



# TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 6

## TALKING ABOUT ADOPTION: THE TEEN YEARS

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

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. For more information on these conversations, see *Talking with Children About Adoption: The Basics* and *Talking with Children About Adoption: Difficult Conversations*.

### EXTRA CHALLENGES FOR ADOPTIVE TEENS

There are two major tasks of personal growth for teens: identity formation and separation. Identity formation refers to the need to explore and answer questions about independence and self-responsibility. This can be exciting, but scary, with most teens feeling 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. For some adopted teens, separation becomes synonymous with rejection, and independence feels like abandonment—feelings associated with their original separation from birth parents. These extra challenges have the potential to be overwhelming. (See *Adoption and Adolescence* topical brief.) Adopted teens unable to communicate these troubling thoughts and emotions to someone, either parents or therapists, are at risk for serious emotional and behavioral problems including depression, substance abuse, school failure, etc.

For teens in open adoption, relationships with birth family can also get more complicated during this time of life. Teens may also find it more difficult to share feelings with birth family members. Just as they are distancing themselves from adoptive parents, they may distance themselves from all parents, including birth parents. Some teens may draw closer to their birth family to separate from their adoptive family. Adoptive parents who continue to build strong relationships with their children’s birth family members can help ensure that they are working together to support the teen during these changes.

### WHY COMMUNICATION IS DIFFICULT

Most parents of adolescents 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 a couple reasons:

[Continue Next Page](#)

- **Teens may stop talking as a way of getting distance from their parents.** Distance helps teens 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 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 or controlling.
- **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 teens will ever face. A range of feelings may impact the adolescent, including anger, sadness, and confusion. However, they are often unable to connect the experience of adoption with their feelings. Their feelings and interest in birth parents or birth family may make them feel disloyal to their adoptive parents, which would make adoption an extremely uncomfortable topic 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.

## EFFECTIVE PARENT COMMUNICATION WITH TEENS

There are several ways parents can prepare for communication with teens about adoption. The first is to be aware of their child's personality and temperament style. Is their child 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? Do they have the best conversations while walking or driving? Are there favorite books, movies, food, etc. that help the teen feel more comfortable or willing to be parented?

Parents also need to be aware of their own moods and circumstances. For example, many teens complain that they really do not 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.

Once the stage is set, parents can follow these principles to ensure the most effective conversations:

- **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. Some adoptive parents find that they can communicate with their teens around adoption-related themes in an indirect way. With all the stories in the news, books, and movies, and on 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 their own story. Or they may be a gateway to a more personal conversation. 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.
- **Look for what is behind their behavior.** Behaviors can be signals to let you know what is going on inside. See Topical Brief #10 Red Flags Becoming a behavior detective is a key part of being a parent of a child who has experienced loss or trauma, including through adoption. For example, a teen that suddenly dresses in a certain way may be doing so to identify with his birth culture. Or a young person

**Continue Next Page**

might be acting out around holidays as they think more about what they lost in sharing those days with birth family members. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect may overreact to slightly tricky situations because their past trauma has made them more reactive to potential danger. 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.

- **Remain engaged and keep trying despite adolescent angst.** C.A.S.E. CEO Debbie 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 bad, I don’t understand what you are 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 are not walking alone.”
- **Share all available adoption information.** Many parents want to protect their children from potentially painful aspects of their adoption story. Sensitive information can include birth histories where there are biological siblings who stayed with birth parents to more serious difficulties such as drug abuse, mental illness, incarceration, sexual assault, or abuse and neglect of the child by birth family members. Difficult information must be shared in an age-appropriate manner, but 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 leave home). As Dr. Joyce Maguire 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.” As explained in the other two topical briefs on talking about adoption, sharing information over time is the best practice rather than dumping a lot of difficult information on teens.
- **Support teens’ desire for reunion with or connection with birth family.** As they work to establish their identity, adopted teens may want more information about or connections with birth family members. This is a natural development that adoptive parents should be prepared for. Make sure your teens know that you are open to these connections and will support them as they move forward. Talk about the fact that some teens feel divided loyalty if they are thinking about birth parents, but that you do not see it that way. Your goal is to make sure your adolescent feels that you can be a supportive partner in their efforts to learn about or connect with birth family members.
- **Help your teens make connections to their heritage and past if you have not already; if you have, keep working on it.** Many adopted children and teens find comfort in acquainting themselves with the places that are a part of their birth family or birth culture. This may include trips to the places they were born or to locations 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. During these visits, some teens search for specific facts related to their adoption story, and some may begin the journey of establishing connections with their birth family.

For children adopted from other countries, homeland tours 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.

- **Support relationships with others who may be able to help.** By becoming more private with their thoughts and feelings, the task of separating from parents becomes easier for teens. At the same time, the extra set of tasks for adopted teens increases the need for someone who can guide them

**Continue Next Page**

when emotions become overwhelming. Many times, they cannot turn to their friends, who do not share similar experiences 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 adoption issues can be an excellent resource for adopted teens. Support groups for teens can also help teens explore their feelings. Teens may 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

### C.A.S.E. Topical Briefs and Articles

- Talking with Your Children About Adoption: The Basics
- Talking with Your Children About Adoption: Sharing Difficult Information
- Adoption and Adolescence
- [Preparing for Search and Reunion](#)
- [Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships with Birth Families](#)

### Books

- [\*Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens\* by Debbie Riley, M.S. and David Meeks, MD](#)
- [Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens IN DEMAND webinar](#)
- [\*Beneath the Mask: For Teen Adoptees: Teens and Young Adults Share Their Stories\*](#)
- *Parenting Adopted Adolescents* by Gregory Keck and Regina Kupecky