Educational Articles for the Adoption, Kinship and Foster Care Community
Table of Contents

C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 1 ................................................................. 3
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 2 ................................................................. 6
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 3 ................................................................. 9
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 4 ................................................................. 12
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 5 ................................................................. 15
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 6 ................................................................. 17
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 7 ................................................................. 20
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 8 ................................................................. 22
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 9 ................................................................. 25
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 10 .............................................................. 28
C.A.S.E Fact Sheet Series No. 11 .............................................................. 30
How to Honor Your Child’s Birth Family ................................................ 33
Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Loss and Grief While Navigating Coronavirus .... 35
Birth Parents on Their Minds ................................................................ 39
Adopting Your Foster Child: What Every Parent Needs to Know ............ 42
College Choices for Adopted Teens ....................................................... 45
6 Questions Every Adopted Teen Wants Answered .............................. 48
Supporting Adopted Children with Special Needs in the School Setting .................. 54
Dear Ellen: Navigating Teens’ Online Search and Reunion Process .......... 58
Embracing Open Adoption .................................................................... 60
Adopting Older Children .................................................................... 64
Making the Decision to Adopt ............................................................... 70
8 Ways to Engage with Your Child & Encourage Family Communication ...... 72
WHERE DID I COME FROM?

For children adopted as infants or toddlers, as they move into their pre-school years, they become increasingly more aware of their environment and other people. They may notice that the mother of a playmate or an aunt or family friend is pregnant and wonder about it. As they begin to understand that being pregnant means “there’s a baby inside,” their natural curiosity may lead them to wonder about their own birth. They may ask such questions as, “Mommy, did I grow inside your tummy?” Their play may involve themes related to pregnancy and birth.

In response to their child’s developing awareness, many adoptive parents follow the advice of professionals who believe that this stage of development is the appropriate one for introducing the child to the basics of his/her adoption story. Usually, children are told that there are two ways families are formed: by birth, and by birth and adoption. (It is important to use these terms so that children realize that adopted children are also born!) They learn that they grew inside another woman’s body, or were born to another woman and man (who can be named or called birth mother and birth father), and then their parents adopted them. Particular emphasis is placed on how happy the parents are to have the child be a part of their family. Parents can also add any facts which pertain to their story, such as “you came over on an airplane from another country called Korea,” or “we went to an agency to adopt you.”

If the adoptive family is in relationship with their child’s birth family, adoptive parents should be referring to “Jane” and “Jim” as the child’s birth parents. Not understanding what that means, the pre-school child may still ask these same questions, and parents can adapt the answer to say, “You were born to Jane and Jim (or however parents refer to the birth parents—some call them Mommy Jane...)

Early telling ensures that children hear their story from their parents and not someone else, makes the child’s adoption a more natural part of his life, and allows parents to practice discussions with children about adoption. This will become an ongoing process as children progress through subsequent stages of development.

WHAT CHILDREN CAN UNDERSTAND

As parents listen to their children relate their adoption story to others, they should understand that children are “parroting” what they have heard without any true comprehension of what adoption really means (even those children in open adoptions.) Because children at this age do not have the cognitive ability to understand the meaning and significance of the story, they generally think and feel that everything is okay, everyone is adopted and that their story is special and makes them feel good. Children who have contact with their birth parents may better grasp and accept the concept of “being born to another woman” but Mother/Mommy is the person they live with and who loves and takes care of them.

However, it is important to note that some children may experience feelings of sadness around not being born to their adoptive mothers. For most children this age, the sense of loss is not related to feelings or concerns about birth parents. Children who were placed after infancy are likely aware that part of their early life was spent in a different place and/or with people who are not their parents today. Consequently, some children may have confusing, sad or even scary memories or emotions because of these early experiences. For the majority of children, however, early facts about their lives do not cause negative feelings on a day-to-day basis – especially when the adults in their lives make them feel safe, secure, and loved.
CHILDREN AND ADOPTION: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS (3-5)
BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

MAKING SENSE OF ADOPTION

Because children are generally receptive to hearing their adoption stories at this age, they may ask to hear it as a favorite bedtime story. They may also enjoy looking at pictures or other memorabilia that the parents have collected to share with their child as part of their story. In open adoptions, birth parents can be part of this process as well.

Parents at this age may begin to create special books called LIFEBOOKS that may include the preparation for adoption, pictures of birth parents if you have them, placement, and also space to add special memories of future occasions. Parents also read children’s books with stories about adoption with their children – for example, Horace. Before parents (and birth parents) talk with their children about adoption, it is strongly recommended they familiarize themselves with positive adoptive language that uses words and phrases that provide the necessary foundation and tools to help children explain their adoption story to others. For example, the terms birth mother and adoption plan help to offset misunderstandings that can arise. A preschool child hearing she was “put up for adoption” may indeed have fantasies of having been placed on a store shelf.

It is normal for children this age to ask endless questions about everything. In response to their story, they are likely therefore to ask, “Why?” which is the common refrain to anything they are told at this age. Preschoolers are usually satisfied with simple, age-appropriate information. “They were not ready to be parents.” Birth parents in open adoptions can answer simply as well, “I didn’t feel I could take care of you by myself. I wanted you to have a mom and dad.”

This is also a good time to introduce your motivation to adopt. It’s OK to say, “We couldn’t make a (another baby) and we wanted so much to be parents (again).” Two moms/dads “We could not /didn’t want to make a baby…” “I didn’t have a wife/husband to have a baby with…” “We wanted a daughter.” “We wanted another child. Again, parents are often afraid this will lead to a “sex” talk. That would not be age-appropriate, but it is age-appropriate for preschoolers to know that it takes a man and woman for the woman to become pregnant and give birth. (Note: Because of being told their story, adopted children may ask how the sperm gets to the egg (earlier than their non-adopted peers), and it is not unusual that they learn the answer earlier than non-adopted children—e.g. by age 6).

Perhaps the most important part of telling the story to preschoolers, is to emphasize what they can understand: how happy you are that they are your child, your son, your daughter, that they are part of your family. In open adoptions, birth parents can share that while they may feel sad that they could not raise their birth child, they can affirm their positive feelings for their birth child, the adoptive parents/adoptive family.

COMMON FEELINGS

Especially in transracial adoption, perhaps as young as 2 or 3, children will become increasingly aware of the physical differences between themselves and their family. (This may be due to the fact that other people make comments or ask questions about their family that relate to differences in physical appearance.) Children of a different race may express negative feelings about their skin color because of their wish to look like their parents, and they will begin to internalize that the physical appearances of family members are a defining aspect about their family. Same-race children may express the wish to have their parents’ hair or eye color. Aware of this, parents should validate their children’s wish to look like them, while emphasizing the beauty of their children’s skin color and working to ensure that the family’s inner circle of friends and community is multi-racial, including people of their child’s racial/ethnic heritage. Again, in open adoption, children may have the benefit of relationship with birth family members of their racial heritage.

By age 4-5, non-adopted children may talk about the day they were born. Even if adopted children know these details, they are aware that their story is different from their non-adopted peers. Certainly, by the age of 6, adopted children understand that most other children are not adopted—that they are being raised by the parents who gave birth to them.
RESOURCES

This is an ideal time to lay the foundation for future family communication about adoption. Although children understand very basic concepts, parents can do a great deal to let their children know they are proud to be an adoptive family and welcome conversations about the subject. It is not uncommon for adoptive parents to experience some anxiety as they embark on conversations with their children about adoption; therefore, it can be helpful to plan ahead. Suggestions include:

◊ Attend an adoptive parent support group to learn what others have done
◊ Build a broader understanding of adoption by sharing books for children, including those which are stories about different kinds of families.
◊ Find (or create) a play group for children in adoptive families, as well as those in many different kinds of families, including foster, step, or single parent families
◊ Consult with an adoption professional for advice, particularly if there is concern about the need to share difficult information. (See FACT Sheet # 4 A and B)

Books

Talking with Young Children about Adoption by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher
Telling the Truth to Your Foster or Adopted Child by Jayne Schooler and Betsey Keefer
Real Parents, Real Children by Holly van Gulden
The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass
Inside Transracial Adoption by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg
Horace by Holly Keller
Tell Me Again about the Night I was Born by Jamie Lee Curtis
A Mother for Choco by Keiko Kasza
Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale

Webinar

Talking with Children about Adoption In Demand Webinar
CHILDREN AND ADOPTION THE SCHOOL AGE YEARS (6-11)

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

WHY WAS I ADOPTED? This Fact Sheet generally addresses children who have minimal or no contact with birth family. A word about children in open adoption is addressed at the end.

The age at which a child can begin to fully understand what it means to be adopted may vary. Generally speaking, however, it is during the school-age years that children come to grips with the fact that, in order to become part of their adoptive family, they had to first “lose” significant people in their lives – namely, their birth parents and family. The feelings of loss that surround such a profound realization is experienced in a variety of ways, depending on unique personalities, personal history, age at placement, and the nature of contact with birth families, etc. The central challenge is to make sense of adoption while trying to answer (a very complex question: Why were the people who gave birth to me unable to “keep” me and raise me? Feelings will vary in intensity and may manifest themselves in a variety of behaviors.

The school-age years mark the time when all children reach new levels of thinking, wondering, questioning and learning. Consequently, children in adoptive families are likely to also be impacted (for the first time) by the questions and comments of friends and classmates who are also able to consider adoptive families in new ways and who also want to try and understand the subject.

THE GRIEF REACTION IS A NORMAL AND ADAPTIVE RESPONSE

Loss in adoption can encompass much more than birth family members. It can involve loss of: race, country, culture, and other significant people: foster parents, orphanage staff, other caregivers, teachers, friends, etc. In response to their sense of loss, children often experience some kind of “grief reaction.” Although it can be difficult for parents, it is normal and adaptive. The intensity may vary from child to child, but, typically, the grief reaction may manifest in the form of:

* Withdrawal * Angry outbursts or acting out behavior * Daydreaming or pining behavior * Difficulty concentrating in school * Falling school grades

MAKING SENSE OF ADOPTION

Children in this age group tend to view themselves as being in the center of the world; consequently, their ability to understand and explain complex adult decisions – such as choosing NOT to parent – is extremely limited. As children work to understand the reasons why they were relinquished, they may formulate explanations, reasons (and solutions) that make little sense to their parents. For example, they may think: “This happened because I was a bad. I cried too much, misbehaved, soiled my diaper.” (I am to blame) “My birth parents were irresponsible and selfish. They should have married (if they placed me because they didn’t feel they could raise a child as a single person). They should have gotten a job (if financial challenges were the reason for placement).” (Birth parents are to blame.) “What if I was kidnapped by my adoptive parents?” (Adoptive parents are to blame.)
COMMON FEELINGS

Children of this age often struggle with a variety of feelings, relating to their adoption story, up to and including concerns about their permanence in their adoptive families – despite reassurance from their parents. They may express fears of being returned to the birth parents or of somehow losing their adoptive families. Children in this age group may ask many questions as they attempt to gather information. The fact that sufficient information is not always available can leave some children feeling frustrated and confused. Fantasies about what birth parents are like and how life might be different with birth parents are also common. Known as the romance fantasy, this kind of thinking is common to ALL school-aged children, but especially to children who were adopted. Children may also experience great pain over feeling different from their adoptive families, especially if they are of a different race. Feeling different from their peers can be especially challenging because they are part of an adoptive family, a transracial adoptive family, a single-parent family, an LGBT family, etc. The opportunity to relate to a diverse group of families, including families similar to their own is critically important.

Because of the complexity of feelings, adopted children experience “double-dip” feelings. (Double Dip Feelings by Barbara Cain.) They learn early the concept of ambivalence, and that you can have two opposing feelings about something at the same time. So while they love their adoptive families and are “happy” to be part of their family, they may also feel “sad” and “angry” that they are not with their birth family, not in their birth country, not being raised with people of their racial/ethnic/cultural heritage.

Children who were adopted at older ages may face additional challenges. While many children demonstrate remarkable resiliency in response to their difficult early life experiences prior to placement (e.g., orphanage, foster care, trauma including abuse/neglect, health problems, etc.), these children may struggle with challenges including: anxiety, depression, undefined guilt, an exaggerated sense of feeling different, anger or mistrust of adults, hyper or lack of intimacy with others, attachment issues/difficulty forming relationships, uncertainty about the future, confusing memories or fears, and behavior problems at school. Parents raising children with challenges need support and education to be “healing parents.”

Children in open adoptions may still grieve for the loss of being raised by/part of their birth family, and if their birth family is very different (socio/economic, racial, country, working vs. middle class, etc.) from their adoptive family, they may face challenges around making sense of those differences. In addition, the belief of course is that intense feelings of rejection, abandonment more typical in closed adoption are mitigated by the opportunity to have connection with birth family. However, relationships are not without challenges of course. A child can still be hurt by a birth parent who cancels a visit or can’t be as involved if they are raising other children.
CHILDREN AND ADOPTION THE SCHOOL AGE YEARS (6-11)
BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

RESOURCES

There is no substitute for a sensitive, caring parent who is willing to talk about adoption. Parents can increase their understanding of the school age child by accessing local adoptive parent educational programs, and workshops and webinars like those offered by the Center for Adoption Support and Education.

In addition to local adoptive parent support groups, there are excellent books which include information on this turning point for children: Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Henig; The Family of Adoption by Joyce Maguire Pavao; Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting an Adopted Child by Holly Van Gulden., Making Sense of Adoption by Lois Melina.


These books contain many suggestions for opening communication about adoption. In particular, Van Gulden suggests that parents deliberately make brief comments about adoption that will indicate their willingness to talk more.

For families in open adoption: Making Room in Our Hearts by Micky Duxbury and The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass

The W.I.S.E. UP! Powerbook created by the Center for Adoption Support and Education is also an excellent tool for opening communication between parents about how and when to address the questions and comments of others about adoption. Parents can also help by connecting their children to other adopted children through support groups, cultural events, or camps. This can be purchased on the C.A.S.E. store at www.adoptionsupport.org

52 Ways to Talk About Adoption is a unique card game created by C.A.S.E. to promote family communication about adoption in a fun and interesting way. These can be purchased on the C.A.S.E. store at www.adoptionsupport.org
ADOLESCENTS AND ADOPTION

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C AND DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT

WHO AM I?

Many parents dread the time when their children become adolescents because it is typically associated with turbulence – negativity, rebellion, and change. The added pressure of adoption issues combined with adolescence may lead adoptive parents to experience even greater trepidation. Understanding the interplay between adolescent issues and adoption issues is therefore critically important for adoptive parents.

Beginning in the preteen years and continuing on into adolescence, youngsters face the daunting task of figuring out their own identity. They begin to take a more critical look at their parents, deciding how they are alike and different from them. They contemplate the ways in which they may want to be alike or different from them. The task of forming an identity helps teens begin the process of separating from their parents, developing independence and preparing for adulthood. In order to form unique identities, and to separate from their parents, teens may choose vastly differently options about how to dress and behave. They are greatly influenced by their peers. All of this is normal and to be expected.

WHO AM I LIKE?

Adolescence can be especially challenging for those who were adopted. During this key developmental stage, adoptees begin to connect adoption to their sense of identity. Not only do they need to consolidate their identity – see how they are alike and different from the parents who raised them – they also must consider how the genetic package they inherited from their birth parents contributes to their concept of self.

Integrating two sets of parents can be a bewildering task – particularly for those who have little or no information about their birth parents. Imagine trying to define who you are without having the basic information about where you came from. That is why it is critical for adoptive parents to provide teens with all of the information they have and – in the process – bring to light reality vs. fantasy and honesty vs. secrecy. In essences, adolescence is the life stage during which parents must provide their teens with any "missing pieces of the puzzle."

While they work to form their identities, adolescent adoptees often think about their birth parents and what they are like (or fantasized to be like), especially with regard to values, behaviors, decision-making, etc. When the birth parents’ known (or perceived) values or lifestyles are very different from the adoptive parents, adoptees may choose to identify with their birth parents – at least for a while. Factors such as knowing (or not knowing) their birth parents and having a lot (or little) information about them will have a great impact at this stage. They may try to over-identify with a known (or perceived) characteristic or trait their birth parent possesses.

Adolescents who were adopted into families of a different race, culture, or heritage have additional challenges to face when it comes to identity formation. Because teens are highly conscious of the physical differences between themselves and their families, they struggle to integrate ethnicity and culture with the picture they have always had of themselves. While all teens may resist parental authority and alternate between periods of distance and neediness, the adopted teen may become more extreme in this behavior because of these additional complexities.

THE ROLE OF SEXUALITY

Beginning in puberty, issues related to sexuality become prominent for all adolescents. They are faced with many choices with regard to their sexual behavior. Adopted children who were placed voluntarily as a result of an unplanned pregnancy will likely have additional issues to consider because of the obvious questions that arise about the birth parents’ sexual behavior. Will they identify with their birth parents – who they may think were sexually irresponsible or promiscuous? Or will they identify with their adoptive parents – whose possible infertility suggests asexuality? Research indicates that adolescents who were adopted are at higher risk for teen pregnancy. In situations where teens have little information about their birth parents, the need to experience an unplanned pregnancy may help to fill in the many unknowns, such as how their birth mother felt during pregnancy, and how she came to place her child for adoption.
ADOLESCENTS AND ADOPTION

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C AND DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT

CHALLENGES

As teen’s knowledge about adoption becomes more sophisticated and complex, his or her feelings may manifest themselves as anger. Feeling different is a challenge for teens, but is especially difficult for those who want desperately to fit in with their peers. On top of it all, teens who were adopted often struggle with anger over the fact that important life decisions—decisions in which they had absolutely no say or control—were made on their behalf.

Some adolescents will verbalize their anger. Others will demonstrate it through their behavior. Still others will internalize it all, and be more prone to moodiness and depression—something all teens may experience to a greater or lesser extent. The adopted adolescent may be more prone to act out his depression through indirect, but negative behavior including substance abuse, loss of interest in school, etc. Additionally, the adopted adolescent may be more prone to overreact to other losses experienced during this time, such as the end of a friendship or loss of a boyfriend or girlfriend. Adopted adolescents may experience more difficulty leaving home because the sense of loss or even rejection can activate the sense of loss/rejection inherent in adoption. The adopted teen may not be at all aware that this overreaction to loss is related to the losses experienced in adoption.

Teens in open adoption may certainly also struggle with identity issues—again, especially if there are vast differences between their birth and adoptive families—racial, etc. In their desire to feel independent of the family imposing rules and expectations, they may have a great need for belonging with their birth family. Both families may struggle to set appropriate limits and boundaries.

COMMON FEELINGS

1) Confusion over who they are, growing sense of self;
2) Anger, especially over feeling a loss of control. May be toward birth parents, but is often directed at adoptive parents;
3) Oversensitivity to losses, fear of further rejection;
4) Trepidation about the future, particularly when it comes to leaving home for work or college; feeling uncertain that their family will remain their family forever;
5) Fears of intimacy related to feelings of abandonment and rejection;
6) Desire to search for / meet birth parents (either for information and/or to understand the reasons for the adoption).

With regard to meeting birth parents, it is important to take the teen’s interest seriously and explore his motivation and need. There is no more “wait until you are 18.” This can be scary as parents often believe their child is “not ready.” In fact, it may be the parent who is not ready. However, parents need to determine if their teen is. Professional assistance is advised to explore your teen’s request, readiness, expectations and preparation for reunion if that is going to occur. Teens are turning to social media to find birth family, especially if they believe their parents are not on board with their interest. Before that happens, we encourage parents to ask their teens not to leave them out of such an important life event. Parents should clearly give their teens the message even before adolescence that parents will assist them with search and reunion to the best of their ability when their child tells them they are interested.
ADOLESCENTS AND ADOPTION

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C AND DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT

RESOURCES

Research shows that teens consider their parents to be the most important relationship in their lives. Adoptive parents need resources and support during this especially challenging stage in order to learn how to “let go” and connect with their teens simultaneously. Adoptive parent groups that focus on the teen years can be especially helpful. You can also learn more about this topic in the following books: Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens by Debbie Riley, M.S. and David Meeks, MD; Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter and Robin Henig; Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew by Sherrie Eldridge; The Family of Adoption by Joyce Maguire Pavao.

Teens are often interested in exploring the subject of adoption independently. Look for teen groups that focus on adoption, as well as community/cultural opportunities to meet other adoptees and adults who were adopted.
It is the rare adoptive parent who does not experience some degree of anxiety or angst on the subject of talking with their children about adoption. Many adoptive parents do not want to be reminded of their own pre-adoptive experiences, which might have included painful feelings related to infertility and loss. Others wish to avoid the uncertainty about how to answer questions for which they have little information. Still others fear “losing their children to birth parents.” Some parents may even wonder why they even have to discuss adoption, wishing to protect children from the painful and confusing aspects of adoption. Other parents understand the importance of creating an atmosphere in which adoption is freely and openly discussed. However, they are uncertain about when to talk with children about adoption, and even more importantly, how?

WHY SHOULD PARENTS TALK ABOUT ADOPTION?

Adult adopted persons have been our best educators about the importance of honesty and openness when it comes to talking with children about adoption. They have shared with us countless tragic stories of discovering on their own or from someone else the fact of their adoption. The pain of deception and dishonesty destroyed their trust in their relationship with their parents, sometimes causing irreparable damage. Those adoptees whose parents had been advised to tell the adoption story once and never bring it up again unknowingly hurt their children as well.

Many parents believe that if their children don’t ask questions about adoption, they don’t have any. Instead, we know that there are reasons for this silence. Children may not ask questions because they don’t know how to articulate their needs and feelings about adoption. Sometimes they worry that to bring the subject up would be an act of disloyalty to their adoptive parents. Others may have tried to ask a question and either sensed or learned that their parents were uncomfortable, angry, or hurt by the questions. They then assume adoption is a taboo subject. The result is that many of the children’s feelings go “underground”, that is, children push their feelings out of their conscious awareness or carry them inside alone.

WHEN SHOULD PARENTS DISCUSS ADOPTION?

Most experts advise talking with children beginning in infancy. Supporters of early telling believe that it is best to ensure that children learn about adoption from their parents. Waiting can jeopardize this. Practicing in the early years also gives parents a chance to become comfortable with adoption discussions before they really count. Early telling also means that children will grow up without remembering when they were told - making it a more natural experience.

Parents need to know that children’s understanding of adoption is based on their developmental stage. Even though parents are advised to talk about adoption in the early years, what preschoolers understand (or don’t) is quite different from school-age children, and certainly adolescents. It is therefore recommended that adoptive parents familiarize themselves with what children understand about adoption at different stages of development. (Please see Fact Sheets 1, 2, and 3). Children adopted at an older age are likely to have memories of significant relationships and perhaps the circumstances that brought them to adoption. It is important for parents to talk about these experiences so that children can develop a clear understanding of their early years. Without those conversations, some children may believe they were rejected because they did something wrong, or they may misinterpret some of the memories they have. Adult adopted persons stress how important it is for adoptive parents to acknowledge all parts of their children’s lives in order to help them develop complete identities, to put together the parts that make the whole.

Overall, it is important for parents to share age-appropriate information, answer questions, and help children with their feelings about adoption before adolescence. Adolescence can be a difficult time to communicate about clothing and plans for the weekend, let alone birth parents, birth heritage, and complex feelings. For this reason, parents should seriously consider the advantages to laying the foundation for adoption conversations at a younger age.
HOW SHOULD PARENTS DISCUSS ADOPTION?

While holding his baby, an adoptive parent can say, “We are so happy we adopted you and that we are a family.” Although infants do not understand the words, they absorb the positive, warm feeling connected with the word adoption. In the pre-school years, parents may say, “There are two ways families are formed - one is by birth, the other is by birth and adoption.” (We have learned from adoptees that their stories often left out having been born, increasing feelings of confusion and being different.) “You grew in your birth mother’s tummy/womb, and then we (or I) adopted you. I am/We are so happy that you are my/our son/daughter and that we are a family.”

Laying this foundation, future discussions of adoption will likely include three basic parts: the birth parents’ reasons for placement, the adoptive parents’ reasons for adopting, and the children’s feelings about both. Children’s questions should be answered honestly but age-appropriately. Adoptive parents should never say anything that they will later have to correct. However, this does not mean that parents should share information that a child is not ready to understand. For example, a child placed for adoption by a birth mother who was raped can tell a seven year old that the birth mother did not have a relationship with the birth father and did not wish to parent any child or another child at that point in time.

Some basic guidelines for parents:

- Some children ask a lot of questions, while others do not. Parents need to take responsibility for initiating discussions of adoption when their children do not. Holly van Gulden recommends.

- Throwing out “pebbles” or statements such as, “I wonder which side of your birth family had athletic talent like you.” Children are free to respond they wish, but the message that it is OK to discuss adoption is conveyed. Parents are advised to look for natural opportunities to initiate discussions about adoption, for example by referring to current events, movies or TV shows, or books with adoption themes. (See our website for age-related books with adoption themes.)

- Discussions about other adoptees (particularly positive stories!) can help children believe their parents are open to the topic and willing to talk.

- Some experts recommend sharing difficult information in the later school-age years so that children are not first processing this information under the volatility of adolescence.

- Parents need to find ways to honor their children’s birth parents. They need to convey empathy for birth parents and help their children see their strengths.

- Parents should emphasize that reasons for placement are always about adult circumstances/difficulties.

- Parents need to learn how to accept and validate children’s feelings. We cannot fix the pain of adoption, but we can teach children how to cope with painful emotions. If we do not take this on as part of adoptive parenting, our children will be left to handle it alone or with others. Most of us would never want that to happen.

- Parents need to know positive adoption language.

- Children must have all of the available information before they leave home as young adults.

In families with open adoptions, conversations about birth family will be less speculative and more about reality. Questions can be directed to and answered by birth family members. Adoptive parents may wish to discuss with birth parents ahead of time how to respond to anticipated questions: For example, “Why did you keep Johnny and not me?” “As a single mom, I felt I could only manage with one child. I wish I could have raised you, too, cause you are so awesome. I’m so glad you have a wonderful family and that I get to be with you and see all the wonderful things you are doing.”
TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION PART A: THE BASICS
BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

RESOURCES
For more information on this topic, the Center for Adoption Support and Education suggests the following:

C.A.S.E. IN DEMAND Webinars:

Talking with Children about Adoption (Coming Soon)
Loss and Grief in Foster and Adopted Children (Coming Soon)

Taking the Fear out of Open Adoption

Books:

Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew, by Sherrie Eldridge,

Making Sense of Adoption, by Lois Melina.

Real Parents, Real Children by Holly Van Gulden, Holly and Lisa Bartels-Rabb, Lisa

Talking with Young Children About Adoption, by Mary Watkins, and Susan Fisher,

Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child, by Jayne Schooler and Betsy Keefer

Making Room in Our Hearts by Micky Duxbury

The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass

Inside Transracial Adoption by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg
Part B of this series on talking with children about adoption focuses on the why, when and how to discuss adoption with children. A daunting enough task for many adoptive parents, when the adoption story includes information that might be considered negative or painful, the task for many parents can feel even more challenging. Examples of such stories include birth parents who may have used alcohol or drugs, suffered from mental illness, been convicted of a crime and incarcerated, or conceived the adopted child as a result of rape or extra-marital affair. What a parent may consider difficult information is a very personal experience. For example, some parents worry about sharing adoption stories in which a birth parent is raising biological siblings that were conceived either prior to or subsequent to the adoption, where birth parents later married; or when the birth mother isn’t sure about who the birth father is.

When adoptive parents are faced with such circumstances, in their desire to protect their child from painful feelings, some parents vow that they will never share negative aspects of their child’s adoption story. Most adoption professionals agree that this is not in the best interests of the child. Instead, they believe that children have the right to know everything that the adoptive parents know about the birth family, especially by the time the children are about to “leave home.” They advise parents to consider the ways in which all aspects of the adoption story help children to achieve a better understanding and acceptance of why they were placed for adoption. Instead of protection, most professionals underscore the value of building resiliency in children by teaching them the skills they will need to cope with many of life’s challenges.

There is no question that of course, sensitive information must be shared carefully and thoughtfully. Although parents are advised to tell the truth to their children, consideration must always be given to the child’s age and ability to comprehend information, maturity, and individual personality (e.g. extremely sensitive, easy going, etc.). Holly van Gulden, author of Real Parents, Real Children suggests that children be told difficult information during the latter school-age years (9-12) so that they can address their issues and feelings before the turbulence of adolescence, and because they are likely to be more receptive to parental support. These issues will likely be revisited during adolescence, but may be easier to grapple with if they have already had the opportunity to deal with them during an earlier developmental phase of their lives. Other professionals suggest that parents can wait to share certain kinds of information that might be better understood with the maturity of adolescence.

Whatever the time frame, it is important for parents to help their children make sense of the information. One way is to help children to separate behaviors or decisions their birth parents made from who they are as people. For example, a parent might say, “I believe that your birth mother was a good person who did not have the opportunities or family love and support that you have that might have helped her to make better choices for her life.” This message helps children to develop empathy for their birth parents, which is critically important as children move into adolescence and develop their sense of identity. Children need support to be able to view their birth parents in a positive light while at the same time knowing that they are able to make choices about their own lives separate and different from those made by their birth parents. Again, as stated in Part A of this series, parents are encouraged to emphasize that the reasons behind a child’s placement for adoption are never about the child, but always about adult (birthparent) circumstances/difficulties.
As parents share difficult aspects of the child’s adoption story with their child, they may also want to help their children think carefully about the ramifications of sharing this information with others, especially friends and other peers. Children need help to understand the difference between privacy and secrecy, the latter of which suggests that something is bad and must be hidden. It is important that they be helped to understand that children have the right to decide whom they share their adoption story with. They need to know that keeping any or all aspects of their story private does not mean the information is “bad”, but rather that others may not be able to understand the information and might unknowingly or purposefully hurt the child with that information.

Given the importance of sharing difficult information, and the natural anxiety that parents may feel about this, many adoptive parents choose to consult with adoption professionals who can assist parents with decisions about when, what and how to share information with their child.

Children in open adoptions can often see for themselves some of the challenges facing their birth parents. While this can be troubling, it can also help adopted children to have a clearer understanding for the reasons why they placed in an adoptive family. In any event, children may feel responsible, guilty, confused and desirous to help their birth parents. These will be difficult conversations, and again, they can also happen with birth family in many instances. Again, adoptive parents may want to want to discuss with birth parents how to respond to the child’s questions/concerns.

RESOURCES

For more information on this topic, the following books can help:

- **W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook** by Marilyn Schoettle (Order online at www.adoptionsupport.org)
- **Twenty Things Adopted Children Want Their Parents to Know** by Sherrie Eldridge
- **Real Parents, Real Children** by Holly van Gulden
- **Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens** by Debbie Riley
- **Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child** by Betsey Keefer and Jayne Schooler
- **Making Sense of Adoption** by Lois Melina
- **The Family of Adoption** by Joyce Pavao
- **Making Room in Our Hearts** by Micky Duxbury
- **The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption** by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass
Part A of the series of talking with children about adoption emphasizes the fact that one of adoptive parents’ important responsibilities is to become comfortable with talking about adoption with their children. The fact sheet addresses when and how to share the adoption story, how to answer children’s common and often difficult questions, and how to initiate conversations with children who don’t ask questions. While parents may find the task of talking with children about adoption daunting, most find that when those children become teens, talking about anything is even more challenging. However, it is no less important to communicate with teens about adoption, because difficult as it is, parents need to continue to be a source of guidance, comfort and support through the teen years.

EXTRA CHALLENGES FOR ADOPTIVE TEENS

There are two major tasks of personal growth for all teens: identity formation and separation. Identity formation refers to the need to explore and answer questions independence and self-responsibility – which can be exciting, but scary, sort of a "Leave me alone, but don’t leave me" theme. For adopted teens, these two tasks come with more complexity. Adopted teens must come to terms with their thoughts, feelings and knowledge of birth parents as they face questions related to their identity. They must psychologically, if not physically separate from birth parents. In addition, for some adopted teens, separation becomes synonymous with rejection, and independence feels like abandonment – feelings associated with their first separation from birth parents. Clearly, these extra challenges have the potential to be overwhelming. (SEE FACT SHEET ON ADOPTION AND ADOLESCENCE). Adopted teens who are not able to communicate these troubling thoughts and emotions to someone – either parents or therapists, are at risk for potentially serious emotional and behavioral problems including depression, substance abuse, school failure, etc...

WHY COMMUNICATION IS DIFFICULT

All parents of adolescents at times become confused when their adolescent presents a brick wall of silence or withdrawal, particularly on subjects such as drugs, sexuality, friends, etc. Well-meaning parents who are trying hard to keep the lines of communication open find their teens unwilling to talk. This can happen for several reasons.

Teens may stop talking as a way of getting distance from their parents. Distance helps them to feel separate and independent; it is a normal task of adolescence. Even teens who once shared every thought with their parents as children, may now desire a great deal of privacy around their innermost thoughts and feelings. Parental attempts at communication may fail because the teens perceive their parents’ interest in their feelings as intrusive and/or controlling.

Second, adopted teenagers may not be able to clearly articulate for themselves what they are feeling, let alone convey their feelings to others, especially their parents. Adoption-related issues can be the most emotionally loaded issues they will ever face. A range of feelings may impact the adolescent – anger, sadness, and confusion. However they often are unable to connect the experience of adoption with their feelings.

Third, their feelings and interest in birth parents or birth family may continue to make them feel disloyal to their adoptive parents, which would make adoption an extremely uncomfortable topic for them to discuss with their parents. Teens may also be painfully aware of their parents’ discomfort with their teen’s interest and feelings for birth parents, or it may be the teen that imagines that their parents feel this way. Even adults who were adopted often feel this way, which is why you often hear of adopted people waiting until their adoptive parents are deceased to search for birth relatives.
TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION — THE TEEN YEARS
BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

There are several tools for parents to help prepare for communication with teens about adoption. One is to be aware of their child’s personality and temperament style. Is their child generally quiet and reserved, does he have a flair for the dramatic, or enjoy being analytical? Is she likely to be more receptive to discussion at specific times of the day? Parents also need to be aware of their own moods. For example, many teens complain that they really don’t have their parent’s full attention when they are trying to talk. With so many balls to juggle, parents may think they are giving undivided attention, but if that is not the teen’s perception, opportunities may be lost.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PARENT COMMUNICATION WITH TEENS

1) Send a clear message that you are open and willing to talk about adoption and the adoption story. Find ways to reach out to your teen that diminish the potential for emotional confusion or overload. Certainly there will be many rejections of these attempts, but sometimes you will get credit for the effort!

Some adoptive parents find that they can communicate with their teens around adoption-related themes in an indirect way. With all of the stories in the news, books and movies, and the internet, themes of loss and uncertainty abound. Teens may be willing to share their feelings and views on these stories without having to directly address adoption or their story.

Communicate respect for your teen’s feelings in ways that demonstrate how much you value their opinion. Obviously, you can send this message on many topics, not just about adoption. However, be aware of your own emotions when adoption is discussed in any way—your teen will read you well and watch for signs that you are uncomfortable or disapproving.

2) Look for the ”red flags” that can be evident through their behavior. These signals are ways to let you know what is going on inside. (See Fact Sheet # 10: Red Flags) Some teens, for example, may indirectly communicate feelings through their behaviors and parents will have to “decipher” or make sense of these signals. Example – a teen that suddenly dresses a certain way may be doing so to identify with his birth culture. Parents often miss signals because they may minimize what their teen is feeling when it is difficult for them to allow themselves to really “walk in their teen’s shoes.”

Part of working with teens is remaining upbeat despite the ever-present adolescent angst. Ms. Riley reminds us: ”Teens need to know that parents are human, too. We make mistakes, we miss things - the important thing is to let the kids know we are trying, that we care. Say to your teen, ‘I feel really bad, I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me,’ or ‘I feel bad that I didn’t get it.’ Then, try to learn more...keep trying. This is part of being an adoptive parent . . . try to make sure they aren’t walking alone.”

3) Share all available adoption information. Many parents wish to protect their children from potentially painful aspects of their adoption story. Sensitive information can include birth histories where there are biological siblings to more serious difficulties such as drug abuse, mental illness, incarceration, or sexual assault. Certainly, difficult information must be shared in an age-appropriate manner. However, teens need to have information as they figure out who they are (identity) and while they still have the support of their families (before they actually leave home). As Dr. Joyce Pavao writes in The Family of Adoption, ”It is our job to protect our children . . . from harm. The greatest gift we can give children is to tell them their truths and to help them make sense of these truths, especially when they are complicated and harsh.”

4) Assist your teen in making connections to his heritage and his past. Many adopted children and teens find comfort in acquainting themselves with the places that are somehow a part of their birth family or birth culture. This may include trips to the places they were born, or to locations that are associated with parts of their adoption story or early life experiences. In those places, they may establish connections that provide answers to questions they have had, or they may find it easier to understand choices that led to their placement. Some teens search for specific facts related to their adoption story, and some may actually begin the journey of establishing connections with birth family through reunion with birth family members.
In international adoption, homeland tours have become very popular in recent years. In the absence of information, the experience of the teen visiting his/her birth country can be an important experience to connect the teen with their heritage, culture and place of birth. Families share an emotional experience that can be the basis of communication and shared memories for a lifetime.

For teens in open adoption, teens may find it easier or more difficult to share feelings with their birth family members. Just as they are distancing from adoptive parents, they may distance from all parents— including birth parents, or again, may draw closer to birth family as a way to separate from adoptive family. Teens may also find it easier to confide in the parent of a friend, or a parent’s friend, or favorite aunt/uncle. While parents may prefer it be them, it may be comforting to know that your teen is talking to someone!

RESOURCES

Communicating with teens simply will not be an easy task for most parents. By becoming more private with their thoughts and feelings, the task of separating becomes easier for them. However, the extra set of tasks for adopted teens increases the need for someone who can guide them when emotions become overwhelming. Many times, they cannot turn to their friends, who do not share similar experience with them. Teachers or school counselors may be a resource; however without training, they may not understand the depth of their students’ emotions and/or how these emotions are connected to the adoption experience. Mental health therapists trained in post adoption issues can be an excellent resource for adopted teens.

Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens IN DEMAND webinar and book by C.A.S.E. CEO Debbie Riley, LCMFT

Parenting Adopted Adolescents by Gregory Keck
ADOPTED CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

As school-age children strive to make sense of adoption, their friends, neighbors and classmates who know of their adoptive status are also trying to understand adoption. Adopted children may be asked a variety of questions from their peers (and other adults). Thus, adoptive parents need to know how to help their children answer these unavoidable questions with dignity, confidence, and appropriate consideration to privacy.

To help prepare children, parents need to first be aware of what their children are going to experience. Then parents can help their children anticipate what may happen. Any situation is easier to cope with if children have been able to consider in advance, the ways that they would be most comfortable responding. Their answers to questions will then be more likely to reflect greater comfort and spontaneity.

Parents are likely to find this entire challenge more understandable (and so will their children) if they pay attention to how other children learn about adoption or adoptive families. Look carefully at children’s books for adoption themes (including fairy tales with evil stepmothers and stories about orphans), movies, and TV shows. Also, be aware of how other adopted children in school might be handling their adoption stories—will their choices have an impact on how all adoption is understood? What does the school do to acknowledge adoptive families?

It is helpful for parents to anticipate what kinds of questions their children might be asked in reference to adoption.

The following are some examples:

“Why didn’t you stay with your real family?”

“How come you look different from your mom? Is she your real mom?”

“Is that your real brother? Your hair is different.”

“Why were you adopted?”

“How do you feel about being adopted?”

While it is impossible to prepare your child for every situation, the following suggestions can assist parents in this important endeavor:

Be a model for your child. Your child can learn the most useful and appropriate responses by listening to you field questions and comments about adoption. Generally, your responses should be calm and respectful, even if you determine that you need to let the questioner know that either the question being asked is “not appropriate” and/or that the answer is private. Being hostile teaches others that adoptive parents are “too sensitive”, and nothing about intrusive questions.
ADOPTED CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Ask your child if he/she would be willing to answer questions and take responsibility for choosing answers. This helps to build confidence with your support to help if needed. After a situation occurs, parent and child can discuss other possible responses to help the child learn that there is no one correct response and that he/she has choices about how to handle each situation.

Help your child consider the source and meaning of the question before the response is chosen. Was it well meaning but invasive? Curious and friendly? Ignorant? Unkind?

Acknowledge the often painful or frustrating feelings that go along with being perceived as “different” by others and encourage effective coping skills. Help children to realistically assess problems, anticipate consequences of their actions, make the best choices, and learn from those choices.

Give your child the tool to handle any situation that might come up: Teach the W.I.S.E. UP! program and then practice it together. (The W.I.S.E. UP! Powerbook is available through The Center for Adoption Support & Education, Inc. or C.A.S.E.) This is also a way to continue to open communication about adoption over the years, as you can also share your own experiences with the questions and comments that may be heard about being an adoptive family.

Another suggestion is to find a place where you child can be with others in adoptive families. Children and teens enjoy sharing experiences and learning that they are not alone. Additionally, as your child grows, help him/her to develop a broader understanding of the history of adoption, how it is currently presented by the press, and how literature and movies impact the way that others gain knowledge about it. This kind of background can ease the tendency to personalize the way that others view adoptive families.

RESOURCES

Help your child identify the names of people who might be able to help at school, during neighborhood play, or in various social situations. Advocate for your child by educating another parent or a school counselor or teacher about adoption (e.g. use of positive adoption language) so that they may understand the need for them to step in to assist your child if necessary. (S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators, A Manual for Teachers and Counselors is available through C.A.S.E. to help educators create a positive school environment about adoption and for adoptive families.)
ENTITLEMENT AND CLAIMING

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Adoption and Society

In her acclaimed book, Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother, Jana Wolf, while waiting for her adoptive son to be born, describes feeling “...slightly defective by society’s standards.” This is not an uncommon sentiment experienced by many new adoptive parents. Because society places so much emphasis on biological parenting as the preferred, normal way to build families, adoptive parents must confront the challenge of thinking of themselves as “second best.” Especially when adoption is preceded by the painful experience of infertility and then followed by the emotional challenges of the adoption process, including intense scrutiny by adoption professionals and possibly by birth parents, the potential damage to self-esteem is great. Prospective parents understandably can lose confidence in their ability and right to parent.

David Kirk in Shared Fate notes how critically important it is for adoptive parents to come to terms with all the losses related to adoptive parenting – the lack of a biological connection as well as the loss of “status.” Recognizing the unique needs of adopted children, he notes that it is also necessary for parents to acknowledge the differences involved in adoptive parenting. Acknowledging the differences means that the adopted parent neither overemphasizes their child’s adoptive status nor tries to completely ignore or keep it secret. Instead, the parent recognizes that their family, while like all families, will face special challenges related to adoption as they go through the life cycle. Successful completion of this task will have great impact on a parent’s relationship with their adopted child.

What does Entitlement mean?

Entitlement incorporates all the responsibilities and risks of parenthood. Lois Melina in Raising Adopted Children discusses the importance of adoptive parents being able to develop:

a strong sense that it feels right for this child to be part of the family, and a firm belief that they have the right/authority to parent their child. The process of attaching to a child often parallels the process of developing a strong, firm sense of entitlement.
When parents have a strong sense of entitlement, they are able to confidently and competently meet the child’s needs for nurturance, protection, security and limits. The child is neither neglected nor overly protected, and parents are able to discipline their child consistently, with age-appropriate expectations and methods. If a parent finds that something seems to be interfering with their comfort with either discipline or separation from their child, the parent should consider whether or not their problem relates to some difficulty with a sense of entitlement.

Entitlement can be impaired by a number of factors including:

- Over identification/ overly empathic response to birth parents’ loss (either – “I took her child” or “I must be a perfect parent – never get angry.”)
- Unresolved issues related to infertility (e.g. loss of fantasy child, or “I can’t handle being apart from my child, it makes me feel sad again.”)
- Lack of support from extended family/friends (e.g. grandparent shows preference for biological grandchildren.)
- Unrealistic fears or expectations (e.g. child will feel rejected again and/or reject me if I impose consequences for misbehavior.)
- Oversensitivity to societal myths and perceptions of adoption (“I must be perfect and prove I love my child as much as I would a biological child.”)
- Attachment issues: especially with older children – parents’ difficulty appropriately understanding and responding to child’s attachment to birth or foster family
- Challenges in relationship with birth family in open adoptions (overreaction to birth family’s interest in child.)
ENTITLEMENT AND CLAIMING

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

What is Claiming?

Lois Melina in Raising Adopted Children writes that adoptive parents can develop a sense that their child belongs with them by finding the similarities they share with their children in mannerisms, personality characteristics, or even in physical appearance. This is part of “claiming” a child as one’s own. (“You have Dad’s sense of humor.”) By recognizing and verbalizing these similarities, parents can help their children to not only connect to their immediate family members but also to extended family members. (“You are artistic, just like Aunt Carol.”) They can also share this observation with Aunt Carol!

RESOURCES

Parents who would like to explore the issue of entitlement and claiming in adoption may find these books to be useful:

Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Henig; The Family of Adoption by Joyce Maguire Pavao; Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting an Adopted Child by Holly Van Gulden, Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother by Jana Wolff, Raising Adopted Children by Lois Melina, Shared Fate by David Kirk; Making Room in Our Hearts by Micky Duxbury; The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption by Lori Holden with Cynthia Hass.

In addition, adoptive parent support groups are often safe, understanding environments to explore family connections. Concerns about those connections can best be addressed with an adoption-competent professional.
ADOPTION AT SCHOOL

BY MARILYN SCHOETTLE, M.A. AND ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Of all the experiences we have in life that help us to know who we are and what we can be, school is surely one of the most powerful. School’s enormous influence makes it a critical component in the development of children’s self-concept, including what it means to be part of an adoptive family. From experience and research, we know that it is normal for children and teens to have a wide variety of feelings and thoughts about having been adopted, which can impact school performance in different ways. In turn, kids are often greatly affected by how others at school perceive adoption. If they can receive positive feedback, they will have a better chance of feeling self-confident about themselves.

TEACHERS ARE KEY TO ADOPTION AWARENESS

The school environment can be a wonderful support for adoptees and adoptive families. If educators are comfortable with the subject of adoption, there are many opportunities to help students learn that adoptive families are permanent and real. When teachers understand the normal emotions of adopted children, they can develop effective strategies to address some of the challenges the children face at school, including certain assignments and intrusive questions from others. Most importantly, educators are powerful adult role models who are in a position to easily and simply validate for all children that adoption is a good way to build families.

Unfortunately, educators do not normally receive training to prepare them to talk about adoption. Instead, most of them form their knowledge base like the majority of the public, that is, through personal contact with members of the adoption circle (including students who were adopted) and what they are exposed to in the media. The old standard of secrecy around adoption and the lack of preparation results in uncertainty about what to say. The consequence is often careful silence on the part of educators when adoption comes up at school. The possibility of support is lost, and for small children in particular, their teacher’s silence can be interpreted as disapproval or shame.

Parents are not likely to know all that is being said about adoption at school. By 3rd or 4th grade, most children keep that information to themselves because they realize that it might upset their parents. However, we have learned from both adult adopted persons and children that adoptees are often asked the toughest questions about their adoption stories when they are at school. The questions and comments can be generated for a variety of reasons – curiosity, nosiness, or bullying. School personnel may not hear all of the communication about adoption because adopted children are not told that they can seek help from teachers or guidance counselors when the questions or comments become too much for them to handle. With education about ways to support adopted children, teachers can be made aware how critically important they can be in providing adopted kids with emotional support.
ADOPTION AT SCHOOL

BY MARILYN SCHOETTLE, M.A. AND ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Parents can promote the need for open, informative communication about adoption in schools by talking to teachers and providing them with information about resources for learning more about adoption on their own. Authors such as Holly van Gulden, David Brodzinsky, Joyce Maguire Pavao, and C.A.S.E. C.E.O., Debbie Riley have written excellent books that provide a foundation of knowledge for educators. It is important to remember that teachers need to always be cognizant of the needs of all of their students, and therefore parents are likely to be most successful when they, too, consider the rest of the classroom as they make their suggestions.

Some parents have found their schools to be receptive to the formation of a parents’ committee to advise school staff. For example, the committee might make suggestions regarding speakers about adoption, National Adoption Month activities, or ways to revise assignments that can pose challenges for adopted students, such as timelines, autobiographies, or even the study of genes and family history. Teachers are not always free to change their curriculum, but are usually glad to know how to adjust work for all students that will be more inclusive of differences.

Another way to promote understanding about adoption is to empower children and teens to educate their peers and teachers themselves. Parents can share with their children some of the questions they are asked, and discuss how they handled each situation. Children can be helped to understand that all members of the adoption circle are beginning to speak up to define the boundaries for appropriate discussion about adoption, and that children can let their teachers know more about adoption (but not necessarily about their personal adoption story).
ADDITION AT SCHOOL
BY MARILYN SCHOETTLE, M.A. AND ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

RESOURCES

S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators, A Manual for Teachers, Educators and Counselors is written specifically to promote a positive, informative environment about adoption and adoptive families in the schools. The manual provides background information about children’s developmental understanding of adoption, as well as strategies and guidelines for opening communication about this subject that was for so long kept secretive.

It is available on C.A.S.E.’s website.—adoptionsupport.org.

W.I.S.E Up! Powerbook is a workbook for children based on a simple, easy to grasp program that C.A.S.E. developed to help children handle the many questions, comments and misunderstandings of others about adoption such as “Where is your real family?” “Why did they give you away”? “Why don’t you look like your mom and dad?” It is also available online at C.A.S.E.’s web site—adoptionsupport.org.

An important resource for educators is Child Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov
LGBTQ YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE
BY TONY HYNES

LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system. Multiple empirical studies have demonstrated the prevalence of LGBTQ youth within the system, where they are represented at 1.5 to twice the rate they exist within the general population. They are also more likely to experience discrimination, family alienation, and sexual abuse than other foster youth. For adoptive parents and foster parents it is important to understand that the challenges LGBTQ youth in foster care face do not happen in a vacuum. Illuminating the challenges current and former LGBTQ foster youth face can be indicative of the changes that must be made to help both LGBTQ foster youth, adopted youth and LGBTQ youth in general.

Discrimination Against LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare

LGBTQ youth in foster care generally have more nondiscrimination protections than LGBTQ prospective parents. Still, 13 states still lack explicit nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ foster youth. There are 37 states that provide protections for youth in the child welfare system through laws, regulations, or agency policies: 24 states and Washington, D.C., provide protections on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity, and 13 states provide protections on the basis of sexual orientation only.

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse

LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience consistent harassment and sexual abuse in foster care, juvenile justice settings and homeless shelters (which they often alternate in and out of). Findings show that, when compared with their heterosexual and cisgender peers, LGBTQ youth in the juvenile justice system are twice as likely to have experienced child abuse. At times, they're subjected to dangerous efforts to influence their orientation or gender identity. One such example is conversion therapy, a harmful practice designed to attempt to force LGBTQ identifying individuals to “change” their sexual orientation and/or identifying gender.

Treatment in Foster Care

In a common trend, the Los Angeles Foster Youth Study found that LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to live in a group home and have a higher average number of home placements. They also found that LGBTQ youth are twice as likely to report being treated poorly by the foster care system. Additionally, the percentage of LGBTQ foster youth who were hospitalized for emotional reasons (13.5%) was nearly triple the percentage of similar hospitalizations for non-LGBTQ youth (4.2%).

Homelessness in LGBTQ Youth

Without safe foster care placements, and without the vital support of caseworkers and other child welfare professionals, LGBTQ youth often flee abuse in foster care only to face homelessness and sexual exploitation. Studies have found that between 20 and 45 percent of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. Being homeless is particularly dangerous for LGBTQ youth. During periods of homelessness, LGBTQ youth also face increased risk of physical harm. For example, The U.S. National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that LGBTQ homeless youth are roughly 7.4 times more likely to suffer acts of sexual violence than heterosexual homeless youth.

www.adoptionsupport.org
Copyright © 2021 Center for Adoption Support and Education. All rights reserved. No part of this fact sheet or series may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher.
LGBTQ YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE
BY TONY HYNES

LGBTQ Youth Overrepresented in Juvenile Justice System

LGBTQ young adults are also overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. While LGBTQ youth comprise only an estimated 5-7 percent of the overall youth population in the United States, they represent 13-15 percent of those currently in the juvenile justice system, many of whom are former foster youth.

Lack of Opportunities in Adolescence and Adulthood for LGBTQ Former Foster Youth

One study utilized data from the Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs to compare outcomes of LGBTQ youth to their heterosexual peers. Deficits were found for LGBTQ youth in education, employment, homelessness and financial stability. LGBTQ youth were less likely than heterosexual youth to obtain a high school diploma (43% versus 63%). Additionally, identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual decreased youth’s likelihood of being financially stable and of having work experience by over 50%. Foster youth traditionally face deficits in general in the aforementioned areas, making the disparity among LGBTQ foster youth especially troubling.

What Can Be Done to Help LGBTQ Foster Youth

To help reverse the negative trends facing LGBTQ foster youth, it is imperative that steps are taken to recruit LGBTQ and LGBTQ affirming foster and adoptive parents. Training parents and child welfare professionals on best practices in supporting LGBTQ youth is paramount. Equally important is the creation of specialized programs that create spaces for LGBTQ youth to express the unique challenges they face in affirming, constructive ways. Child welfare agencies should also create community connections that prioritize the importance of supporting LGBTQ and non-adopted LGBTQ youth in all regions of the country, an undertaking meant to decrease the amount of LGBTQ individuals experiencing negative experiences with their families, and potentially leading to a decrease in LGBTQ youth who seek or are placed in foster care.

Dettlaff et al., 2018
Welcoming All Families - Center for American Progress
Ibid
Welcoming All Families - Center for American Progress
Ibid
Sexual and gender minority disproportionality and disparities in child welfare: A population-based study - ScienceDirect
LGBT-Housing-Apr-2020.pdf (ucla.edu)
LGBTQ - Children’s Rights
Shibboleth Authentication Request (umd.edu)
LGBTQ PARENTING
BY TONY HYNES

In 2015, Obergefell v. Hodges, a landmark civil rights case, ended with the Supreme Court ruling that same-sex marriage was legal in the United States. The decision set the stage for broader discussion about the state of LGBTQ individuals and families in the United States as thousands of LGBTQ adults were married for the first time. However, in the years prior to Obergefell, many same-sex couples had already filed for civil unions or married in states where same-sex marriage was previously legalized. Many LGBTQ couples and individuals were already parents as well, with a significant number of families deciding to bring children into their homes through foster care and adoption. Despite the increase of LGBTQ/same sex headed households in the years prior to and directly following the Obergefell decision, much is left to learn about these households. This fact sheet documents some of the common characteristics of LGBTQ families in the United States, along with facts about adoption and fostering among these family types.

Total Number of Same Sex Couples
In 2019, for the first time, the U.S. Census Bureau released estimates of same-sex couples in its annual America’s Families and Living Arrangements tables package. According to estimates from the 2019 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement, there are 543,000 same-sex married couple households and 469,000 households with same-sex unmarried partners living together.

Number of Children Living in LGBTQ Headed Households
Between 2 million and 3.7 million children under age 18 have an LGBTQ parent, and approximately 200,000 of them are being raised by a same-sex couple. Many of these children are being raised by a single LGBTQ parent or by a different-sex couple where one parent is bisexual.

Psychological Well Being of Children LGBTQ Headed Households
Research has frequently found that children from LGBTQ headed households have healthy psychological well-being outcomes. For example, one study, a meta-analysis (examination of data from a number of independent studies of the same subject), which combined the results of 64 different studies to assess six different psychological outcomes, found that a child’s developmental well-being did not vary by parent’s sexual orientation.

Prevalence of State Sanctioned Discrimination Against Prospective LGBTQ Resource/Adoptive Parents
11 states permit state-licensed child welfare agencies to refuse to place and provide services to children and families, including LGBTQ people and same-sex couples, if doing so conflicts with their religious belief. 20 states have no explicit protections against discrimination in foster care based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Same Sex Couples More Likely to be Foster Parents
Despite the discrimination they face within the child welfare system, same-sex couples are six times as likely as their different-sex counterparts to raise foster children. Approximately 2,600 same-sex couples are raising an estimated 3,400 foster children in the US.
LGBTQ PARENTING

BY TONY HYNES

Same Sex Couples More Likely to Adopt
Same-sex couples raising children are also four times as likely as their different-sex counterparts to be raising an adopted child. Among couples with children under age 18 in the home, 13% of same-sex couples have an adopted child compared to just 3% of different-sex couples. More than 16,000 same-sex couples are raising an estimated 22,000 adopted children in the US. Among all children under age 18 being raised by same-sex couples, approximately one in ten (10%) are adopted, compared to just 2% of children being raised by different-sex couples.

LGBTQ Adoptive Parents More Receptive to Open Adoptions
Research also suggests that compared to heterosexual adoptive parents, LGBTQ parents may be more open to contact with birth relatives, a process providing the adopted child with potential supports from both their birth and adoptive families.

LGBTQ Racial Minorities More Likely To Parent
Parenting by LGBTQ couples is more prevalent among same-sex coupled people of color: 20% of white women in same-sex couples are raising children, compared to 41% of non-white women. In addition, less than 10% of white men in same-sex couples are raising children, while more than 20% of non-white men in same-sex couples are raising children.

Poverty and LGBTQ Families
LGBT individuals and same-sex couples raising children face economic disadvantages. Single LGBTQ adults raising children are three times as likely as comparable non-LGBTQ individuals to report household incomes near the poverty threshold. However, fewer than one in 10 of the children in married same-sex households were living in poverty according to 2013 American Community Survey data. In addition, married same-sex couples with children had significantly higher annual median household incomes than same-sex couples who were unmarried—$97,000 vs. $75,000—along with higher rates of home ownership.

LGBTQ Families By Region
Contrary to common perception, childrearing among same-sex couples is actually most common in Southern, Mountain West, and Midwest regions of the country. States with the highest proportions of same-sex couples raising biological, adopted or stepchildren include Mississippi (26%), Wyoming (25%), Alaska (23%), Idaho (22%), and Montana (22%).
“Where are your real parents?” “Why are you a different color than your mom?” “Why do you have two moms?” All were questions I, a Black former foster youth growing up with two White moms, received often. To me, the answers were simple: “These are my real parents, I’ve lived with them almost my whole life.” “I am a different color than my parents because White people have legal guardianship of me.” “I have two moms because two women sought to adopt me.” In time, I realized that people were not asking about my family because they were interested in the present — no, they were interested in the past, in what I had lost. When framed that way many of the questions took on a different tone: “What happened to you?” “Why don’t you live with your birth family?” “Why did you lose your first family?” were how the questions began to sound.

I did not know the answers to these questions or who to get them from. A joint custody agreement had been arranged between my birth family and my moms. I lived with my moms and visited my birth family every other weekend. Like many children in my position, I found myself wondering which family to be loyal to, or rather, which family I was being disloyal too. If I had a good day with my birth family, I refrained from talking about it with my moms for fear that hearing me talk of my day positively would make them jealous of my birth family, or worse, that they would think I did not view them as my legitimate parents. After bad days with my birth family, I worried that if I talked about it, my moms would get angry at my birth family. If conflict ensued, I knew neither one of my families would ever accept the other, that I would always feel caught in the space in between, a space that continued to make me feel as though I was picking which family I was going to belong to, rather than allowing me to share my life with both of them.

The challenges I faced were not unique to me. What I yearned for was for my birth family to be honored. My adoptive family had already been honored. They were honored when the courts decided that they were the more suitable home for me to grow up in. They were honored when I agreed to change my last name to their last name. They were honored when I told a judge at the age of 7 that I would rather live with them than with anyone else. It was time for my birth family to be honored as well.

Sometimes parents ask me what they can do to honor the birth families of their children. The first step I encourage them to take revolves around language. One of my moms got a lesson in this a few years ago. I had just come back from my relative’s house.

“How was Ms. Davis?” My mom said. I paused.
“Mom, could you call her Grandma instead of Ms. Davis?”
“Oh,” my mom said. “Yes. I did not know … I just got to know her as Ms. Davis, and so that’s what I called her. “Yes, I will do that.”

For years I had felt uncomfortable when my mom addressed my grandmother as Ms. Davis. However, it was on that day that I finally realized what I needed from her — to address my grandmother as part of my family, because that is what she was.
Honoring your child’s birth family does not stop with the language you use to describe them. However, it can start there. In the eyes of your child, whether positive or negative, the language you use reveals not only how you feel about their birth families, but about them as well. If you infer that your child’s birth parents are reckless, your child may think that they will be reckless too. If you look down on the class status of your child’s birth parents, they will think you are looking down on their birth family, and by extension, on them as well. Foster youth carry both their own origin stories and that of their birth families. The feeling of coming from an impoverished background does not cease when a foster youth goes to live with a resource family, much like the feeling of being Black does not cease when a foster youth goes to live with a White resource family.

This is why the language you use in addressing not only your child’s birth family, but topics based around class, race, religion and other subjects, remains impactful in regard to the messages you are sending to your children about how you feel about them. You are not alone in undertaking this endeavor. A community of professionals, resource parents and those with lived experience are here to help guide you.

Four Things you can do to honor your children’s birth families:

1. **Encourage your children to write a letter to their birth parents.** The letter can encompass anything they would like it to, from potential questions they would like to ask their birth parents/families, to how they are feeling about their adoptive experience. The beauty of the letters is that they do not have to be shared with you or their birth parents. They are your children’s to keep. If they are younger and do not have the ability to write for themselves, they can dictate what they would like say to a family therapist.

   If your children are in contact with their birth families, they can choose if and when they would like to send the letters. If they are not in contact with their birth families, they may choose to keep the letters in a keepsake. This can also be done even if they are in contact with their birth families. The overall experience allows children the opportunity to express feelings of loss related to separation from their birth families and lets them know that they have your permission to think about and consider their birth families, without judgment from you. Before you send the letters to your child’s birth family, speak with an adoption competent professional about how to establish trust and boundaries between your child’s birth family to enable a safe environment for both families.

2. **Set up times to interact with your child’s birth family if possible.** If possible, set up regular times where your child (and you) can interact with their birth family (either virtually or in person). This act shows that you desire having and maintaining a relationship with your child’s birth family, and that it is OK for your child to want that as well. (Note that your child’s birth family consists of both their birth parents as well as extended relatives, siblings, grandparents, etc.).
3. Celebrate the states or nations your child's birth family is from. Take the time to educate yourself on the history and culture of the places your birth child’s family is from and share that information with your children. If possible, take your children to visit those places. If you are in contact with your child’s birth family, consider spending a day with them in the area their birth parents are from. These actions show your child that their birth family’s histories are things that will be honored and shared in your home, and that you will honor the places and cultures your child’s birth family is from.

4. Don’t withhold information (even if difficult) from your children about their origin stories and birth family histories. Reach out to an adoption competent therapist for information on how to tell your children difficult information in age appropriate ways and remember that your children are the owners of their origin stories.

About Tony Hynes
Tony Hynes, a former foster youth, was adopted by a same sex couple in the mid 1990s. He writes about his experiences growing in his memoir "The Son With Two Moms." Hynes completed his master’s thesis in sociology on the psychology of children within the same sex headed household in 2013, and in the fall of 2017 was awarded a full scholarship to begin doctoral studies in language, literacy and culture at the University of Maryland. His dissertation focuses on social connectedness among interracial adoptees. In his time as training specialist at C.A.S.E, Hynes has designed innovative training curriculums that help families and professionals respond to evaluation and assessment tools that encapsulate holistic pictures of adoptees and foster youth.
Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Loss and Grief While Navigating Coronavirus

By Laura A. Ornelas, LCSW, contributing author

The reality of a global pandemic brings up anxiety for nearly everyone. Few of us have experience with pandemics, and there is no clear roadmap for this one. All the “what if’s” swirling around may be causing you poor sleep, difficulty focusing, mood swings, even a physical reaction in your body like headaches or stomachaches or just sheer exhaustion. You may even find yourself moving through emotional states similar to a grieving process. Many have been experiencing shock and denial the past few weeks, perhaps trying to go about business as usual. As the realization of the restrictions set in, many are experiencing anger, sadness or depression. All of these feelings are to be expected during a crisis of such proportions and are likely a healthy way of moving towards acceptance of the situation and creating a “new normal” for yourself and your family. Acknowledge these experiences for yourself, be kind to yourself, and stay steadfast. Now more than ever is the time to keep your own oxygen mask on. Give yourself permission to take good care of yourself during this time, and you will be in a much stronger place to fend off the virus and continue to care give to your loved ones.

For children who have experienced separations, loss and trauma, the impact of this pandemic may include any or all emotions that everyone else is experiencing, yet also run deeper. Survival instincts that children and youth learned very early on may exacerbate or return. Behaviors like food hoarding or withdrawing into beds or bedrooms, yelling, blaming or being highly insensitive to others may resurface or develop. Other children may exhibit more concerning behaviors like self-soothing through head-banging or even high-risk behaviors like self-harm. Remember that children who have experienced separations, loss and trauma may have learned to emotionally catastrophize because they truly lived in harm’s way and/or deprived conditions. The despair and distrust learned from those experiences could easily get tapped as a result of this crisis, which will most often play out behaviorally.

These kinds of responses show us that children are more than typically anxious and possibly, in a state of fear about the effects of COVID-19. When people are experiencing anxiety, such as with this pandemic, we’re worried something bad could happen. Fear is different than anxiety because it comes from the experience that something bad is happening. While your family may not currently be in immediate danger, your child’s past may tell them otherwise. Their former life experiences may be tripped up in their brains and bodies and cause them to now experience the past as if it were happening in the present.
Before the concern of this virus, you may have noticed this reaction occur with just the slightest amount of “threat”, like when plans got cancelled, or not having the right cereal for breakfast-big reactions to minor stressors.

These reactions may not seem to make sense, but they actually make perfect sense to a child who is searching for control amongst what feels like chaos. And, these days, it’s certainly been easy to see and sense the chaos in the world. So, it is logical that control and fear (possibly even terror) could heighten. Remind yourself that an increase in behavioral concerns are not children’s fault—they are likely reactions to fears about losing you and/or all that they have with your family. They could even be scared about their birth families becoming sick or not having enough food. As always, what they need is our support, emotional stability and compassion.

Acknowledge the fear that this situation could be bringing up for your child(ren):

- It is important to say out loud. It is scary.
- Ask about specific concerns and if the child does not verbalize any, be sure to regularly pepper reassurances into daily life that remind the child that they and the family are safe.
- Keep verbal messages simple, concrete, and focused in the present— you are safe, here now, with our family.
- Be reassuring—we will be doing everything humanly possible to continue to keep you and the whole family safe (we have so much food stocked now, we could never run out!) Even if any of us get sick, we will take care of each other just like always. We will get through this and go back to doing everything like we used to.

Consistency and predictability are critical components of keeping children who have experienced separations, loss and trauma, safe and stable. Yet, a major disruption in routines is a reality that children and families are dealing with across the country right now. It will be very important to create a new schedule and routine, rather than treating this school break like a vacation. Vacations and weekends may be fun when they are planned and have an order. But, the spontaneity alone of how quickly the virus is impacting communities will cause children to feel unsettled.

As part of your routine, make sure you balance relaxation and getting some form of exercise or healthy movement. While you may not have access to your usual activities, both remain important forms of self-care and physical stress release. And, for children who have experienced trauma, exercise can also be a meaningful way for their body to continue to heal.

**Talking About COVID-19 With Children Who Are In Foster Care Or Adopted**

Find the balance between talking openly about the pandemic and allowing kids plenty of time away from those concerns. As always, considering a child’s developmental age is very important in figuring out how to have meaningful conversations.

As with their foster/adoption story, this virus should be explained in ways that the individual child can understand, not giving too little or too many details for their level of understanding. With your words and body language, show the conversation is open for future questions/concerns, try giving the child a bit of control by asking them how much/when/if they’d like to be updated, and be sure to follow through. Just as when children grieve, know that they will probably not be thinking about COVID-19 as
frequently as adults. They will be more focused on what is right in front of them, learning and growing and bickering with other children all the while.

**Talking with Younger Children about the Pandemic**

It may help to show younger children the concreteness of your readiness and to discuss plans if people get sick.

It may be comforting for them to help stock or organize the extra supplies in the house, and you can use this as an opportunity to stay lighthearted, playing nurse, doctor, store stocker! Others may do better with distraction and very little to no talk of the virus, especially birth to five-year-olds.

Keep news programming to a minimum around children, especially young ones. (And, for yourself, resist the urge to continue hearing the news on a loop- check in for what you need to know and maximize the little time you’ll have away from children taking care of what you need to, including yourself!)

Remember that younger children believe the world revolves around them, and especially given the low self-worth of children who have been routinely hurt, they may wonder what they’ve done to cause the virus or make it worse. This can be particularly true if they contract the virus and then others in the household get sick. It will be critically important to reassure children before, during and after these scenarios.

Use affirming messages, reminding them it was not their fault, it could have come from anywhere, and many people are getting it everywhere. Use silly humor where appropriate to give examples and lighten the mood.

Remember that children are children. Forgetting, playing, and hanging out with friends will all be important as with any other time. Allow for this by getting creative about virtual or open-air play dates. Monitor them as you always would.

**Talking with Older Children about the Pandemic**

Tweens and teens do not likely benefit from guarded information the way that younger children do. If they are developmentally able to understand the concept of illness and contagion, they are likely going to look up viruses on the internet and become over or ill informed.

Create space and talk openly about whatever is on their mind and what questions they may have. Do not assume they feel safe or protected
because they say they’re fine, reassurances will be as meaningful for them as for younger children, just phrased at their level.

For those who continue to think about the virus extensively, consider books and movies that discuss global crises that have inspirational characters and hopeful endings.

With plenty of time now on their hands, older children may feel more relaxed or more precocious or both. Free from the pressures of schoolwork and/or a social life, the down time can actually help quiet stress levels for youth. Let them take some time to relax from those pressures, while keeping them accountable to the routine consistency of remote learning, chores, etc.

This is an opportunity for parents and caregivers to thoughtfully approach and strengthen relationships with older children in ways they may not usually have time and focused attention for. These moments will be particularly powerful if you are in a relaxed mood, stay affirming and have no agenda to these activities. Consider listening to what music kids are into at the moment, searching websites together about things they’re interested in, playing video games, wondering about friends or romantic interests, or musing about future hopes and dreams without the prompt of academic concerns or lecturing.

For older children and especially those in foster care or newly adopted, know that the reality is being hit home hard that you are indeed a true family because you are constantly in close quarters. If the child was not ready for this, or simply just has plenty of time to think now, thoughts of birth families could be occurring more strongly than usual. They may choose to use increased time and access to social media and websites as an opportunity to search or communicate. It will be important to keep a gauge on this and continue to open these conversations about it as always.
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.
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.
Mr. and Mrs. Chandler were dedicated foster parents to their two sibling foster children, Demetri and LaShawn, who came into care when they were eight and six. The Chandlers were the children’s first and only foster family. From taking them to monthly visits with their birth family to comforting the children on occasions when their birth parents didn’t show, the Chandlers lovingly cared for Demetri and LaShawn. When the plan changed from reunification to adoption, the Chandlers embraced the commitment to adopt the children and become a forever family. However, becoming that forever family required patience and strength during the four long years that it took to finalize the process.

The Road to Finalization

The Chandlers’ story is not unique. Despite laws enacted to provide permanency, the reality is that a substantial amount of time can pass as child welfare workers pursue the concurrent plan of reunification or adoption. The legal process often involves decisions that can extend the time period for working toward reunification. Time-consuming appeals often occur, whereby birth parents attempt to overturn decisions that terminate their parental rights.

Sometimes it is the foster parents themselves who delay finalization. They may worry about losing the support of the social workers and services they have come to rely on that are part of foster care. The special challenges of raising children who have faced trauma, who may come from compromised beginnings or who are grieving losses including birth family, may make the adoption finalization quite scary. As one parent said, it has been comforting to know that the social worker “has my back.”

Preparing for the Transition

Regardless of the circumstances or time period for finalization to take place, it is imperative for foster families to resist the pull to “drift into adoption.” Having had a child in their home for many years, foster parents may not see adoption as a big change either for themselves or their children. With this belief, parents may not see the need for adoption education, and may then be blindsided when their child begins to express feelings or exhibit behavior that is unusual and distressing “Nothing’s changed,” said Jane, an adoptive parent. “I am adopting Sally, because I love her, and we will go on with our lives as usual.”

For Sally, however, while happy about being adopted by Jane, adoption ALSO involved feelings of loss and change. It meant losing her beloved social worker who had been there for her through four placements, as well as changes in the visitation schedule with her birth siblings. “All I know is foster care, and now it’s just going to be us,” said Sally.
Additionally, Sally’s list of questions about the adoption surprised Jane:
- Should I change my last name?
- Will the school lose my records if I change my name?
- How will my birth siblings feel if I change my name?
- How do I tell my classmates that I’ve been adopted?

Whether the child and the parents feel euphoric, relieved, or ambivalent about adoption, it is important for foster families to be prepared for what adoption really means for all those involved. The many changes that come with adoption finalization should be carefully considered and explored by the foster/soon-to-be adoptive parents.

Parents must understand both their own emotional reactions to all of the changes adoption brings as well as be prepared to address their children’s reactions. One area for exploration is the changes that adoption will mean for birth family contact and relationships. Regardless of open adoption agreements, parents are now in charge of the circumstances around which these relationships will continue. This can be a welcome change or a scary one.

Changes in the frequency of contact likely will impact the children, as will feelings around grief and loyalty that may not have surfaced before. As Maris Blechner and Helene Gershowitz wrote in The Coalition Voice, Fall, 2000, “A child can live in a foster home for years and never touch the issues deep down inside, as long as that child can hold on to the belief that someday he or she is going back to their birth family. However, once the decision is made by foster parents to adopt, a child must look at all those buried issues, in order to decide to be their child.”

Many children seen at C.A.S.E. share their most intimate stories about the neglect, abuse and other trauma they experienced with their birth family only AFTER they are adopted and claimed by a family. They want and need the security of forever parents who will accept them unconditionally and listen to their secrets and worst fears. They need to be securely anchored. Like adults, children will only grieve with people they trust to be there for them. And because so many foster children have had multiple moves, they need to experience that feeling of permanency in their adoptive family before they can address the trauma they have experienced.

Acting out behavior related to grief can also involve a child’s attempt to test the parent’s adoption commitment, sometimes shortly before and often after finalization. A recurrence of old problematic behavior can reoccur as the child may be thinking, “You really want me? If I am bad, will you STILL want me?”

One 9-year-old boy admitted while in therapy with his parents that he felt deep shame for what he perceived as his part in entering foster care. He believed he was a bad, disloyal child. Luckily his adoptive parents were prepared for his challenging behavior and knew how to help him.

Celebrating the Transition to Adoption

One way to mark the important distinction between foster care and adoption is the use of rituals that serve to celebrate this desired change, despite all its complicating emotions. Many jurisdictions require a court appearance for the adoptive family where pictures are taken – even with the judge. Extended family and friends often attend to witness the
signing of the legal documents, showing support for the adoption. Whether you throw a party or celebrate quietly with close family members, it is important to mark the day of finalization. Many families continue to celebrate Adoption Day as a special anniversary to recognize becoming a family. Children frequently tell us that they remember their adoption day. The celebration has great significance for them as they end their journey in foster care and become part of a permanent family.

If your child or your family is experiencing the common challenges involved in the transition to adoption, remember that it takes a village and we recommend seeking adoption-competent professional assistance.
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.

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?”
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.
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.
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.

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: Walk away; say, "It’s private"; Share something about the adoption story; or Educate 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.*
**Supporting Adopted Children with Special Needs in the School Setting**

By Debbie Riley, LCMFT and Ellen Singer, LCSW-C  
Center for Adoption Support and Education

It's that time of year again – back to school, and if you are a foster/adoptive parent of a child whose school year did not end on a positive note last spring, we hope this article will shed some light upon the causative factors regarding early life experiences and adoption that may have contributed to the challenges you and your child faced. Did the school year symbolize yet another year of ongoing frustration, unmet needs, and feelings of helplessness? Or, did you gain some clarity as to the factors that are influencing your son or daughter’s academic challenges but are not sure how to remediate them? And finally, have you come to a new acceptance that something’s amiss but you don’t know what it all means.

No parent wants to see their child struggle in their most important “job” of school. Tearful mornings, countless calls from school, and frustrations homework hassles are the experiences that, unfortunately, may be familiar to many of you. As adoptive parents, you may wonder if being adopted and the experience of adoption increases your child’s vulnerability for school performance difficulties. In fact, the interplay between adoption and learning issues is what frequently brings parents to seek specialized support through C.A.S.E. The variables involved are complex and require professionals who have an understanding of BOTH adoption and learning challenges in children and adolescents.

**What is the Interplay between Adoption and School Performance?**

According to Dr. William Stixrud, a prominent neuropsychologist in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area with whom C.A.S.E partners to address school issues in adopted children, 1/3 of the adopted children and teens seen in his practice have been diagnosed with Learning Disabilities and or ADHD. Researcher and author, Dr. David Brodzinsky notes in his book, *Children’s Adjustment to Adoption*, “Adopted children are at greater risk than their nonadopted peers for a variety of academic problems, especially learning disabilities and attention deficits.”

As a guest speaker in a previous C.A.S.E. webinar, Adoption and Learning Differences, Dr. Stixrud addressed several factors related to adoption that can create academic risk for children. While too often, we tend to downplay the role of genetics in adoption, Dr. Stixrud clearly delineated a strong genetic basis for dyslexia, ADHD, learning disorders and autism. For example, impulsivity is a symptom of ADHD which can lead to risky behavior and compromised decision making that might result in unintended pregnancy, a common reason why children are placed for adoption.

There has been much research into pre- and post-natal variables that have a detrimental impact on brain development. As Dr. Stixrud explains, maternal stress can impact the development of a fetus’ stress response system which has implications for a child’s ‘executive functioning’ (planning, working memory, attention, problem solving, verbal reasoning, inhibition, mental flexibility, multi-tasking, initiation and monitoring of actions.) In addition, lack of proper prenatal nutrition and exposure to toxins including alcohol, cigarettes, illegal drugs, and prescription medicines can adversely impact brain development as well. According to the National Society for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, children who have been prenatally exposed to alcohol are at risk for learning challenges because of distractibility, concrete thinking, lack of organizational skills, and impaired memory.
After birth, traumatic, adverse early life experiences can have a detrimental effect on brain growth and development. The first three years of life are most critical. Dr. Christine Dobson of the Child Trauma Academy outlines the key ingredients needed for healthy brain development: love and nurturing from a primary caregiver; exposure to new people, places, things in the context of a safe, secure primary relationship; and appropriate stimulation to the senses. Many adopted children come from compromised beginnings where they did not experience a healthy attachment with an attuned parent in a safe, nurturing and enriching environment. Instead they may have experienced chronic neglect, abandonment, inconsistent caregiving, multiple caregivers/loss of caregivers, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and/or witnessing abuse/violence while in the care of birth family or other caregivers, foster parents, or institutions. Dr. Dobson notes that traumatic experiences “trump” the impact of normal developmental experiences on the “organizing” brain. And, as Bruce Perry notes, the human brain is a “use it or lose it” organ. There are critical “windows of time” that, when missed, can result in cognitive delays and deficits, some permanent, as with language development.

Traumatic early life experiences are also detrimental to a child’s ‘stress response system,’ creating an increased vulnerability to stress in the future. Children with trauma histories often live in a constant state of arousal, or hyper vigilance. Many traumatized children suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder whose symptoms are similar to ADHD – inattention, impulsivity, difficulties with emotional regulation, and social skills deficits. These trauma-related challenges can all compromise school performance. For international adoptees, learning English as a second language can impact early academic progress. However, Dr. Stixrud notes that the research on language development of internationally adopted children is very encouraging.

How do the emotional challenges of adoption affect school performance?

Adopted as an infant, Sally, a bright, outgoing third grader began to have difficulties in school. She wasn’t focusing on her classwork, denying to her parents that she had homework, and seemed more withdrawn socially, especially at recess. Her teacher suspected that Sally had ADHD and shared her concerns with her parents. After thorough neuropsychological evaluation, Sally was diagnosed with ADHD and mild learning disabilities. Medication and a tutor helped alleviate some of the school difficulties, but Sally remained withdrawn and her parents wondered if being adopted had some relevance to her struggles.

The family consulted with C.A.S.E. and after meeting with Sally and her family, the therapist shared her impression that Sally was struggling to make sense of what it means to be adopted. She had many questions about her birth parents and was clearly grieving her loss. Her withdrawn behavior and trouble concentrating in school was likely a combination of both her learning and emotional challenges. Family counseling was recommended to help the family learn how to communicate about adoption, and to help Sally to express her grief. After several months, there was much improvement.

At C.A.S.E., we certainly see children and teens that have BOTH – neurologically based difficulties like ADHD or LD that impact learning, and who also are grappling with emotional challenges related to adoption. The early grades of school are when children can cognitively understand what adoption means. As they strive to make sense of their adoption story-why they were placed for adoption- they think about birth family connections, what it means to be adopted, being from another country or being a different race from their adoptive family –there’s a lot on their minds... which can interfere with academic performance. In addition, for those children with learning difficulties, the processing of these issues can
be much more challenging. They may need specialized support to comprehend the complexities of being adopted.

Children who are diagnosed with learning challenges often report feeling different from their peers. Add to that feelings of difference related to being adopted, one can see how adopted children/teens can face many challenges in the social domain at school. Unfortunately, these issues of “differentness” can also lead to being teased or bullying about adoption or because of their “special need.” In addition, children with trauma histories may bring their emotional and behavioral issues into the classroom.

Building partnership with the school

To be your child’s school advocate, the first step is to open a dialogue with teachers and other important school staff. You want to glean as much information about how they see your son or daughter and offer any historical information – pre and post adoption experiences, previous academic performance, and professional evaluations to help them better understand the factors that may be contributing to your child’s challenges.

Experience has shown us that a strong, comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation can provide the basis for understanding that is critical in determining effective remediation. Certainly parents can ask to have their public school provide the testing. Unfortunately, schools have criteria that must be met in order to justify providing this service. Many children who are struggling may still not meet these criteria and parents may encounter difficulty in getting the school’s cooperation.

For adoptive families, the evaluation process can be compromised when professionals (school psychologists, psychologists, guidance counselors, teachers, other specialists) are uninformed about the psychological/emotional impact of adoption. We all know that teachers’ lives are quite demanding, and more often than not, they have not been given the opportunity to receive the education needed to understand adoption. As your child’s best advocate, you need to become “an adoption educator.” You can give them resources to help them understand your child. C.A.S.E.’s Safe At School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators Manual helps school personnel understand the connections between adoption and learning, and teaches 5 proactive strategies for creating a positive school environment to support adopted students. (We are revising and updating the manual which will be available for purchase in early 2018.)

C.A.S.E. has partnered with Dr. William Stixrud and Associates to provide our Adoption-Sensitive Evaluation and Support Services (A.S.E.S.S.) program for adopted children and their families. While we recognize that this model is not present in all communities, we recommend that parents do their best to find professionals who have experience in working with adopted children and families.

As parents we want the very best for our children. When it comes to academic challenges, parents are often uncertain what to do and where to turn. We hope this article has offered the reader some insight into factors which may contribute to your child's academic performance.

We hope that this knowledge will empower you in the challenging job of being your child's advocate. Remember that you know your child better than anyone else. Offer clarity about what you know both from a historical perspective and current overview of their educational, social and emotional development. Ask for perspectives from teachers and other school personnel that have a relationship with your child. Reach
out to other adoptive parents in your community to seek recommendations of professionals that are adoption competent.

Most importantly, remember that your child needs affirmation from you that you love them, are not upset with them and will help them feel better about school by accessing the appropriate resources. They may be feeling as helpless as you but can't figure out how to make things better! So as you enter this new school year, we encourage you to develop a plan that will foster a positive school experience for your child.
Dear Ellen: Navigating Teens’ Online Search and Reunion Process

I am worried about my 16 year old son’s activity on social media. I feel uninformed about what he is doing, and worry about his safety. I can’t help but wonder if he is communicating with members of his birth family, and if so, what is he learning from them? I don’t know what to do.

The need to find answers to questions like “Where did I come from?” and “Who am I connected to beyond my adoptive family?” is drawing increasing numbers of preteens and teenagers to utilize the internet as their virtual search engine. They are creating accounts on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for the purpose of connecting with birth families and/or adoptee networks.

In our experience, the use of social media for this purpose is even greater for those teens whose parents avoid the mounting questions teenagers have as to their origins and reasons surrounding their adoption. “There were so many opportunities for my parents to help me sift through my questions,” said Terrie now 19. “Each time I would bring up wanting to know more, my parents would deflect the conversation. I just eventually gave up and went online to gather information.

When it comes to technology and social media, as a parent, your teen may likely have more savvy online skills than you do, potentially putting you at a disadvantage. Parents often report feeling a great deal of anxiety around what their kids are “doing online.” They hear stories about sexual predators and cyber bullying, and hope that their children are not engaged in activities that threaten their safety – emotional or physical. They certainly do not want their children to either be revealing personal identifying information to strangers, or engaging in inappropriate conversations, even anonymously.

Of particular concern to adoptive parents is the fact that unbeknownst to them, their teens may be connecting with birth family members via social media. Parents often feel blindsided to know that their teen has used what little information they have or the acquisition of hidden adoption papers with identifying information, and used social media to find and communicate with their birth family. Similarly birth family members, including birth parents, siblings, and extended family members who have been yearning to have contact with the lost child are also accessing social media as a way to make a connection.

Lisa was adopted domestically in a private adoption when she was an infant. When she was 17, she found papers in a drawer, and having a last name, friended her birth mother, Susan, on Facebook. Susan asked to be able to talk to Lisa’s adoptive mother, but Lisa insisted that her mother would be hurt if she knew Lisa was in communication with her birth mother. She told Susan that she was certain that her adoptive mother would try to stop the communication between them. Believing her, Susan waited until Lisa turned 18 and then agreed to a meeting without the adoptive parents’ knowledge. While the reunion went well, keeping it a secret was so stressful for Lisa that she began to fail at school.

www.adoptionsupport.org
Matthew, 15, was removed from his birth mother because of severe neglect when he was five years old. He was then adopted by his first and only foster mother, Diane. Through FACEBOOK, Matthew was contacted by his older birth half-sister, Kendra, age 18. Kendra had also been removed from the birth mother, and was adopted by her birth father’s brother and his wife (paternal uncle and aunt). Kendra shared with Matthew her serious resentment toward Diane because Diane had not allowed the siblings to remain connected. Confused and upset, Matthew began to pick fights with his mother. During an argument, Matthew finally revealed his communication with his sister.

As these two examples suggest, connections with birth family can be wonderful and healing, but certainly may also trigger strong, complex emotions that your teen should not have to handle on his or her own. Adoptive parents need to anticipate the possibility of their teens using social media to connect with the birth family. They must be proactive in sharing their expectations, wishes and concerns with their son or daughter before their teen is likely to pursue connections without parental involvement, much like talking with children about alcohol and drugs long before their teen may be ready to experiment.

3 guidelines for maintaining open communication with your teen:
1. Establish an open atmosphere in which adoption information is shared in an age-appropriate manner beginning in the earliest years
2. Express empathy, interest and respect for the birth family to dispel your teen’s propensity to feel disloyal around his desire for connection
3. Clearly let your teen know that you will support his need for information or contact with his birth family and that he should come to you with those wishes. Clearly communicate to your teen that while you respect his desire for privacy and independence, you need to be involved in the search and reunion process and that he should not make contact without your knowledge and awareness.

Teens need reassurance that you are comfortable and equipped emotionally to be alongside of them during this journey, which is such an important step in their lives.

Online forums for members of the adoption community to chat with each other have proven useful in providing emotional support and validation for adoption-related (or other) feelings that your teen may be struggling with. The danger, of course, is that your teen may share things that leave him vulnerable to responses that are potentially hurtful and destructive. Carol, a young adult adopted person, offers this advice, “Teach your teen that online life is just like real life. They should use the same behavior and courtesy that they would use when talking with someone face-to-face.”

Many kids feel a false sense of security when communicating online because being shielded by a computer screen feels less real. Your teen therefore may need help in recognizing that the impact and consequences of their online actions are in fact real. Stay engaged with your teen and stay one step ahead by making sure that you are reviewing his browsing history of sites he’s visited online, setting up parental controls if possible, and keeping the discussion flow between you two open and consistent.

The best way to protect your kids online? Talk to them.
http://www.onguardonline.gov/articles/0006-talk-your-kids

www.adoptionsupport.org
EMBRACING OPEN ADOPTION
By Ellen C. Singer, LCSW-C

While contact between birth and adoptive families is also growing in both international and public domestic adoptions, this article addresses voluntary adoptions arranged through private independent or agency adoption.

After four years of infertility treatment back in the 1980’s (before IVF treatment was standard practice), my husband and I adopted our then-two-week-old daughter in May 1987 from an agency in Chicago. I was relieved that my daughter’s birth parents chose not to meet us and did not want any continued contact. I thought I was so lucky. Having begun in the 80’s, I had heard of open adoption and chalked it up to those ‘crazy’ Californians who were always involved in things that were “different, edgy, and nonconformist.” Being someone who is not too adventurous, and somewhat risk adverse, I was quite content to be involved in a much more common, closed adoption arrangement. But truth be told, I just wanted my baby. Infertility was a devastating, traumatizing, miserable experience. I just wanted to feel normal again. I just wanted to be a parent.

As a clinical social worker and adoptive parent, intent on increasing my knowledge of the psychological aspects of adoption, it was less than three years later before I understood that I wasn’t so “lucky”, and that those “crazy” Californians were spearheading the challenge to traditional adoption practice – for very good, very important reasons. But again, truth be told, I was ready to learn this lesson because I was a parent and adoption was no longer about fulfilling my needs, but learning how to best meet my daughter’s needs.

The fact is that 30 years later, closed adoptions (domestic) are rare, and most adoption arrangements involve some type of post-placement contact in the form of letters, e-mails, phone calls and in-person visits. (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute “Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birth Parents in the Adoption Process” by Susan Smith, Nov. 2006). The movement toward open adoption is based on the belief that continued relationships have benefits for all parties involved. Though there has been criticism of some of the “scientific methodology” involved in the research on open adoption, nevertheless, the research that has been conducted supports this belief.

In open adoption, birth parents who cannot raise their children suffer the loss of their parental role, but not the loss of relationship with their child. Their guilt and grief is not complicated by having to live with excruciating uncertainty – without knowledge of how their child is faring, as is the case in closed adoption. Research has shown that birth parents who choose the adoptive family and who have continued contact and/or knowledge experience lower levels of grief and...
regret, and have greater peace of mind with their adoption decisions. (Evan B. Donaldson(Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birth parents in the adoption Process by Susan Smith, Nov. 2006,) 

For adopted children, the ability to maintain relationships with birth families mitigates the degree of feelings of loss, rejection/abandonment. Knowledge of one’s roots contributes to self-esteem, healthy identity development and a sense of well-being. The longitudinal study by Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy (The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project) showed that children in all types of adoption overall showed positive adjustment to adoption. However, the children in open adoptions spent less time engaged in fantasizing about birth families because they didn’t have to. (Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections by Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy, 1998). In addition, “higher degrees of collaboration between the adoptive and the birth families predicted greater socioemotional development.” (Grotevant, Ross, Marchel and McRoy, Adaptive Behavior in Adopted Children: Predictors from early risk, collaboration in relationships with the adoptive kinship network, and openness arrangements. Journal of Adolescent Research, 14.) This longitudinal study has shown that most teens who do have contact with their birth mothers are satisfied with their open adoption arrangements, while the majority of those who don’t have contact, wish they had more. (Evan B. Donaldson e-newsletter February 2007 - Child Welfare League of America Nov. /Dec. 2006 – Adolescents’ Feelings about Openness in Adoption: Implications for Adoption Agencies by J. Berge, T. Mendenhall, G. Wrobel, H. Grotevant and R. McRoy.) 

Adoptive parents who are able to build trusting relationships with their child’s birth family avoid the typical fears many adoptive parents experience – “birth parents showing up on our doorstep”, “wanting their child back,” losing child to birth family,” etc. (Grotevant and McCoy-Openness in Adoption). This study also showed that over the course of time, contact with birth family did not negatively affect the adoptive parents’ sense of entitlement – (their right to parent and sense of authenticity.) In addition, parents who are knowledgeable about the challenges inherent in closed adoption and who believe that open adoption is in their child’s best interest, may experience less anxiety about how their children will fare emotionally. 

Nevertheless, intellectual understanding of the benefits inherent in open adoption is far easier than a person’s emotional readiness to embark on this journey. Infertility and treatment usually leave people emotionally depleted. Furthermore, relationships require work – hard work – and even the most successful ones are not without challenges. Relationships between birth and adoptive family are unlike any other relationship a person may have experienced. There is so much to learn. There is so much fear of the unknown to overcome. Building trust is a process that takes time. That is why the thought of relationships with birth family can feel so scary and so overwhelming for many prospective adoptive parents.
Nancy, mother of 16 year old Allyson (by adoption), and 24 year old Daniel (by birth) states, “We may have been more scared about adoption than most – having already parented a biological child and certain that no child could compare…but we certainly couldn’t imagine what it would be like to meet a birth mother, let alone continue contact with her. We were totally terrified at our first meeting with Robin. When we realized that she, too, was scared, we calmed down and truly wanted to help her feel comfortable. We really liked her, and meeting her helped us to step into her shoes. At first we thought we would keep in touch via e-mail and post pictures online, but over the years, our relationship progressed to visits. Instead of fearing her, we came to respect and admire her for the courage and strength it has taken for her to remain in Allyson’s life.”

Some adoptions are open right from the start. Others become open, at the decision of the adoptive parents, at some later point in time – often middle childhood – when their children are asking questions, including if they can meet their birth parents. Sometimes adoptions are opened at the request of birth parents. I have worked with many anxious adoptive parents who have surprised themselves by eventually concluding that this move on the birthparent’s part was an unexpected “gift.” Sometimes adoptions are opened when it is clear that an adolescent wants/needs to know his birth parents. Preparation and education is key, as it is with every stage of the adoption experience.

Every family creates its own set of acceptable boundaries. When open adoption truly involves contact/visits – the amount can vary – Some families have annual visits, some have weekly contact. Some families vacation together. Some birth parents provide child care for the adoptive family. Relationships work best when the decisions about the nature of the contact are respectfully negotiated between both parties, and when there is an understanding that agreements may be renegotiated over the course of time as needs and circumstances change. Of course there are birth parents who choose not to have post-placement contact at the time of placement. What is most important is that the door is left open should they desire contact at any point in the future, perhaps because they are older, more emotionally ready for contact, and/or the circumstances in their lives change.

Sometimes it is extended birth family members who develop the relationship with the child – typically grandparents or an aunt – such as the case with Cindy and Steve, whose birth granddaughter lives far away. Because of the distance, visits occur about twice a year. Even though it seemed strange at first, Cindy now feels like the adoptive family is really like extended kin. “The truth is that this relationship really developed because of Amy (adoptive mother). She has been so welcoming. I really like her parents, too and we all have such a good time during these visits.”

As with all healthy relationships, these unique relationships require good communication, mutual respect, problem-solving capability, and the ability to set appropriate boundaries, etc. There is much personal growth to be gained by both parties as they work to develop empathy for each other. When conflict occurs and threatens the relationship, it is usually because one or more of these necessary skills needs shoring up. Many times the conflict reflects feelings of
grief – around infertility for the adoptive parents, and relinquishment for the birth family. In this and other instances, family therapy is advised to help resolve these impasses. I have been witness to many painful exchanges and impressed at the understanding for each other.

In recent years, I have met more prospective adoptive parents embracing open adoption. I have also seen a shift toward more adoptive parents being upset when birth parents decide not to continue contact. It is a wonderful shift. It reflects enormous growth and understanding. Whatever the reason behind why a birth parent may not be able to continue contact, birth parents also need and deserve education to fully understand their invaluable roles in the lives of their birth children. They can benefit from emotional support to handle the challenges they may encounter in remaining involved with their birth child(ren) and the family.

Adoption is certainly not a one size fits all experience. While it may be very difficult to think beyond getting through the immediate adoption process, it is extremely important that prospective adopters make it a priority to take the time to educate themselves about adoptive family life. Whatever decisions are made -- are best made from an educated/informed place. Having once “been there” themselves, adoptive parents, including those in open adoptions, are usually very willing to share their experiences with prospective parents.

REFERENCES/RESOURCES

- The Open Adoption Experience by Lois Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia
- Making Room in Our Hearts by Micky Duxbury
- Children of Open Adoption by Patricia Dorner
- Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections by Dr. Harold D. Grotevant and Dr. Ruth McRoy
- Adoption Nation by Adam Pertman
- Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky
- Real Parents/Real Children by Holly van Gulden
- The Family of Adoption by Joyce Pavao
- Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish their Adoptive Parents Knew by Sherrie Eldridge
- Adopting After Infertility by Patricia Irwin Johnston
- Beneath the Mask by Debbie Riley
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
- www.childwelfare.gov/adoPTION
ADOPTING OLDER CHILDREN

By Ellen Singer, LCSW-C
Senior Adoption-competent Therapist/Training Coordinator
Center for Adoption Support and Education

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 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
People adopt children for a variety of reasons. Some people parenting children by birth adopt because of a wish to expand their families and/or provide a home for a child in need. Single people wishing to parent often adopt. Some adopt because they feel that they are too old to pursue pregnancy and birth. And of course, both singles and couples adopt as a result of primary infertility and secondary infertility* (failure to conceive after having biological child(ren). For these would-be parents, adoption is usually a second choice, or even a third choice for those who attempted and failed to conceive through “third party reproduction” (donor egg or sperm, surrogacy, etc.) While the decision to adopt after infertility comes easily to some people, most people do not experience this decision as easily. Instead, the decision making process in adoption is usually quite difficult, emotionally challenging and involves quite a bit of “soul searching.”

**Loss and Grief**

When a person is not able to conceive, he or she is forced to confront just what it means to them to be a parent. Such contemplation involves a very personal, individual process. This is why it is so vitally important to recognize that the well-meaning advice of others can be so troublesome. While adoption is a wonderful, valid way to build a family, it is not a “solution” to infertility and is not the right option for everyone. Infertility encompasses many kinds of losses which adoption cannot “fix” including:

- Loss of the fantasy biological child or additional biological children
- Loss of genetic heritage
- Loss of self-esteem related to ability to reproduce
- Loss of the pregnancy and birth experience
- Loss of control/privacy

The only loss that adoption can fix is the loss of the parenting experience. To make the decision to adopt, people must acknowledge, explore the significance of and grieve for all the losses which adoption cannot “cure.”

When someone is grieving, they move back and forth between the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. As a result, it is not uncommon to vacillate in one’s desire to pursue fertility treatment versus considering an alternative option such as adoption. In addition, as grieving is an individual process, one member of a couple may be ready to consider adoption while their spouse is not. It is important to recognize how grief can impact one’s feelings about adoption. A lack of enthusiasm about adoption may not mean that a person will never want to consider adoption as much as it may reflect the fact that the person needs more time to work through the losses associated with infertility. On the other hand, couples who move quickly into adoption need to make certain they are not doing this to avoid the painful feelings of grief, as this can result in difficulties later on.

**Is Adoption Right for You?**

There are many important questions that all prospective adoptive parents can ask themselves to help determine both IF adoption is the right option for them to build their family and WHICH OPTION they may wish to pursue (domestic, international, same race vs. transracial, open adoption, etc.)

- Can I accept and love a child that I did not give birth to, who may look nothing like me and who may be very different from me?
- Can I cope with little or no information about my child’s birth family, or with difficult information?
Making the Decision to Adopt  
(continued from page 1)

- How do my extended family members feel about adoption?
- What type of child can I love? Can I love a child of a different race? Am I prepared to incorporate my child’s race/culture into the family, ensure that my family has significant, meaningful connections with people of my child’s race/culture, and help my child/family learn how to deal with racism?
- Can I respect the significance of the birth parents to my child and provide an open atmosphere in which adoption is freely discussed, questions welcomed and feelings validated?
- How do I feel about relationships with birth parents and their families?
- Adoption is a one-time event with lifelong implications. Am I committed to my education about adoption to meet my child’s needs over time?

It is important to note that attitudes and feelings about adoption can change over time and with experience, confidence and continued education. When people do decide to pursue adoption and learn about the different options, sorting out the plan that is right for them can be complex. In addition to the above questions, prospective adoptive parents must evaluate how the options fit with each person/couple’s unique priorities, personalities, beliefs and resources. Some couples may choose to adopt a child of another race or culture because they feel it will enrich family life as they strengthen or cultivate relationships with people of different races. Others may value their privacy as a family and feel less comfortable with a transracial adoption that means the likelihood of dealing with public attention and experiencing racism. Some adopters will actively pursue an open adoption, believing continued contact post-placement is in everyone’s best interests. Others may need to work on building trust with birth parents over time before being comfortable with increasing contact. Whatever option is decided upon, it is recommended that prospective parents connect with others who have pursued that option for ongoing moral support and advice. It is also recommended that if you think you want a “closed adoption,” you need more education to understand the importance of birth parents to adopted children. Of course, not every family may be able to have contact with birth parents for many reasons—but that should be viewed as something unfortunate, not desirable.

Adoptive parents gradually find that, although adoption may have been their “second or third” choice for building a family, it no longer feels like “second best.” Until placement occurs, however, feelings of ambivalence may remain because of normal anxiety related to the “unknown.” (Even people who are about to give birth often feel ambivalent!) The belief that adoption is not “second best” may not come until after placement; consequently, many people experience the decision as a “leap of faith.” Connecting with other adoptive parents is extremely beneficial during the “waiting period” between the decision to adopt and actual placement.

Adoption Education

Ambivalence about adopting can also surface in response to many aspects of the adoption process and adoptive family life. The decisions involved in determining which type of adoption to pursue, in addition to the home study process, paperwork, costs, time commitment, uncertainty, invasion of privacy, possible foreign travel, etc. can be daunting or overwhelming for people. Stories about people’s negative experiences with adoption can be frightening. Therefore it is imperative that prospective adopters learn as much as possible about adoption to dispel myths, misinformation and distorted media presentations. There are many avenues to take to learn about adoption:

- Read books/articles about adoption (Visit the C.A.S.E. website at www.adoptionsupport.org in February for resources and a bibliography of recommended books.)
- Attend workshops, webinars and adoption agency information meetings
- Connect with adoptive family support groups – talk with adoptive parents, adopted adults, birth parents
- Consult with a C.A.S.E. or other adoption-competent therapist

www.adoptionsupport.org
8 Ways to Engage with Your Child & Encourage Family Communication

1. *Share photos and videos of the first days with your child and retell her adoption story.*

2. *Engage in an activity* with your kids that you loved to do during summertime. Pass on fun family traditions and encourage them to do the same!

3. *Help your kids connect to their early history.* Write letters and send photos to people who were a part of their lives before they entered yours.

4. *Build stronger connections to extended family members.* Visit cousins and grandparents!

5. *Explore your child’s racial/ethnic heritage.* Visit a local cultural festival or take a trip to the city where your child was born.

6. *Help your child or teen practice the W.I.S.E. UP!sm Program:* find a cozy place to review the Powerbook activities.*

7. *Read a book or watch a movie together* with a foster care or adoption related theme.

8. Play our card game* “52 Ways to Talk About Adoption” which encourages families to discuss adoption-related topics in a fun and interesting way.