



# TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 2

## CHILDREN AND ADOPTION: THE SCHOOL AGE YEARS (6-11) A GROWING UNDERSTANDING OF LOSS

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

The age at which a child can begin to understand more fully what it means to be adopted varies. However, it is during the school-age years that children come to grips with the fact that they had to first lose significant people in their lives—namely, their birth parents and other family members—in order to become part of their adoptive family. Even though open adoptions can reduce children’s feelings of loss, children are unable live with their birth parents and siblings.

The feelings of loss that surround such a profound realization are experienced in a myriad of ways, depending on unique personalities, personal history, age at placement, and the nature of contact with birth families. The central challenge for children at this age is to make sense of adoption while trying to answer a complex question: Why were the people who gave birth to me unable to raise me? Feelings will range in intensity and may manifest themselves in a variety of behaviors.

The school-age years mark the time when children reach new levels of thinking, wondering, questioning, and learning. They are also more likely to hear questions and comments from friends and classmates who may have varied, and even negative, understandings and feelings about adoption.

Adoptive parents (and birth parents in an open adoption) should continue discussing adoption regularly with their school-aged children, adding more developmentally appropriate information about their circumstances and responding to questions.

### THE GRIEF REACTION IS A NORMAL AND ADAPTIVE RESPONSE

In adoption, a child can lose much more than birth family members. Losses can include race, country, language, culture, and other significant people: foster parents, orphanage staff, other caregivers, teachers, friends, etc. In response to their sense of loss, children often experience a grief reaction. Although this can be difficult for parents, it is normal and adaptive. The intensity may differ from child to child, but the grief reaction may manifest in the form of:

- Withdrawal
- Angry outbursts or acting out behavior

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- Daydreaming or pining behavior
- Difficulty concentrating in school
- Falling school grades

Adoptive parents can help children manage their emotions and their reactions to those emotions by making sure children know they can talk about their adoption and by helping them acknowledge and even grieve their losses. Parents can look for triggers for behavioral challenges (such as discussions about relatives, holidays, etc.) and provide opportunities for children to share how they are feeling. On Mother’s Day, for example, adoptive families can talk about the child’s birth mother and make a point of honoring her.

## **MAKING SENSE OF ADOPTION**

School-aged children 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 are not with their birth parents, they may formulate explanations such as:

- “This happened because I was bad. I cried too much, misbehaved, didn’t follow directions.” (I am to blame.)
- “My birth parents were irresponsible and selfish. They should have married.” (If they placed the child because they were single). “They should have stopped using drugs.” (If addiction was the reason for a child entering foster care) (Birth parents are to blame.)
- “What if I was kidnapped by my adoptive parents?” (Adoptive parents are to blame.)

Parents who have details about why birth parents chose adoption or were not able to raise their child can share information that helps allay these concerns. For children whose parents abused or neglected them, it can be important to show empathy for the parents and why they may not have been able to do what was best for the child. Explaining, for example, that addiction is an illness that is difficult to treat. It is vital parents reaffirm that the adoption was the result of adult decisions and actions or even systemic issues such as poverty or lack of opportunities, *not* anything the child did.

## **COMMON FEELINGS**

Children of this age often struggle with a variety of feelings relating to their adoption story, including concerns about their permanence in their adoptive families, even with reassurance from their parents. They may express fears about being returned to the birth parents or of somehow losing their adoptive families. (If their first parents made an adoption plan, why can’t the new parents?) 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. Parents should continue to answer questions honestly and affirm the child’s frustration or regret when parents do not have enough information to share.

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

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children who were adopted. Adoptive parents can help by sharing information about birth family members and, for international adoptions, about the child’s country of origin.

Children may also experience great pain over feeling different from their adoptive families, especially if they are of a different race or ethnic background. Building meaningful relationships with children and adults that share the child’s background can keep them from feeling alone. Children of school age may also feel different from their peers who are not in adoptive families (or transracial or LGBTQ+ families). Providing ongoing opportunities to build relationships with families like their own is critically important for children at this age. Parents can also emphasize what the child has in common with their adoptive family and what the families like to do together.

Because of the complexity of feelings, adopted children often experience what Barbara Cain calls “double dip” feelings. They learn early the concept of ambivalence—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 or angry that they are not with their birth family, not in their birth country, not being raised with people of their racial, ethnic, or cultural heritage. Adoptive parents can help normalize these feelings by asking or talking about them or sharing their own experiences of having mixed feelings, such as about loving their current house, while also missing a former neighborhood.

Children who were adopted at older ages or who experienced abuse and neglect may face additional challenges. While many children demonstrate remarkable resiliency in response to difficult early life experiences, children who experienced early trauma 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 should seek out support and education to be “healing parents.” Many of the books listed below talk more about being a healing parent and are a great resource for adoptive parents.

Children in open adoptions may still grieve the loss of being raised by their birth family, and if their birth family is vastly different (race, ethnic background, country of origin, socioeconomic status, etc.) from their adoptive family, they may struggle to make sense of those differences. And a child can still be hurt by a birth parent who cancels a visit or cannot be as involved in their lives as the child wishes.

## LEARNING MORE

There is no substitute for a sensitive, caring parent who is willing to talk about adoption—both the facts of the child’s adoption and any related emotions. Parents can undertake the following to help their school-aged children:

- Adoption expert Holly Van Gulden suggests that parents **deliberately and regularly make brief comments about adoption** that will indicate their willingness to talk more. Parents who are ready and willing to answer questions can really help their school-aged child navigate the complexities of adoption.
- Parents can increase their understanding of the school-age child by **attending adoption support groups and accessing adoptive parent educational programs**, workshops, and webinars like those offered by the Center for Adoption Support and Education.

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- Parents can also help by **connecting their children to other adopted children** through support groups, cultural events, or camps.
- Another way to help children normalize adoption and the child's feelings around it is to **read and discuss books, movies, and shows with adoption themes.**

## RESOURCES

### Other C.A.S.E. Resources

- Talking To Children About Adoption: The Basics
- Talking to Children About Adoption: Sharing Difficult Information
- Helping Adopted Children Respond to Questions
- Adoption at School
- The **W.I.S.E. UP! PowerBook** is an excellent tool for opening communication between parents about how and when to address the questions and comments of others about adoption. This can be purchased on the C.A.S.E. store at [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org).
- **52 Ways to Talk About Adoption** is a unique card game 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](http://www.adoptionsupport.org).

### Books

- *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 All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* by Nicole Chung

For parents raising children adopted at older ages:

- *Parenting the Hurt Child* by Gregory Keck and Regina Kupecky
- *Nurturing Adoptions* by Deborah Gray
- *Wounded Children Healing Homes* by Jayne Schooler, Betsy Keefer Smalley, and Tim Callahan
- *The Connected Child* by Karen Purvis, David Cross, and Wendy Lyons Sunshine
- *Parenting Your Internationally Adopted Child* by Patty Cogen

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For families in open adoption:

- *Making Room in Our Hearts* by Micky Duxbury
- *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption* by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass