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BIRTHPARENTS ON THEIR MINDS

By Debbie Riley, LCMFT and Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

Robin was driving her 14-year-old adopted daughter, Emily, to her piano lesson. They were talking about where they would go for dinner after the lesson. As they were approaching the home of the piano teacher, Emily turned to her mother and said, "I want to meet my birth parents." Stunned and caught off guard, Robin simply responded with, "Oh?" Emily didn't say anything else and quickly said good-bye as she left the car to go to her lesson. Robin drove off to run an errand. At the store, she could hardly focus. She hadn't known Emily was even thinking about her birth parents as Emily hadn't asked any questions about them in quite a while.

As children enter adolescence, they usually become more private about their thoughts and feelings. Teens in adoptive families are no exception, and some teens may find the subject of birth parents especially uncomfortable to discuss with their parents. It may feel deeply disloyal to them to do so. It may be hard for them to put into words what they are feeling. They may have mixed feelings that leave them feeling baffled and confused, different and alone. Consequently, adoptive parents may be unaware of just how often and how intensely their teen is thinking about birth parents.

Identity Formation

Adolescents' thoughts and questions may become more intense because identity formation is one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence. Teens try to figure out who they are by comparing themselves –their values and beliefs, strengths/challenges, interests/talents – to their parents. To answer the question, "Who Am I?" teens who were adopted must integrate information and history from **two** sets of parents. Consequently, teens often need to delve more deeply into their adoption stories. When they are willing to open up (to parents), they often want deeper answers to questions about why they were placed for adoption, and more detailed information about their birth parents.

Teens may hold onto any bits of information they have about their birth parents and try to fill in the gaps. They may try to satisfy their curiosity by expanding on their knowledge and "owning" their history. Seventeen- year-old Amy only knew that her birth mother in Guatemala was single and impoverished. She immersed herself in learning about Guatemala – dressing as she thought her birth mother might, cooking Latin American dishes, streaming Latin music on her phone. She studied Spanish at school and gravitated to other Latinas. Engaging in these behaviors was a productive way of trying to "know" and be connected to her birth mother– as well as integrating her heritage into her identity.

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Some teens fill in the gaps of knowledge in undesirable ways, particularly if what is known is scant, or filled with negative information, or they sense that birthparents are a taboo topic. Cindy, 15, heard references to her birth parents portraying her birth mother in Russia as an alcoholic who was promiscuous and unstable. This compromised her self-esteem and led her to engage in risky behaviors, thinking that such behaviors were inevitable, that she was “destined to be just like her birth mother.” In therapy, Cindy insisted that her birthmother should have found a way to get her act together and raise her. Her parents had had no idea what was happening with their daughter and were surprised by the anger and feelings of rejection she expressed. They came to understand the support she needed to work through the feelings underpinning her self-destructive behavior. Cindy’s parents also took responsibility to honestly share what they knew about her birthmother, providing more of a balanced picture. Treatment also involved a discussion of the possibility of trying to locate Cindy’s birth family.

As they begin dating, teens may also wonder about their birthparents’ relationship. *Was it casual or long-term? Did their birth parents mean anything to each other? Were they adolescents themselves?* Robert, 17, knew that his birth father had a brief, casual relationship with his birthmother when they were teens. The impact of this knowledge led him to be quite vocal about his desire to be involved in committed, not casual, relationships. Robert was unique among his friends in having a long-term girlfriend.

If teens are fortunate to be involved in an open adoption, the teen’s birth parent(s) can and will serve as role models. They can address a teen’s questions, provide family history and important information. In transracial adoption, birth parents can assist the teen in developing positive racial identity and provide racial socialization. This is what happened for Anthony, 13, who is biracial. His birth mother and his adoptive parents are both Caucasian. Conversations with his African American birth father helped Anthony develop coping skills when confronted with unwelcome attention he received when he was out in public with his adoptive parents or birth mother.

Parents may certainly want to have a discussion with the birth parents about if, when, and how to share difficult information in addressing the teen’s questions. If possible, birth parents can be invited to participate in the teen’s therapy as well and can be given guidance around how they can support and be helpful to the teen.

To Search or Not to Search: Who’s Decision is it?

If your teen asks you if it is possible to meet their birth parents, while we know this may fill you with anxiety and fear, it is best to encourage teens to share their thoughts and feelings with you. This will be easier if you have established an open atmosphere of communication around adoption from the beginning and they always know they can talk to you about their birth family. It is important that they feel that you will help them if you can with whatever they need. Telling your child or teen that you will help them find their birth family when they are “18 or 21” is a thing of the past.

Too often today, especially when teens feel “Put off” by their parents, they are going on social media sites like FACEBOOK without their parents’ knowledge or guidance, to see if they can locate and contact birth parents on their own. Teens should NEVER embark on such an important, emotional journey without loving and informed parental guidance, supervision and support. We cannot overemphasize the fact that this often occurs because there is a lack of open communication about adoption-related issues. Consequently, teens hold onto the belief/fear that adoptive parents will be hurt, angry or disapproving of the teen’s desire for contact and so they decide to go it alone.

Determining the appropriate time to make contact is personal and individual, and as such, we encourage parents to determine the unique, individual needs of your teen and make decisions together to best meet those needs. We recommend professional assistance from an adoption-competent therapist to support both adoptive and birth families around decision-making as well as preparation for the process of search and reunion.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that parents need to take the lead in communicating with their teen about adoption. If a teen is not asking questions or sharing his thoughts and feelings about his birthparents, parents can make comments or ask questions to “open the door.” Parents can look for natural opportunities like birthdays, Mother’s/Father’s Day, a media story, etc. to bring up the subject. Respecting a teen’s privacy is important but ensuring that a teen knows they can “share what’s on their minds” is equally important. Thoughts and feelings about adoption can be deeply complex and troubling. Even when teens act as if they want parents to “leave them alone,” (and hide ‘beneath a mask’), parents need to make sure their teen is “never alone” in navigating the challenges inherent in the adoption journey.