

Adolescence – does adoption make a difference?

Our survey of adoptive families in 2002 as well as our general practice with families, clearly point to adolescence as the time families most want counselling. Could this not simply be seen as normal for families? Isn't adolescence known to be a testing time? Is adoption a factor at all?

The answer is yes, it does seem to be. It is true that adoptive parents are quicker to seek professional help than birth parents, but research that excludes this variable still indicates adoptive families are about twice as likely to be seen by therapists (Miller, B.C et al 2000).

At the same time, we are talking about relatively small numbers here. The vast majority of adoptive families manage the time of adolescence without undue difficulty. The question is: how does adoption become a stressor for families and for young people themselves? We have drawn most of the following ideas from innumerable conversations with adult adoptees, some of whom were adopted from overseas. Older adoptees can often look back and see how during adolescence they didn't understand what was driving their behaviour, but can now see how adoption was an unsettling factor.

Identity

Adolescents are in a key stage in the development of an identity separate from family. They are faced with questions of: Where do I fit in? What makes up 'me'? They identify much more strongly with peer groups and are testing whether or not they want to subscribe to the standards and beliefs held by their family. They need to experiment, to make their own choices, to think and act independently. Usually this is done in the context of having had their childhood years to build a sense of self which has continuity with previous generations.

Adopted young people must establish a sense of self in the relative absence of social-historical information. They are likely to wonder what their original parents were like and how much they have inherited from them. This leads some of them to feel somewhat 'lost', or that they have to create their own identity from scratch, or simply make themselves into whoever people around them want them to be. The reaction varies from person to person.

Those of us who were brought up with our biological parents may not realise how much our identity is gradually constructed during years of comments about whom we look like. Adoptees do not have this. Differences in looks will be more noticeable if the teen is from another racial background. They may not even look similar to others in the society, much less to others in their family. This is another point of interaction with adolescence. Physical appearance is very important in the teen years. Adolescents want to look attractive in the ways their culture constructs 'attractiveness'. For some adoptees, this impacts on how good they feel about themselves.

If the young person has been through experiences of racism, when their looks elicited derogatory reactions, it's not hard to imagine how much more negatively they may feel about themselves. Parents can be very helpful in respect to these issues. (See our website for, 'Possible approaches to helping your child deal with racism.')

Some adopted adolescents are more conscious than others of how they are different from their family, not only in their looks, but also in their whole approach to life. These teens are likely to be more aware of the differences than their parents who are intent on loving them as an integral part of the family. Mum and dad will naturally relate in ways that are comfortable to them, but it comes across to the teen that 'they want me to be someone I'm not.' This can have them, in some instances, asserting the differences more forcefully.

Adopted people talk about feeling anger that the choices made on their behalf were somewhat arbitrary. Why this family and not another? Why this country? Why me? If I were not right here, I'd have a whole different identity. There are the 'what ifs' and the 'if onlys'. The sense is that choices that other people make on your behalf are to some degree random and therefore unsafe. The young person feels insecure unless they are squarely in control, the kind of control most adolescents will actively seek anyway.

Loss and trauma

Adolescents are known for their intense, changeable moods. This has to do with a not-yet-fully-developed capacity to be guided by rational thought as well as hormonal factors. Experiences of loss and trauma can exacerbate emotional swings. There can be a sense of loss of belonging, of looking like your family, of normality, of your birth mother, loss of knowing about your background, of your original identity, your cultural heritage. Wondering about origins can involve some idealising of what it would have been like to fully belong in the original family the way other people belong, a longing for the comfort of easily fitting in.

Many adopted people would testify to a deeply felt sense of the trauma of separation from the one person who was their whole world at a time when they were immensely vulnerable. A fundamental trust was betrayed, and they were left deeply wounded, unable to feel secure that those closest to them were not also going to leave them to be desperately alone. The feeling is if your own mother can reject you, how can you trust anyone? This comes with hurt, sadness, mistrust, insecurity and, to varying degrees, anger. Naturally these emotional reactions can put further fuel on the fire of adolescent volatility. It is true that many adopted young people do not struggle with these feelings, but those who do will struggle less successfully without the understanding and the wise, firm guidance of their parents.

Ideally as a parent you could give your son or daughter opportunities to express any such feelings, and let them know these are understandable. Expressions of anger can be okay if they do not become abusive. Risk-taking needs to be kept within some reasonable safe limits. Adolescents may need to make up their own minds about many things, but parents remain important as people who can discuss options with them. Whether or not they are displaying behaviour seen to be 'typical' of adolescence, they continue to need your wisdom and support.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

<p><u>NSW/ACT</u> Post Adoption Resource Centre PO Box 239 Bondi NSW 2026 T 02 9365 3444 F 02 9365 3666 E parc@bensoc.org.au www.bensoc.org.au</p>	<p><u>QLD</u> Post Adoption Support Queensland PO Box 5347 West End QLD 4101 T 07 3170 4600 or 1300 914 819 F 07 3255 2953 E pasq@bensoc.org.au www.bensoc.org.au</p>
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