a foster, adoptive, or guardianship family. Identify which of these issues were challenges for the youth and for parents. Take a few minutes and write an updated treatment plan with this new perspective.

Issues in Search and Reunion

Yearning for answers and searching for information about or, for some, contact with birth family is a normal process for adopted youth. It is important to help their adoptive parents understand this and support youth in their efforts. The process of searching and contacting birth relatives is complex and is best aided by expert guidance.



Review the resource, **Searching for Birth Relatives**. This brief identifies 6 processes that may be needed in searching:

1. Emotional preparation
2. Assembling known information
3. Researching relevant State laws
4. Registering with reunion registries
5. Obtaining missing documents
6. Filing court petitions

It is important to help youth and parents understand and anticipate the possible responses and repercussions that they may experience.



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