Adoption and the Stages of Development

Now that you have adopted a child and life is beginning to settle down, you may find your thoughts moving to the future. When shall I tell my child that s/he is adopted? How will s/he feel about it? At what point will s/he want more information? What will s/he want to know from me? How can I help my child feel comfortable about being adopted?

What's Inside:
- The first year
- The second year
- Ages 2 to 6
- Elementary school years
- Adolescence
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The Second Year

Toddlers continue the attachment and separation cycle in more sophisticated ways in the second year. They learn to tell you how they feel by reaching their arms out to you and protesting vigorously when you must leave them. Anxiety about separating from you heightens, and they may begin to express anger. During this stage, when you must guide and protect your child, you become a “no” sayer. It is not surprising that your child becomes frustrated and shows it in new ways. Helpless crying usually comes first. Later your child may exhibit aggressive behavior such as throwing things, hitting, pushing, biting, and pinching. Much of this behavior is directed toward you but some is directed at the child’s peers. Such behavior often puzzles and frightens parents. You may wonder if your child is normal. Adoptive parents often worry that an unknown genetic trait is surfacing or that the “orneriness” has something to do with the adoption. Sometimes they think ahead to the teenage years and wonder if these are early warnings of trouble ahead.

It helps to know that this kind of behavior is typical of toddlers, who have conflicting wishes about their push toward autonomy and their anxiety about separating from you. Almost all children go through a “me do it myself” phase, accompanied by temper tantrums and toilet training battles. Handling tantrums, setting limits, and encouraging language development and the expression of feelings consume most of your time and patience.

In the first 2 years, the stages of attachment, the beginnings of separation, and the expression of anger and aggressiveness probably are the same whether your child is adopted or not. Even in homes where the word “adoption” has been used frequently and the child can pronounce it or even say, “I’m Susie, I was adopted from Chicago,” the words have little meaning. What is especially important is that your adopted child has the opportunity to pass through the attachment and early separation stages in the same way as a child born to you.

When older babies or children are adopted, their capacity to form relationships may have been disturbed. A series of caretakers and broken attachments through the first months of a child’s life can complicate adjustment and compromise the ability to develop trust. You may need to work much harder to let your child know that you care and that you will always be there. Even if your baby received nurturing care before joining your family, s/he can still benefit from your understanding the significance of attachment and the importance of loving interaction.

If you adopt cross-culturally, it will be helpful for you to learn about attachment behavior in that culture. Consider for instance a family who had adopted a 7-month-old Asian baby. When the baby cried, she could not be comforted by holding; she would only quiet down if she were laid on the floor near her mother and spoken to softly. Once she became calmer, she would crawl into her mother’s lap for a hug.

There is another example of a baby adopted from Peru who needed to sleep with an
As you observe your children and others, you will notice that both boys and girls imitate their parents' nurturing and caretaking activities. They carry, feed, change, and put to bed their dolls and stuffed animals. They kiss them and sometimes throw them or hit them.

They are mimicking attachment and separation behaviors. If a baby enters the family, many 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds insist that it is their baby, that they “borrowed” it or “adopted” it. Sometimes a girl will tell you that it is her baby and that Daddy is the father. A little boy might say that he is going to “marry Mommy when Daddy grows up and dies.” If you listen, you will see that your child is trying to make sense of the relationships in the family and to find a way to express the strong emotions of love, hate, and jealousy.

It is puzzling for children to understand why mom and dad get to sleep together while they have to sleep with two trucks and a bunny. You are witnessing what is known as the Electra complex in girls and the Oedipal complex in boys. Little girls may feel jealous of their mothers’ grownup relationship with their fathers. They experience a mix of feelings which includes wanting to marry Daddy but feeling competitive and fearful that they will not “measure up.” Little boys may want to be mommy’s partner in everything and show off their developing “manliness.” They do not understand why Daddy should be included but worry that Daddy will be upset with them for the way they feel. All of this behavior is normal for children this age.

There is also an aggressive, competitive side to this stage. You may notice behavior that is challenging, stubborn, and argumentative, usually directed toward the same-sex parent. Girls argue with their mothers about what to wear, what toys to leave at home, and who is the boss of the baby. Boys want to talk about what they will do when they grow up, and even in the most peaceful of families, they will turn all sorts of items into weapons which they yearn to use on the draperies, the baby, and, in frequent moments of frustration and anger, on Daddy.

These behaviors are part of children's working out their awareness of their smallness and insignificance compared to their parents and their urges toward autonomy and independence. They want to be big but also want the benefits of infancy. If they cannot be Mommy or Daddy's partner, they want to be their “lap babies.”

Gradually, the intensity of these feelings abates. Children's love for their parents allows them to reconcile the Oedipal or Electra complex by eventually exchanging the wish to marry the parent of the opposite sex for the more realistic desire to grow up to be like the parent of the same sex.

Some version of this scenario occurs in most children, even those raised by a single parent. Sometimes the behavior is expressed directly; other times it is subtle, recognizable only through recalling dreams or in pretend play.

Children who have been traumatized or abused may not show the kind of behavior described here. They may be seductive or fearful, uncertain about the appropriateness of being affectionate, or show symptoms associated with sexual abuse. These children need special help from their parents and
implied by learning that s/he was born into a different family.

Although it is obvious to adults, young children often believe that they are either adopted or born. It is important, when telling them about their adoption, to help them understand that they were born first—and that all children, adopted or not—are conceived and born in the same way. The birth came first, then the adoption.

Waiting until adolescence to reveal a child’s adoption to him or her is not recommended. “Disclosure at that time can be devastating to children’s self-esteem,” says Dr. Nickman, “and to their faith in their parents.”

Children Who Are Adopted
When They Are Older or Who Are of a Different Race

Children who have been adopted when they are older than 2 or when they are of a different race from their adoptive parents need to be told about their adoption earlier. With older children, who bring with them memories of a past, failure to acknowledge those memories and to have a chance to talk about them can reinforce the attachment problems inherent in shifts in caretakers early in life. In these cases, parents should “work to safeguard the continuity of the child’s experience by reminding him or her of his earlier living situation from time to time, still bearing in mind that too frequent reminders might arouse fears of losing his present home,” Dr. Nickman suggests.

If your adopted child is of a different race or has very different physical features from your family, you must be cognizant of signs that s/he is aware of the difference. Your child may have noticed it, or someone else may have commented on it. You will want to explain to your child that the birth process is the same for everyone but acknowledge that people in different cultures have distinguishing physical features and their own rich heritage. Sometimes children who look different from the rest of their family need to be assured that their parents love them and intend to keep them.

For children with developmental disabilities, explanations about birth may be simplified or adjusted to match their ability to comprehend. When children have expressed no interest in the subject, it may be that they are not yet able to benefit from a discussion about it.

In any case, it takes years of periodic returns to the subject of adoption before your children will fully grasp its meaning. Meanwhile, it is most important that you provide an environment that nourishes and encourages learning and the understanding of all important family issues, such as love and aggression, hate and jealousy, sex and marriage, illness and death. At least two studies (Kirk, Hoopes and Stein) suggest that adopted adolescents were better adjusted if they came from families where all emotional issues including adoption were discussed among family members beginning in early childhood.

Children who learn early that it is all right to ask questions and be curious usually carry this behavior over to school and develop a sense of mastery over their lives. That is why both attachment and separation behaviors should be encouraged and endured patiently by parents. Both are necessary for children
It is no wonder that in such a state, even without contemporary pressures resulting from divorce or other family disruptions, that emotional and behavioral problems frequently beset elementary school-aged children. Common problems include hyperactivity, poor school performance, low self-esteem, aggression, defiance, stubbornness, troubled relationships with brothers and sisters, friends, and parents, lack of confidence, fearfulness, sadness, depression, and loneliness. Adoptive parents wonder whether and how much these problems are caused or influenced by adoption or a history of faulty attachment.

Smith and Miroff state in their book, You’re Our Child: The Adoption Experience, “It is extremely important, and also reassuring, to realize that the most common source of problems are developmental changes which follow a child from infancy to adulthood, not the fact that the child was or was not adopted.”

Why Was I Given Away? Loss and Grief in Adoption

Loss is a feeling that runs through the lives of children who have been adopted. It shows itself in different ways at different stages of their lives. But knowing that their birth parents made an adoption plan for them, and then not hearing a lot of information about the birth parents, often makes adopted children feel devalued and affects their self-esteem. Sometimes they feel as though their status in society is ambiguous.

The full emotional impact of that loss comes to children, usually between the ages of 7 and 12, when they are capable of understanding more about the concept of being adopted. It happens because they live more in the world outside of their families and are more tuned in to the world inside their heads. While this is a giant step toward self-reliance, it leaves parents in a quandary about when and how much adoption information to share, and uncertain about whether their child is wanting or dreading to hear it. It is especially difficult at this time to decide what to do or say to children who do not inquire about their birth parents.

Although it may feel awkward, it sometimes helps to think back to your child’s life and death questions during the preschool years and introduce the subject yourself. You might preface your conversation with what you would say to an adult. For example, “I just want you to know that if you want to talk about your adoption, I’d be glad to” or “You haven’t asked much about it lately, and I thought, now that you’re older, you might be thinking about it in a more grown-up way.” Such an introduction gets across to children that you are interested in talking about the subject and that you are aware of their getting older and more sophisticated in their thinking. In any case, your willingness to “connect” with your children about their adoptions and not to deny the difference between being adopted and being born into a family can help them grieve this important loss.

You can help your children work through their loss if you can be nondefensive about their adoption as well as sensitive to how much they want or need to talk about it at a given time. Do not, however, place undue emphasis on the adoption, as this is likely to make children feel painfully self-conscious about it. But if facts and feelings about adoption are not discussed at all, children’s

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times the facts make it more difficult for children to idealize their birth parents or put pressure on them to “choose” to “be just like” or “totally unlike” one or the other set of parents.

**Psychological Identification**

If your child has had several homes before yours, there is often a brief honeymoon period where s/he will try to be perfect to ensure your love. But soon the sense of loss, hurt, and anger surfaces. Your child may, consciously or not, break your rules, steal, lie, or act out physically or sexually. The child’s message is “I’m going to leave here anyway, so I’d better make sure I don’t get too close” or “Families don’t last, and I’m angry about that.”

You will need to help your children build trust and gain confidence that you will not abandon them. Part of that job is helping your children to develop the psychological identification that distinguishes them as individuals.

What is this identification process that is so critical to success and confidence in later life? It takes us back to the initial attachment process, when it is important for babies to make an emotional connection that shape their personalities and make them someone who is a unique individual as well as a member of a particular family.

During the elementary school-age years, children’s identity comes from a combination of their genetic heritage, their experience with their families, and what happens to them as they try to find their place in the wider world. They want to be like their peers and their families.

The creation of a family tree, a common elementary school assignment which asks children to construct a portrait of their geographical, ethnic, historical, and birth connections, offers an opportunity and a challenge to the adoptive family. This assignment will bring to the surface knowledge and ignorance about your child’s background and legitimize discussion of family facts and secrets.

If there has been openness about adoption and a sensitivity to not insisting on discussing adoption when a child is not receptive, parents will be able to discover from their child what can and cannot be included in the family tree assignment. A 10-year-old, after moving to a new school, said she would like to be the one to decide whether to tell new classmates that she was adopted, because now she was the boss of that information. Is it farfetched to think that a 10-year-old is old enough to be “boss” of her adoptive information? At this age, the child’s self-esteem will flourish if she can feel her parents trust her as she learns and masters new facts about herself and the world.

Sometimes during the elementary school years, before or after the family tree experience, children learn about heredity, genes, and “blood relationships.” At this time, the adopted child realizes at the highest cognitive and emotional level so far, the differences between biological and adoptive relationships. Reactions to this information are probably as varied as the children and include feelings of relief, a sense of enlightenment, heightened interest in learning more about birth parents, denial of any interest, or feelings of loss and grief.
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trate, is angry or flies off the handle for no obvious reason. You may see behavior that is unusual or not characteristic of your child; sometimes it is the increasing degree of a certain behavior that is troubling.

Perhaps there has been an upsetting event or change, such as a move or loss of job for you or your spouse. Children react to any parental problems that threaten their security. Elementary school-aged children tend to have problems around school; often that is the setting where problems are noticed. Adolescents tend to have identity concerns and authority struggles with their parents or other adults.

All of these possibilities can occur in any family. The adoptive family has the added concern of trying to decide whether or not it is an adoption issue that is troubling the child. If the child is over 6 years of age, it is usually impossible to distinguish adoption from other psychological, social, and educational issues. Treatment must evaluate the child and family and should consider his or her stage of development and the nature of the child's relationship with you (and sometimes with his or her birth parents).

Finding Help
Before seeking professional counseling, use your parenting skills to discover if you can help your child yourself by listening, talking, or making changes in the environment. If you feel your child cannot communicate with you or that your relationship might be part of the problem, it is wise to seek outside assistance.

Because it is so difficult to disentangle adoptive issues from those of normal development, especially once the child has reached elementary school-age, the adoptive family can benefit from professional helpers who have experience working with adoptive families. There are many varieties of therapy, and advantages and disadvantages to each. Sometimes the whole family needs to be involved in therapy. Sometimes your adopted child needs to deal with problems alone.

Ask your agency social worker, a friend with adopted children, your pediatrician, a representative from an adoptive parent support group, your local mental health center, or your local family service agency for recommendations of appropriate helping professionals. You can also contact Information Gateway or NAC for referrals.

This article was written for the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse by Elaine Frank, M.S.W., and edited by Gloria Hochman in 1990.
Searching for Birth Parents

Current adoption practice has mixed opinions about whether, when, how, and with whose help, adoptees should look for more information about or try to initiate a reunion with birth parents. Information on this process is available through Information Gateway. Adoptive parents tend to think about their children’s wish to search when they first adopt, and again when confronted with their angry toddlers. The topic resurfaces in adolescence, either raised directly by the child, or when rebellious, defiant behavior such as threats to run away, makes parents wonder if their child is wanting or needing to contact a birth parent. It takes a parent with sturdy self-esteem and more confidence than most of us have to withstand the stony silences and stormy confrontations with teenagers in turmoil.

Parents are often tempted to escape perhaps by abandoning their teenagers who are having toddler-like tantrums, but you and your family will benefit more if you remain calm, stand up for the values you have taught, and continue communication efforts. For some adolescents, searching can be useful, while for many, the urgent activities and decisions of daily life are so pressing that they feel uninterested in or unable to confront such a heavy emotional undertaking. Waiting till they have reached adulthood when their lives will be more settled may be better for the latter group.

Anger, Sex, and Aggression—Again!

Adopted adolescents have the same trouble searching for a comfortable identity as do nonadoptees. Problems involving aggression, sexual activities and pregnancy, delinquency and substance abuse, social isolation and depression are the most common ones faced by teenagers and their families. Although there appear to be more adoptees percentage-wise in adolescent psychiatric treatment programs than nonadoptees, the majority of these patients tend to be the multiply placed children whose problems stem from a variety of sources, often the least of which is their adoption.

Although sexual identity is an issue for all adolescents, adopted girls have the additional burden of conflicting views of motherhood and sexuality. On one hand there is their perhaps infertile adoptive mother and, on the other, the fertility of their birth mother who did get pregnant and chose not to keep her baby, or possibly had her child taken away from her.

No matter how open communication has been, it is often next to impossible for adolescents to discuss their feelings about sex with their parents. Additionally, the adopted girl, unless she has close friends who are adopted as well, would have difficulty finding an ear understanding and sophisticated enough for this discussion. This may be a time to encourage meeting with other adopted teenagers, either through an organized group or informally, to provide your child with support for some of these sticky issues. Looking for solutions outside of the family is also appropriate for an adolescent for whom one major developmental task is to learn to separate and live independently.

As adolescents move toward greater autonomy, a parent’s most difficult task is to create a delicate balance of “to love and let go.” Although there are many times when you could encourage your toddler—"me do