



Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child

School-age children—those between the ages of 6 and 12—learn critical skills and gain interests that carry into adolescence and adulthood. Adoption can add layers of complexity to their developmental tasks. Adoptive parents can best support their children by learning as much as they can about child development and by being aware of how adoption may influence their child’s emotional growth.

This factsheet is designed to help you understand and respond to your adopted school-age child’s developmental needs. It provides simple, practical strategies you can use to foster healthy development, including approaches for building attachment; addressing trauma, grief, and loss; talking honestly with your child about adoption; acknowledging his or her adoptive history; using effective discipline; and enhancing your child’s school experience. Because some adoptive families will need extra support to address their children’s mental or behavioral health needs, the factsheet also discusses when and how to seek help.

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Find other resources about adoption and child development on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/stages>.

Understanding the Impact of Adoption on a Child's Development

It is important for parents to understand the typical tasks and needs of school-age children, as well as how adoption-related experiences may affect their development. Knowing what to expect will help you meet your child's needs, strengthen your relationship, and identify important emotional or physical concerns.

There is a lot of information available about typical growth and development patterns for school-age children; the sections that follow address issues specifically related to adoption, their potential effects on child development and school experiences, and ways that you can help your child meet these challenges. It is important to remember that not all of these issues apply to all adopted children, nor are children's issues always related to adoption; personal histories and experiences vary greatly from child to child.

The National Library of Medicine provides a brief overview of the typical developmental tasks of school-age children (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002017.htm>).

The Importance of Attachment

Attachment refers to the emotional connection that develops between an infant and a reliable primary caregiver. This process is important for all aspects of a child's later development. Attachment is the basis for trust, and healthy attachment occurs when a primary caregiver consistently provides emotional essentials such as warm touch, movement, eye contact, soft voices, and smiles, as well as the basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. A healthy primary attachment teaches young children that their needs will be met and that they are loved. This attachment frees a child to explore, play, learn, and develop relationships.

If the attachment process is disrupted, the child may not develop the secure base needed for healthy development. Factors that may prevent healthy attachment include early years spent in orphanages or large group homes, multiple moves from caregiver to caregiver, invasive or painful medical procedures, sudden or traumatic separation from the mother, hospitalization at critical developmental periods, neglect, sexual or physical abuse, prenatal alcohol or drug exposure, and neurological problems.

A school-age child with insecure attachment might experience anxiety when away from home or even show developmental delays (see section on Developmental Delays) or traits of a younger child. You can help your child by interacting with him or her in a way that is consistent with the child's developmental age, not chronological age. When you interact with children at the level of their emotional and physical development, you help them grow and improve and repair attachment.

A skilled adoption counselor or professional also can help you and your child strengthen your attachment to each other by offering therapy that encourages gentle connection such as eye contact and nurturing behaviors. Be sure to avoid "attachment therapies" that use questionable techniques such as physical restraint, isolation, or placing children in residential care without involving their families.

Attachment runs along a continuum; most children with insecure attachments do not have the most severe form of attachment disorder, called Reactive Attachment Disorder. Be wary of therapists who are quick to use that terminology or diagnosis.

What you can do:

- Provide a safe and secure environment with a focus on predictable routines and schedules.
- Commit to one-to-one parent/child time. Talk to and play with your child every day, even if only for a few minutes.
- Make eye contact and smile before you address your child.

- Play board games or find other creative ways (such as face painting) that puts you eye-to-eye with your child.
- Offer gentle words of encouragement and praise as often as possible. Place notes with kind messages in lunch boxes, and leave small surprises for after school.
- Find developmentally appropriate ways to have physical contact (hugs, combing hair, kneading dough together, cuddling while watching TV).
- Engage your child in planning future events, to show that you plan to be together in the future.
- Speak positively about birth parents and other caregivers from the child's past so your child doesn't feel shame.
- Make your children feel valued at every opportunity.
- Be playful and laugh together.
- Nurture, nurture, nurture! You cannot "spoil" a child with affection and care.

For more information about the importance of attachment, visit the Attachment section of the Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/impact/development/attachment>.

Base Interactions on Developmental Needs, Not Chronological Age

If your child came from an institution or an abusive or neglectful family situation, he or she may not have learned some important things, such as communicating with others or expressing feelings appropriately. Playing with other children, taking turns, or just having fun may be new experiences. As a result, your child may need time to catch up to children in the same age group. If English is not the child's first language, he or she may have added delays and challenges.

You can help your child overcome such lags by using parenting strategies based on your child's developmental level, not on his or her age. For example, a 7-year-old child may need the bedtime routine of a 3-year-old. A 12-year-old may need to learn how to get along in a group of two or three friends before he or she is ready to join a larger group activity. A child who is socially behind may play better with younger children. Encourage that (with supervision). Playing with younger children will give your child a sense of confidence and teach empathy and helpfulness.

Allowing your child to learn at his or her own pace is crucial. Although others may feel you are "babying" your older child, you are simply helping him learn what he has missed. Some older children may need to learn tasks the way a younger child would. Break tasks down into small, manageable steps, so that your child will feel a sense of success and accomplishment. Let progress be guided by your child's readiness to move on to the next developmental level.

Social and Emotional Impacts

During elementary school, children form a stronger sense of who they are. Much of that identity comes from their relationships with family and other people. For adopted children, developing an identity is more complicated. They must merge two separate families and histories as they decide how they fit in.

In middle childhood, many adopted children struggle with issues of self-worth, self-esteem, and feeling “different.” Some may have difficulty with social relationships outside the family. These emotional challenges can interfere with concentration and distract children from schoolwork. Children with these struggles may appear to be less capable than they truly are.

In addition, children who did not spend enough time with emotionally healthy adults when they were younger may have difficulty understanding, controlling, and expressing their emotions. Those who were adopted from orphanages or group care settings may not have had many opportunities to see or practice healthy social interactions.

What you can do:

- Teach your child the words for various feelings. Explain how to handle and express emotions in a healthy way.
- Be a positive example to your child as you express emotions. (“I feel so angry right now, I think I’ll take a walk until I cool down.”)
- Teach your child how to interact with others. Practice how to greet a playmate, how to ask for something, how to share.
- Coach your child on how to see things from another person’s point of view. (“I wonder how Sammy felt when no one chose him for their team.”) This helps children develop empathy.

Effects of Trauma

Many adopted children have experienced some degree of trauma. Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes harm. Potentially traumatic events include abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), neglect, unpredictable parental behavior due to addiction

or mental illness, or being separated from loved ones. Exposure to trauma can affect how children learn, think, feel, and interact, and it may have consequences for their health and development that persist even after they join safe and stable adoptive homes.

The experience of multiple traumatic events over time can result in the development of challenging habits or behaviors (for example, hoarding food, fighting, distrust of adults). Keep in mind that these behaviors may have helped your child survive a dangerous situation. As your child feels safer and more comfortable, his or her behavior will improve.

This will take time. In the meantime, parenting a traumatized child can be difficult and can put a strain on other relationships. It can also trigger what is known as “secondary trauma” (or “vicarious trauma”) in parents. Symptoms of secondary trauma may be physical (headaches, stomachaches, lack of energy), behavioral (increased drinking or smoking, avoiding others), emotional (anxiety, depression, loneliness), or mental (inability to concentrate or make decisions).

What you can do:

- **Treat trauma as early as possible.** Some families do not learn about their child’s trauma history until after the adoption is finalized because children may not feel comfortable disclosing what happened to them until they feel safe. If you see signs of trauma at any age, don’t hesitate to seek help from a trauma-informed therapist.
- **Identify trauma triggers.** Situations that result in extreme behavior may remind your child of the trauma in some way. Help your child avoid triggers until more healing occurs.
- **Build trust by being available, consistent, and predictable.** Remain calm, and avoid physical punishment.
- **Help your child learn to relax.** Teach skills like slow breathing and listening to calming music. For some children, fidget toys or movement will be more helpful for calming down.

- **Encourage self-esteem.** Giving children developmentally appropriate choices allows them a sense of control. Positive experiences (such as mastering a new skill or helping others) help children recover.
- **Don't lose hope.** Children can and do heal from trauma.
- **Watch for signs of secondary trauma.** Take good care of yourself so that you can take good care of your child. Take breaks from caregiving to renew yourself, keep up with hobbies, and see friends. If your child's trauma becomes a constant source of grief for you, it may be time to seek help.

For more information, read *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/child-trauma>). Parents whose children experienced sexual abuse may find more specific guidance in *Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-abused>).

Developmental Delays

All children develop at their own pace, but some adopted children may experience true developmental delays—a *significant*, persistent lag in one or more skill areas. Such delays can be caused by genetic factors (such as Down syndrome) or environmental factors (including exposure to alcohol or other drugs during pregnancy, trauma, neglect, or insecure attachment). In some cases, it is difficult to know what caused a developmental delay.

Children learn skills and develop at different rates, so don't worry if your child is slightly behind peers in one or two areas. Also, learning a second language or adjusting to a new culture may create *temporary* delays. While many children will catch up developmentally, others will not.

What you can do:

- Ask your school or doctor for a professional assessment if you notice:
 - Significant lags in many developmental areas
 - Learning difficulties
 - Loss of previous skills

- Extreme behavior
- Signs of sensory difficulties, such as extreme reactions to touch, light, sounds, or motion, or the need for constant stimulation or touch
- Access screening and other resources through Medicaid's Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) service, if available to your family (<http://www.medicaid.gov/Medicaid-CHIP-Program-Information/By-Topics/Benefits/Early-and-Periodic-Screening-Diagnostic-and-Treatment.html>).
- If an assessment reveals that your child has a disability:
 - Focus on building and maintaining a strong foundation of attachment with your child (see earlier section, *The Importance of Attachment*).
 - Join a support group, in person or online, for adoptive parents or other parents of children who have your child's specific disability. For a list of organizations that provide information about children with special needs, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspROL&rolType=Subject&SUBJID=3>.
- Inform your child's teacher and school about his or her condition. Provide specific information about how the delay or disability affects your child's ability to succeed in school. Advocate for school personnel to work with you to develop an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that will ensure special education services or other accommodations to address your child's needs.
- Provide homework assistance or tutoring if needed.

Some delays are not apparent right away and may show up later. Don't assume that doctors and teachers know your child best, because often it is parents who notice disabilities before professionals do. If you are not satisfied with the assessment of a doctor or school psychologist and feel that further investigation is warranted, find other professionals who can assess your child's strengths and weaknesses, and be prepared to advocate for your child. If the school administration is not helpful, you may want

to contact the school board. In all cases, keep records of all meetings and decisions, and keep copies of all professional assessments and reports. Parental help is key to a child's future success!

Communicating About Adoption

Parents who feel good about adoption, are comfortable talking about it, and can openly acknowledge their child's feelings are best able to help their children do the same. Parents who tense up when the topic is raised or who keep it a secret may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. This section presents tips for communicating about adoption and recognizing your child's history in a positive way. For more information, see the Talking About Adoption section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/talking>.

Choose Your Words Carefully

Talk openly and honestly with your school-age child about adoption. However, be aware of the words you use.

Consider the following word choices—

Use:	Instead of:
Birth or first mother, father, family	Real or natural mother, father, family
We could not have a child born to us.	We could not have <i>our own</i> child.
They were not able to take care of a <i>child</i> (or <i>any child</i>) at that time.	Your birth parents were not able to take care of <i>you</i> .
Intercountry adoption	Foreign adoption
Your birth family (or the judge) <i>made a plan</i> for you to be adopted.	They <i>gave you up</i> for adoption.

In communicating with your child:

- Think about how your words might be understood by your child. Many adoptive parents try to build their child's self-esteem by saying things that may seem positive but that can be misinterpreted. For example:
 - "Your birth mom gave you up for adoption because she loved you so much." A child may start to wonder if the adoptive parents also will send him or her away because of their love.
 - "You are very lucky to be adopted." Adopted children should not be expected to be grateful to have a family or to be cared for. This can lead to a self-esteem issue (i.e., Why do other children deserve families but I have to be grateful to have one?)
 - "We chose to adopt you—you are special." Adoptees may later realize the loss that is implied by being "chosen" (they first had to be "unchosen").
- Do not sugarcoat the adoption experience. Doing so denies children the support they need as they grieve their unique losses. For example, talking only about how wonderful it was for your child to be adopted ignores the fact that gaining your family also means losing the experience of being raised with the birth family. In order to heal, a child must first be allowed to grieve and be angry.
- Practice talking about adoption in an adoptive parent support group or with others in your support network, and let them give you feedback.

Handle Difficult Information Sensitively

Adoptive parents often try to protect their children from the more painful aspects of their histories. You may wonder what to tell and what to hold back from your child. Here are some guidelines that can help:

- Decide *how* and *when* to share difficult information, not *if*, because children deserve the truth. Your child is likely to find out eventually and has a right to his or her own history. You are the best person to give your child the facts and to help him or her understand them.
- Do not force your child to talk about the past if he or she is not ready, but remain open and available for when the time is right.
- State the truth simply. Do not tell your child details that might be too complex for him or her to understand. Many details are too traumatic for young children, so more information can be given as your child develops

and is able to handle more. A professional can guide you in this process.

- Present the facts about your child’s history or birth family without judgment or criticism. Realize that adoptive children identify with their birth parents even if they have no contact with them or memory of them. Criticism of a birth parent will at some point be reflected in how the child feels about him- or herself.
- Offer an alternate viewpoint if your child criticizes his or her birth parents (“Your mom was a victim herself” or “Your dad was too young to make good judgments”). However, resist the temptation to make up information or put a better spin on your child’s history. Be sure to explain that caseworkers and other professionals may have tried to help your child’s birth parents, but that change was not possible. This may help alleviate anger that children may feel about being removed from his or her birth family.
- Help your child understand that the choices and mistakes birth family members made have no bearing on your child’s value. Explain that the actions of that adult do not mean that they didn’t care for the child. Reassure your child that he or she has the power make choices and find happiness.

Honor Your Child’s Past

Find ways to acknowledge and show respect for your child’s birth parents and birth family members. Your child’s attachment to you is strengthened by your show of respect for the family he or she came from.

- Take the initiative by talking about birth families and prior caregivers: “I bet your birth mother is thinking about you today,” or “I wonder if you miss the people who took care of you before you came here.” Avoid statements that may arouse a child’s sense of concern for his or her birth parents’ welfare (e.g., “I bet she misses you so much”).
- Create a “lifebook” together that records your child’s personal history through pictures, objects, news clippings, and other memorabilia that have a personal meaning. Use the book to help your child understand more about his or her history and to continue to process losses at each developmental stage. (Be aware

that sometimes photos and mementos can bring up pain and loss and cause temporary acting out.) For more information on lifebooks, see the Lifebooks section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks>.

- If possible, encourage safe, developmentally appropriate contact with the birth family and others from your child’s past. (See box on Openness.) Such contact helps adopted children understand their history and promotes identity development, self-esteem, and attachment to the adoptive family.
- Show your interest in finding as much information about your child’s past as you can:
 - For transracial or transcultural adoptions, help your child learn about his or her race or birth country—its culture, history, language, and current events. Participate in events in your child’s community of origin, and/or build relationships with adults from your child’s racial or ethnic background.
 - For intercountry adoptions, learn with your child about the food, history, and traditional dress of his or her country of origin. If possible, develop relationships with members of your child’s birth country and plan a future family trip to the child’s homeland. Many adoption agencies and organizations arrange such trips.
- Create adoption rituals. For example:
 - Some adoptive families honor birth parents and grandparents on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day with special prayers, cards, or candle-lighting ceremonies.
 - Adoption anniversaries can be acknowledged with special meals or events.
 - Holidays and significant events of a child’s birthplace can be celebrated (for example, the date that your child’s country of origin recognizes its own independence day, thanksgiving, or the new year).

Openness in Adoption

In an open adoption, there is some level of contact with birth family members or previous caregivers. Contact can vary, from exchanging letters and photos through a third party (often an agency) to face-to-face visits. For more information, see Open Adoption and Contact With Birth Family at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/before-adoption/openness>.

While birth family connections have always been important, the explosion of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram is quickly and dramatically changing the landscape of postadoption contact between birth and adoptive families and adopted youth. It is now far easier—and far more likely—for children to have contact with their birth families than in the past. This is true for families who have planned for an open adoption as well as those who have not, and for families involved in all types of adoption, including private, public, and even intercountry adoptions. In the majority of adoptions, the question of openness is no longer “if,” but “when.”

Some tips to consider:

- Recognize that information and photos shared via social media sites are not private. Stay on top of sites’ changing privacy policies, and keep in mind that anything you post could be made public.
- Connecting via social media exposes everyone involved to a lot of information about each other’s daily lives. This can be positive, but it also can be overwhelming or difficult, especially for children. Setting boundaries from the beginning will support a healthier long-term relationship.
- Be especially cautious about posting information about your child’s adoption and birth family on the Internet. Your child should learn this information directly from you, at the right time, rather than by searching the Internet. Likewise, your child deserves to decide when and how he or she feels comfortable sharing this information with others.
- If you receive an unexpected request to connect from a member of your child’s birth family, consider reaching out to your agency or an adoption-competent professional for advice and support before responding. A professional can help you set safe and comfortable boundaries for contact (including redirecting the birth family member to a more private form of communication, if desired).
- As with any extended family relationship, there may be inconveniences and challenges. Handle these with sensitivity and respect. Seeing that you value his or her birth relatives or previous caretakers will help your child feel better about him- or herself and closer to you.
- Research shows that some adopted youth do contact and are contacted by birth family members via the Internet without their adoptive parents’ knowledge. When your child begins to use the Internet and social networking sites, provide guidance about searching for or responding to requests from birth family members. If you would prefer that your adolescent wait to contact birth family, let your child know that. However, also emphasize that if he or she chooses to look for birth family members, you would rather know about it and provide support, rather than have him or her keep it secret from you. In any case, it is important to talk about these things before they occur, so that everyone is better prepared for the issues that can arise.

Help Your Child Cope With Grief and Loss

All adoptions involve loss. You may need to help your child cope with adoption-related grief. Here are some ways you can promote communication about loss with your child and acknowledge your child's feelings:

- **Address the issue early.** Do not wait for your child to bring up the subject of adoption, start missing birth family members, or express sadness about his or her family history. Even if your child never mentions his or her birth parents, most adopted 6- to 12-year-olds have frequent thoughts about them. If you are open and matter-of-fact about the subject, it will help your child feel more comfortable, too.
- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** Tell your child that it is natural for adopted children to think about their birth families and to feel sadness about the loss of family members or unknown family histories.
- **Resist the urge to rush in and cheer up a grieving child.** You cannot take away the losses of adoption. Just as children need the chance to learn and develop in their own ways, they need to work through grief and loss issues. You can help your child by being supportive. ("You seem sad. I wonder if you are thinking about your birth [or other] family.") Efforts to lessen their pain, on the other hand, can make children question the value of their feelings and reduce their confidence in their abilities to cope.
- **Help your child express sadness in the manner that best fits his or her stage of emotional development.** A school-age child may need to sob like a toddler and to be held and comforted like one.
- **Be prepared for grief disguised as anger.** Although it is difficult for the parents, anger is a way for children to vent loss and sadness. In time, the child is able to let go of those upsetting emotions.

For more information, see *Helping Adopted Children Cope With Grief and Loss* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/helping>.

Address Adoption-Related Fears and Fantasies

Children who have experienced the loss of a least one family or home may be fearful of losing another. Fears may take the form of sleeping or eating difficulties, nightmares, separation difficulties, nervousness, and even increased allergies and illnesses. To lessen fears:

- Reassure your child that you intend to be his or her parent forever. Demonstrate this through both words and actions. Some children may test their adoptive parents with misbehavior.
- Engage the child in planning future family events (e.g., "Next Thanksgiving, would you like to ... ?").
- Purchase a photo album with spaces designated for school photos and memorabilia all the way through high school.
- Go away and come back. Although it is extremely hard to go out when a child has separation anxiety, it is only through practice that a child learns you will always return.

All children fantasize about an alternate family life—a "real" mother who never reprimands, a father who is a famous person. Sometimes adopted school-age children use fantasy to attempt to undo their losses. They may imagine their birth parent returning for them or the adoption agency calling to report that they mistakenly placed the wrong child. To address fantasies:

- Encourage your child to talk about fantasies and express his or her feelings about adoption.
- Reassure your child that it is normal for adopted children to imagine what their lives might have been like had they not been adopted. Point out that everyone, adopted or not, does this occasionally. ("I wonder what would have happened if I had ... [gone to a different college, taken another job, been born into another family].")

Disciplining Effectively

The purpose of discipline is to teach children acceptable behavior and how to develop their own internal controls. Discipline should take into account your child's abilities, learning styles, and family history. Many resources are available to help parents learn to use positive discipline. This section offers a few strategies that may be particularly useful for parents of adopted children.

Adoptive parents must concentrate first on forming a positive relationship with their children. While some discipline will be needed from the beginning, these efforts will be more effective after a strong attachment is established between you and your child. Likewise, children with serious attachment problems may not respond to discipline in the same way as children who have a healthy, secure attachment with their parents. (See earlier section, *The Importance of Attachment*.) Children who have been abused should not be subjected to corporal punishment; other methods should be used.

Establish Routines and Rules

Consistent routines and rules are important for school-age children. They help children learn what to expect, which helps them to feel more secure and confident. Be patient when teaching family rules and routines to your adopted child. Use language like, "In this house, we ...". Children who were neglected, who had frequent changes in caretakers, or who lived in group settings may need extra time to understand healthy family structure and consistency. They may have to unlearn past patterns as they learn new ones.

Consider your child's skills and previous experiences when you set rules or decide if a particular activity is allowed. A neglected child often needs more parental supervision than other children of the same age. You may need to protect and supervise as you would a younger child. Giving children too much freedom too soon can set them up for failure.

Use Rewards and Consequences

Make every effort to recognize and reward good behavior. Praise is often far more effective than punishment, and it can go a long way in encouraging your child's positive

behavior. Be sure to praise *specific* behavior ("Great job cleaning your room," "I appreciate how nicely you shared with your little sister!") rather than saying something general ("You're a good girl").

Also help your child understand the consequences of his or her negative behavior. Imposing a consequence or taking away a privilege (not going to the playground or less time for video games) is more effective when the child can see a logical connection to his or her actions. For example, if your child rides his bicycle on a busy street where he has been told not to ride, then a fitting consequence might be no after-school bike riding for the next 3 days. Try to give warnings about what children can expect *before* they get into trouble ("If you don't do your homework, you can't go to your friend's house") rather than surprising them with consequences.

Neglected children and children with learning delays or prenatal substance abuse effects may need extra help understanding cause and effect or may not be able to make a connection between behavior and rewards or consequences. It's important to know if your child was exposed to prenatal substances such as alcohol or drugs so that you can learn about the possible effects on your child's brain and behavior. Read more about the effects of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders at http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Adoption.pdf.

Consider *Time In* Rather Than *Time Out*

Many parents like to use *time out*—placing a child in a safe place to think things over or cool down alone. This *time out* method, however, is not always appropriate for children who have been maltreated, who have attachment issues, or who were raised in group settings. The first goal in parenting these children is to help them form healthy attachments. In these cases, it is better to have the child remain close to you until he or she regains enough control to return to the previous activity (*time in*). This is useful because it avoids isolating children from their parents, playmates, and the rest of the family and helps support attachment. It sends the message, "You are having a hard time with control. I am here to help you."

Improving Your Child's School Experience

Being adopted can affect your child's school experience. Some classroom assignments may create tension, self-consciousness, or sadness. Peers may pose innocent questions that cause hurt feelings, or they may tease an adopted child about being adopted. Children with emotional or behavioral problems may find it challenging to succeed socially or academically in school.

While you cannot protect your child from all of these possibilities, you can take a proactive approach to ensure that adoption is taught and respected as a valid way to create a family. Following are some actions you can take to improve your child's school experience. For more information, see Information Gateway's Adoption and School section at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/school>.

Talk to Teachers About Adoption

Raise the topic of adoption at school:

- Ask your child's teacher(s) to include adoption in lessons on family diversity and nontraditional families.
- Offer to make a presentation about adoption to the school staff or to your child's class (but only with your child's input and approval).
- Encourage school personnel to use positive adoption language. (See "Choose Your Words Carefully" on page 6.)
- Donate books and materials about adoption to the school library.
- Ask your child's teachers to offer options or make adjustments to assignments about family history. For example, instead of bringing in a baby photo, students could bring in or draw a photo of themselves when they were *younger*. For a "family tree" assignment, children could be allowed to include their birth family as the root system or draw another figure altogether (such as a house with multiple rooms) that better reflects their unique family structure.
- Try to connect with teachers before each school year. Let teachers know if any subjects might be distressing

to your child (e.g., presentations on substance abuse, for a child whose birth family was affected by addiction).

In deciding how much information to share with school personnel about your child's history, follow the "need to know" rule. Share only the information needed to ease your child's adjustment and ensure his or her needs are met.

See the Resources for Teachers section of the Information Gateway website for more tips (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/school/teachers>).

Prepare Your Child to Handle Adoption Questions or Comments

Help your child decide how to talk about adoption with classmates and others:

- Ask your child to think in advance about how he or she wants to respond to questions about adoption.
- Offer "What if ... ?" scenarios, and practice responses with your child.
- Teach your child that that it is up to him or her to decide how much personal information to share. This includes allowing your child to choose how to respond to certain class assignments, such as family trees.
- Help your child understand the possible results of what he or she tells others.
- Coach your child in using phrases such as "That's private," or "I don't want to talk about that."
- Work with your child to master some general statements about adoption that can be used to educate peers.
- Encourage your child to be proud of the fact that he or she was able to be strong and resilient enough to come through early hardships and to join a new family.

The Center for Adoption Support and Education (adoptionssupport.org) offers resources to help children talk about adoption with peers.

Seeking Help for Mental or Behavioral Health Concerns

Adoptive families, like other families, sometimes need help to address mental health or behavioral concerns. Sadness, anger, and behavior challenges are normal as children in elementary school learn more about their family histories and come to terms with adoption. Some children may need a professional to help them grieve and move on. This need for extra assistance may occur even in children who previously adjusted well, as they grapple with developmentally appropriate issues such as identity formation. Do not allow difficulties with peers to go unaddressed. A child with poor interpersonal skills may be picked on or excluded, leading to more social and emotional problems down the road.

Remember that seeking help is a sign of strength, not of weakness. It is a good idea to seek professional help if your child or other family members show any of the following signs:

- Extreme emotions and behaviors
- Difficult family relationships that persist or seem to be getting worse
- Difficult peer relationships
- Substance abuse

Postadoption programs, adoption support groups, and other adoptive parents are good sources of information about adoption-competent mental health professionals.

For more information, see Information Gateway's Finding Services for an Adopted Child at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/services> and *Selecting and Working With a Therapist Skilled in Adoption* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist>.

Summary

Parenting an adopted child during the elementary school years, as he or she ventures further into the outside world, is both challenging and enriching. With sensitivity to adoption issues, honest communication, and effective discipline, parents can support their child's healthy development during this period and reap the rewards as their child matures.

For more information, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/stages>.

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