



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 3

ADOPTION AND ADOLESCENCE

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Many parents feel apprehensive about adolescence and its association with turbulence—negativity, rebellion, and change. Additionally, the pressure of adoption-related issues may lead adoptive parents to experience even greater worry. Understanding the interplay between adolescent issues and adoption is critically important for adoptive parents.

TYPICAL ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Beginning in the preteen years and continuing 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 how they may want to be alike or different from them. Further forming their own identity helps teens begin separating from their parents, developing independence, and preparing for adulthood. To form unique identities, and to separate from their parents, teens may choose vastly different options about how to dress and behave. They are influenced by their peers. All of this is normal and should be expected.

ADDING THE COMPLEXITIES OF ADOPTION

Adolescence can be especially challenging for those who are adopted. During this developmental stage, adoptees begin to connect adoption to their sense of identity. Not only do they need to consolidate their identity—to see how they are alike and different from the parents who raised them—but 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 the information they have and bring to light reality vs. fantasy and honesty vs. secrecy. Adolescence is the life stage during which parents must provide teens with any missing pieces of the puzzle they have not already shared. Adoptive parents can also support their teens as they seek answers that the family does not already have.

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 regarding values, behaviors, decision-making, etc. When the birth parents' known (or perceived) values or lifestyles are vastly different from the adoptive parents, adoptees

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may choose to identify with their birth parents—at least for a while. Factors such as whether they know their birth parents and how much information they have about them will have a significant impact at this stage. Teens may try to over-identify with a known or perceived characteristic of their birth parent.

Adolescents adopted into families of a different race, culture, or heritage have additional challenges to face with 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. Parents who have meaningful relationships with birth family members or other members of their child's race or culture of origin may be able to help the child continue to build their own connections and comfort with their racial or ethnic identity.

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 about their sexual behavior. Adopted children who were placed voluntarily because of an unplanned pregnancy may want to share an experience that the birth parents had (including an unplanned pregnancy) or may judge their birth parents for getting pregnant, especially if their adoptive parents or others around them have been judgmental about that.

Research indicates that adolescents who were adopted are at higher risk for teen pregnancy. Some adoptees who do not have contact with any birth family members may desire a baby, so they have a biological connection with someone in their life. Children who were abused or neglected may be at higher risk for being sexually exploited or abused.

CHALLENGES

As teens' knowledge about adoption becomes more sophisticated and complex, their 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. In addition, teens who were adopted often struggle with anger over the fact that important life decisions—decisions in which they had 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 than their peers. An adopted adolescent may be more prone to act out depression through indirect, but negative behavior including substance abuse, loss of interest in school, etc. Additionally, an adopted adolescent may be more prone to overreact to other losses experienced during this time, such as the end of a friendship or romantic relationship. Adopted adolescents may also experience more difficulty leaving home because the sense of loss or even rejection can activate the sense of loss or rejection inherent in adoption. The 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 struggle with identity issues—especially if there are racial, socioeconomic, cultural, or other differences between their birth and adoptive families. In their desire to feel independent of the family imposing rules and expectations, they may seek or feel a stronger connection with their birth family. Both families may struggle to set appropriate limits and boundaries.

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COMMON FEELINGS FOR TEENS

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

Adoptive parents can help teens address these feelings by having open and honest conversations about adoption, as well as seeking professional help when the feelings seem too big for the teen to handle.

EXPLORING THE NEED TO SEARCH FOR BIRTH PARENTS

Regarding meeting birth parents, adoptive parents must take teens' interests seriously and explore their motivation and needs. Parents should validate teens' desire to know more and to make connections with people who are an important part of their identity and do all they can to support these connections. Professional assistance is advised to explore your teen's readiness, expectations, and preparation for reunion.

There is no more "wait until you are 18" in this age where social media can allow children to find and connect with relatives. This can be scary as parents often believe their child is not ready. In fact, it may be the parent who is not ready. Parents may need their own counseling or help from other adoptive parents whose children have birth family connections to be able to distinguish their own feelings and readiness from their child's.

Adoptive parents need to have expressed openness to birth family information and connections over time, so that their teens do not shut them out of their own feelings or even actions to learn more about their birth family. Before adolescence, parents should clearly deliver the message they will assist them with search and reunion to the best of their ability when their child is interested.

PARENTS CAN GET SUPPORT

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 to learn how to "let go" and connect with their teens simultaneously. Suggestions include:

- Adoptive parent groups, including those that focus on the teen years
- Groups or activities for teens who have been adopted

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- Community events, trainings, blogs, and other resources created by or led by adoptees
- Books and other resources, including those written by adoptees about identity

RESOURCES

Other C.A.S.E. Topical Briefs or Articles

- Talking About Adoption: The Teen Years
- [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: For Teen Adoptees: Teens and Young Adults Share Their Stories*](#)
- *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
- *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* by Nicole Chung