



“THE BEST TIME TO PLANT A TREE IS TWENTY YEARS AGO. THE SECOND BEST TIME IS NOW.”
—Chinese Proverb

College Choices for Adopted Teens

- By Debbie Riley, LCMFT and Ellen Singer, LCMFT

Cindy, adopted as an infant, was always a good student throughout high school. Like her friends, she expected to attend college after graduation. However, in the fall of Cindy's senior year, as her friends were busy completing their college applications, Cindy's parents became aware that she was having difficulty completing hers. At first, they chalked it up to mild procrastination; not out of the ordinary with Cindy's deadline driven tendencies. However, by early December, it clearly seemed that she was stalling. Her parents encouraged her to talk with her high school college counselor. During a family meeting, the counselor encouraged Cindy to share that she wasn't completing her college applications because she was feeling a great deal of anxiety about leaving home and going to a school far away. Cindy expressed that she always thought she that she wanted to go away, and felt disappointed and upset with herself. With their acceptance and reassurance that Cindy's feelings were completely understandable, Cindy's parents helped her to embrace her choice to attend an excellent school much closer to home.

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As the high school years come to an end, some teens may experience a wide range of emotions including ambivalence around leaving home. Cindy's situation is not at all uncommon especially for adopted teens. They may feel—whether consciously or unconsciously—a rekindled sense of loss or rejection about having to leave their families.

We say “rekindled” in that processing feelings of loss, grief and rejection begins in childhood for ALL adoptees, regardless of age of adoption, impacted by the adoptee's pre-adoption experiences. The normal adolescent developmental tasks of separation and individuation-- in preparation for adulthood and independence --can re-trigger those painful and challenging feelings.

For some adopted teens: “separation = loss and independence = rejection.”

In the book, [Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens](#), it is noted that some teens struggle with worries regarding “permanence.” They may fear, “When the parenting role is over, will I still be connected to my family?”



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Parents may be surprised and baffled that their teen is grappling with these serious emotions. If parents sense this is what is happening with their teen, they would be wise to dialogue with their teen about what is going on and emphasize that their teen HAS choices and options. This includes communicating to their teen that he or she can choose not to go away to college, even if it seems like all their friends are doing so. Of course, this can be very hard for parents to accept if they have always held this expectation and hope for their child. And of course, this notion may be hard for a teen to accept, because again, their feelings on the subject may be very mixed. Sorting out these important, often complex decisions with an adoption-competent therapist may be very helpful in helping your teen make the best choice that is right for them.

Some adoptees may not have the academic desire to go to *any* college. Michael, adopted as a two-year-old from Korea, struggled throughout high school and showed little interest in his future. He faced challenges with mild anxiety and depression and issues around identity. Nonetheless, Michael’s parents believed in his potential. While they supported his decision to get a full-time job after graduation, they encouraged him to try classes at a local community college, an acceptable option for many teens. Michael found that he enjoyed taking one or two classes per semester while working in the electronics department of a store. And over time (and with therapy), he began to gain confidence and a sense of direction. While it took Michael longer than most of his peers to complete his education, he eventually graduated with an Associate’s degree in cybersecurity.

Adoption-related and other emotional challenges may be compounded by learning issues that can have an impact on an adopted teen’s self-esteem, self-confidence, or academic performance. Lisa was adopted at age five from foster care. At age six, she was diagnosed with ADHD, and, at age nine, with learning disabilities. Her parents enrolled her in a small private school where she received academic support in the form of accommodations including extra time for test-taking, and access to a note-taker. Lisa obtained good grades and in high school, she earned excellent SAT scores and was admitted to several universities. However, both Lisa and her parents knew that she was not ready to handle the emotional and social demands of college life along with academic pressure. They decided it would be best for her to take a gap year, after which she enrolled in a small private college that offered substantial academic support. While it took her five years to graduate, she eventually went on to earn a master’s degree.



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When considering the college needs of your teen, it’s important to realize that the path he or she takes may not be the usual one, but rather filled with twists and turns. This kind of ambiguity can generate a great deal of anxiety for both teens and parents.

Here are some tips to help:

- Try to remain supportive and nonjudgmental of your teen’s choice. This will keep the lines of communication open and increase your teen’s acceptance of your guidance and advice.
- Encourage your teen to discover *all* the possible careers or vocations he might have an interest in pursuing. Talk to guidance counselors, college/career /vocational counselors, or people in his fields of interest. (College may not be the path for that pursuit.)
- If your teen has special learning needs or other type of disability, find out which colleges can best provide the kind of supports/accommodations he will need to succeed.
- Encourage your teen to talk to others who have faced similar challenges – e.g. young adults who are a few years older. Their advice may help your teen avoid mistakes that they themselves have made.
- Encourage your teen (and yourself) to embrace the notion that college choices and career ‘mistakes’ are not catastrophic. People transfer schools, take breaks, change career directions all the time; flexibility is key.
- Older teens may be much more open to counseling than in previous years. Consider professional assistance – therapy, academic/career/life coaching, etc.– for help in decision-making about what to do after high school, or to support them during these transitional years.