

Impact of Adoption on Children and Adults

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Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child



If you're a foster parent adopting a child, children, or youth currently in your care, you'll need to help your child make the emotional adjustment to being an adopted child. While you may appreciate the difference in the child's role within your family, children and youth may not clearly comprehend the difference between being a foster child versus being an adopted child in the same family. There are specific steps you can take to help children understand these changes.

What's Inside:

- Talking with children about the changes
- Helping children understand their histories and losses
- Helping children cope with trauma and loss
- Helping children transfer attachments
- Conclusion
- Resources



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This factsheet was written for foster/adoptive parents, like you, who are helping their child transition from foster care to adoption.

Talking With Children About the Changes

The adoption adjustment period can be a vulnerable time as children are confronted with the reality that they will not return to their birth family. While they may have seemed fine and even happy through the foster/adoption process, children may cling to a last hope of reunification. That's why it's important to engage the child in the adoption process and listen carefully to what he or she has to say.

Children often have questions about their birth family, and you may need to address the status of your child's birth family. It is crucial to tell the truth—even when it's difficult—and to validate the child's experiences and feelings. There are several ways adoptive parents and siblings can deal with the feelings about birth families that may arise and, together, help the adopted child or youth integrate and feel secure.

- Acknowledge that adoption is important but that relationships are more important. While the names on paper might be different, the relationships already in place will remain the same.
- Encourage open discussion about any ongoing contact among birth family members, the child or youth, and members of your family.

- Create regular activities, events, or anniversaries to celebrate the adoption. Be sure to discuss the plans with your child to ensure he or she is comfortable with the attention.
- Plan regular events and activities where the focus is not on adoption but on building family memories and relationships.
- Develop relationships with other foster/adoptive children, youth, and families. Sharing common experiences, challenges, and successes will ease the feeling of being isolated or "different" (Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, 2009).

WHAT IS AN OPEN ADOPTION?

Open adoption, in which some kind of contact is maintained between the adoptive and birth families, may help the child adjust to being adopted. Maintaining contact with the child's relatives may help a child understand the realities of the birth family's situation and ease his or her worries about them. By acknowledging the importance of that relationship, foster/adoptive parents build the child's self-respect and help the child open up about past experiences and start to heal old wounds.

For more information about open adoption, visit the Information Gateway website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/contacts.cfm>

Children and youth learn best through repetition. Conversation about the differences between the foster family and the adoptive family may need to be repeated in a variety of ways. It is best if these conversations take place during activities that foster bonding and create memories.

- Help the child talk about the perceived difference in his or her own words. Ask open-ended questions, such as, “How do you think being adopted is different from being in foster care?” or “What do you think the biggest difference is, now that you’re adopted?”
- Help the child draw analogies to something in his or her life. For instance, you might say, “This is like the time when ...”

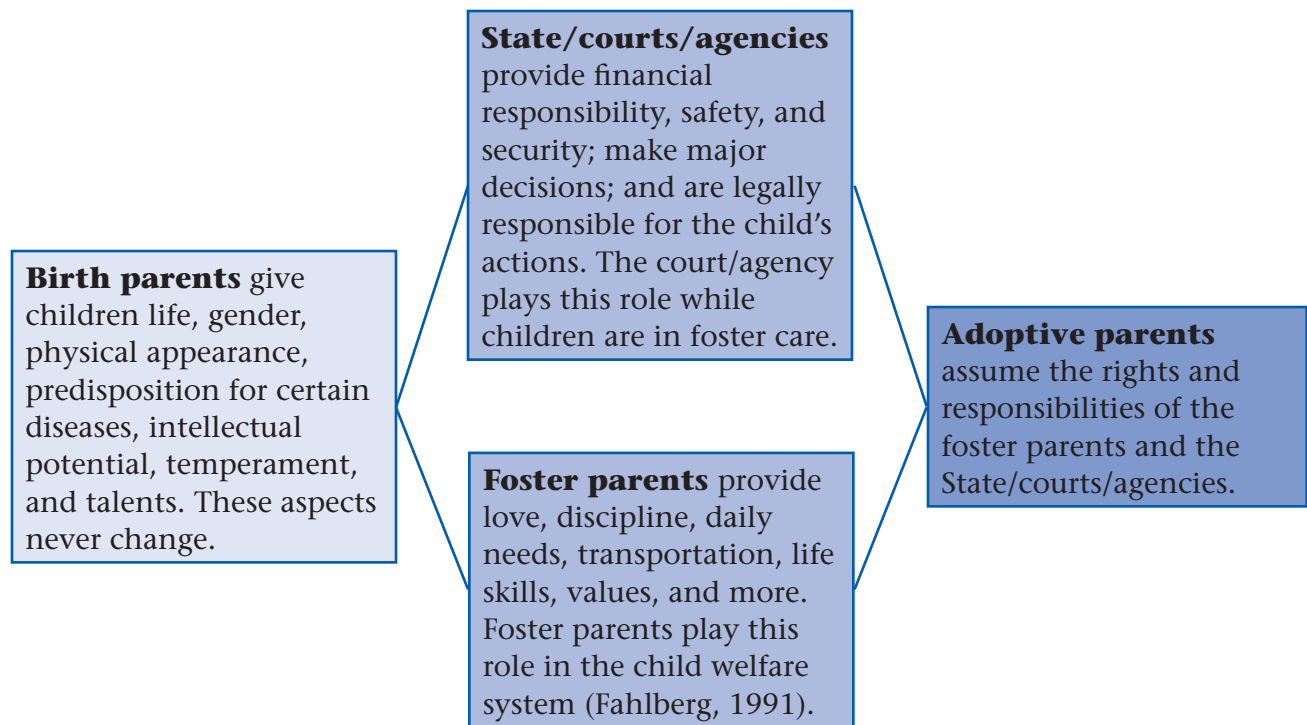
There are a number of changes in status that will affect the child, and these should be discussed, depending on the child’s developmental level.

- To help the child understand **legal differences** between foster care and adoption, you might talk about how the adoption court hearing is different from other court hearings during foster care.

Some parents use marriage as an analogy for adoption and say the court hearing is like a marriage ceremony, and the adoption certificate is like the marriage certificate that makes the relationship legal and permanent. (Be prepared for questions about divorce.)

- Youth might need help in understanding the **financial differences** inherent in foster care and adoption. Adoption assistance payments might be compared to an allowance; older children may be able to understand the payments as costs to meet the child’s needs (Laws, 2004).
- To help children understand **parenting differences** between foster care and adoption, you might remind the child that when in foster care, a permission slip signed by an agency caseworker was required for field trips, sleeping over at a friend’s house, or traveling across State lines. After adoption, *you* can give permission for these activities.

Another way to explain the changes from foster care to adoption is to talk about the roles and responsibilities that different parents and agencies play in a child or youth’s life. (See diagram on following page.)



Helping Children Understand Their Histories and Losses

When children or youth spend extended periods of time in out-of-home care, memories of significant events and people can be lost. Children may not have a historical sense of self: who they are, where they've lived, the people they lived with, where they went to school, memories of favorite items like stuffed animals or blankets, and more. This can have negative developmental outcomes (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2008). Parents can help children review and understand their previous life experiences to clarify what happened to them in the past and help

them integrate those experiences so they will have greater self-understanding.

Where Is Your Child on the Permanency Continuum?

Children's answers to the following questions will vary depending on their developmental stage, but their responses can guide you or your child's therapists or social workers in helping your child overcome past traumas and achieve feelings of permanency (Henry, 2005).

- Who am I? (question related to identity)
- What happened to me? (question related to loss and/or trauma)
- Where am I going? (question related to attachment)

- How will I get there? (question related to relationships)
- When will I know I belong? (question related to connection and safety)

For more information about helping your child deal with trauma, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/mentalhealth/common/trauma.cfm>

Helpful Activities and Resources

Families can help children in answering these powerful questions and in understanding their unique history in many ways. Lifebooks, ecomaps, lifemaps, and lifepaths are tools used by foster/adoptive parents and adoption professionals to help children and youth answer questions about how they came to be separated from their birth family and where, ultimately, they belong. These tools can help children build a bridge between foster care and adoption.

A **lifebook** is an account of the child's life in words, pictures, photographs, and electronic documents. While lifebooks can take many forms, each child's lifebook is unique. You can assist in creating a lifebook by gathering information about a child and taking pictures of people and places that are—or were—meaningful. Working together on a lifebook can bring parents and children together. For free lifebook page samples, visit the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association website: http://www.ifapa.org/resources/IFAPA_Lifebook_Pages.asp

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN A CHILD'S LIFEBOOK

- Pictures of the child's birth parents and/or birth relatives and information about visits
- Developmental milestones: first words, first smile, first steps, etc.
- Common childhood diseases and immunizations, injuries, illnesses, or hospitalizations
- Pictures of current or past foster family and extended family members who were/are significant to the child
- Pictures of previous foster families, their homes, and their pets
- Names of teachers and schools attended, report cards, and school activities
- Special activities such as Scouting, clubs, sports, or camping
- Faith-based activities
- What a child did when he/she was happy or excited and ways a child showed affection
- Cute things the child did, nicknames, favorite friends, activities, and toys
- Birthdays, religious celebrations, or trips taken with the foster family

Because a lifebook may contain personal and painful information about the child or youth's past, it is not intended to be shared outside the family. It's merely a resource to help the child cope with the transition from

temporary to permanent care. For more information on lifebooks, visit the Information Gateway website: http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/lifebooks.cfm

W.I.S.E. UP Powerbooks help children answer awkward or difficult questions asked by classmates or new friends. Foster care and adoption are nothing to be ashamed of, but questions like, “Why are you in foster care?” can cause added anxiety and stress for children and youth. The W.I.S.E. UP series helps children understand that they have options about how much and what kinds of information to disclose when answering these questions. The books offer example questions and responses.

- W stands for “Walk away.”
- I stands for saying, “It’s private.”
- S stands for “Share” some information about adoption or about one’s own story.
- E stands for “Educate” others about adoption with correct facts.

W.I.S.E. UP Powerbooks and similar resources can be found at the Center for Adoption Support and Education website: <http://www.adoptionssupport.org/pub/index.php>

An **ecomap** is a visual representation of the principal people and activities in a child or youth’s life. An ecomap may have a circle in the middle of the page with a stick figure of a child in it, along with the question “Why am I here?” Lines extend from the circle like spokes to other circles representing the court, other foster families, siblings, school, or to topics such as “things I like to do” to represent what and who is important to

a child and to help the child understand how he or she came to live with the foster/adoptive family.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADOPTION

Social media sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter have changed the face of communication today. Although statistics are not yet available to document the number of adopted people and birth parents who find each other through these sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a growing trend. If your child is a regular user of social media, you may want to explore positive ways to use Facebook and other sites to maintain healthy contact between your child and his or her birth family members.

Lifemaps or **lifepaths** are visual representations to help children understand the paths their lives have taken and the decision points along the way. They may include stepping stones to represent a child’s age and a statement about where and with whom they lived at that age.

Meaningful details to include in these tools that will help children understand their histories describe the child’s birth, explain why and how the child entered foster care, and clarify how decisions were made about moves and new placements. If possible, include baby pictures and pictures of birth parents. If no information is available, children can draw a picture of what they might have looked like. Statements such as “There is no information

about Johnny's birth father in his file" at least acknowledge the father's existence. Honesty, developmental appropriateness, and compassion are vital for children in explaining difficult and painful circumstances that brought them into foster care.

Working with these tools can give your child ways to experience and work through trauma and feelings of loss and grief.

Helping Children Cope With Trauma and Losses

It may be difficult to comprehend the experience of past losses your foster child or youth encountered before adoption. Your child may still be grieving because of losses or lost connections with family members. He or she may also suffer from trauma related to those losses. There are often several stages of grief the child must experience before he or she can transfer attachment from the birth family to your family. Adoption experts acknowledge the importance of helping children integrate their previous attachments to important people in their lives in order to transition that emotional attachment to a new family (Fahlberg, 1991; Henry, 2005). Integration is a way of helping children cope with the painful realities of the separation from their birth families.

The five-step integration process below was first described by adoption pioneer K. Donley (1988). The process is an effort to clarify permission messages children and youth receive from their birth families to be

in foster care, to live with new parents, to be loved by them, and to love them back.

Five Steps to Help Your Child in the Integration Process

1. **Create an accurate reconstruction of the child's placement history.** Creating a lifebook, lifemap, or ecomap with a child helps a child to see and understand his or her own history.
2. **Identify the important attachment figures in the child's life.** Foster parents might learn who these important people are by listening to the child talk about people from previous placements. These attachment figures might be parents, but they could be siblings, former foster parents, or other family members. When adoptive families rarely talk about birth families, children or youth may feel the loss more intensely (NACAC, 2009).
3. **Gain the cooperation of the most significant attachment figures available.** If possible, parents should cooperate with the birth parents, grandparents, or other relative to whom the child was attached. Even if the birth family is not happy about a child's permanency goal of adoption, there is likely one important person (a teacher, a former neighbor) who will be willing to work with you to make a child's transition easier.
4. **Clarify "the permission message."** It is necessary for children to hear

and feel from people who are important to them that it is all right to love another family. The primary person in a child's life who is available to give the child that message should be sought out to do so.

- 5. Communicate that permission to the child.** Whether the “permission to love your family” comes in the form of a letter from Grandma or from the birth parent during visits, it is important that children hear from that person that it is not their fault they are in foster care and that it is all right to love another family. This “permission” will go a long way to helping a child relax and transfer his/her attachment to the new family.

For more information on helping your child adapt to grief and loss, visit Information Gateway: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/mentalhealth/common/grief.cfm>

During this transition phase, it's important for parents and others working with the child to use the following skills (Henry, 2005):

- Engaging the child
- Listening to the child
- Telling the truth
- Validating the child's life story
- Creating a safe space for the child
- Realizing that it is never too late to go back in time
- Acknowledging pain as part of the process

Helping Children Transfer Attachment

While the integration process is about helping the child cope with and accept his or her past, the transfer of attachment is about moving toward the future. Attachment transfer is not an easy process but it's an important part of the transition from foster child or youth to adoptive child or youth. Children with attachment issues have missed several completions of the attachment cycle, or what is referred to as a disrupted attachment cycle, and it's critical to allow children and youth to experience the cycle with their foster/adoptive family (Keck & Kupecky, 2002/2009).

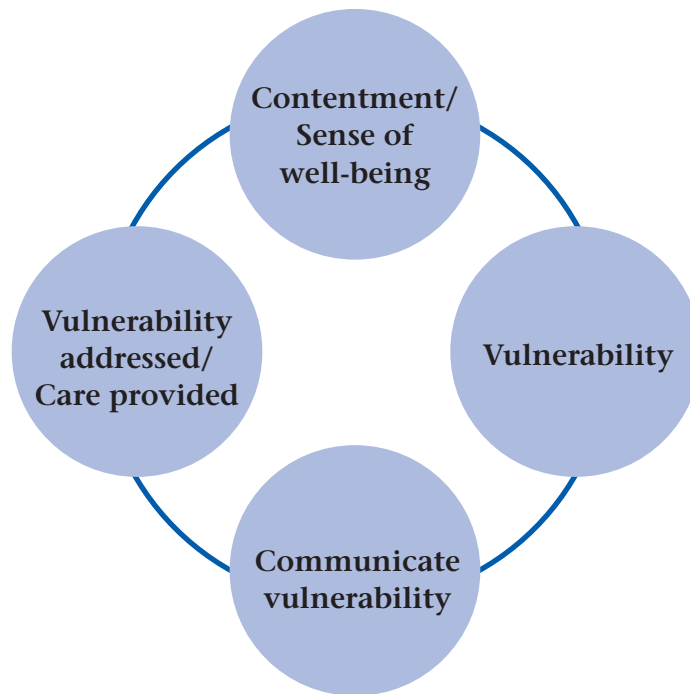
The diagrams on the next page, adapted from Parents as Tender Healers (PATH)—a curriculum for foster parents, adoptive parents, and kinship caregivers—demonstrate the completed and disrupted attachment cycles (Jackson & Wasserman, 1997).

Relationships and Routines

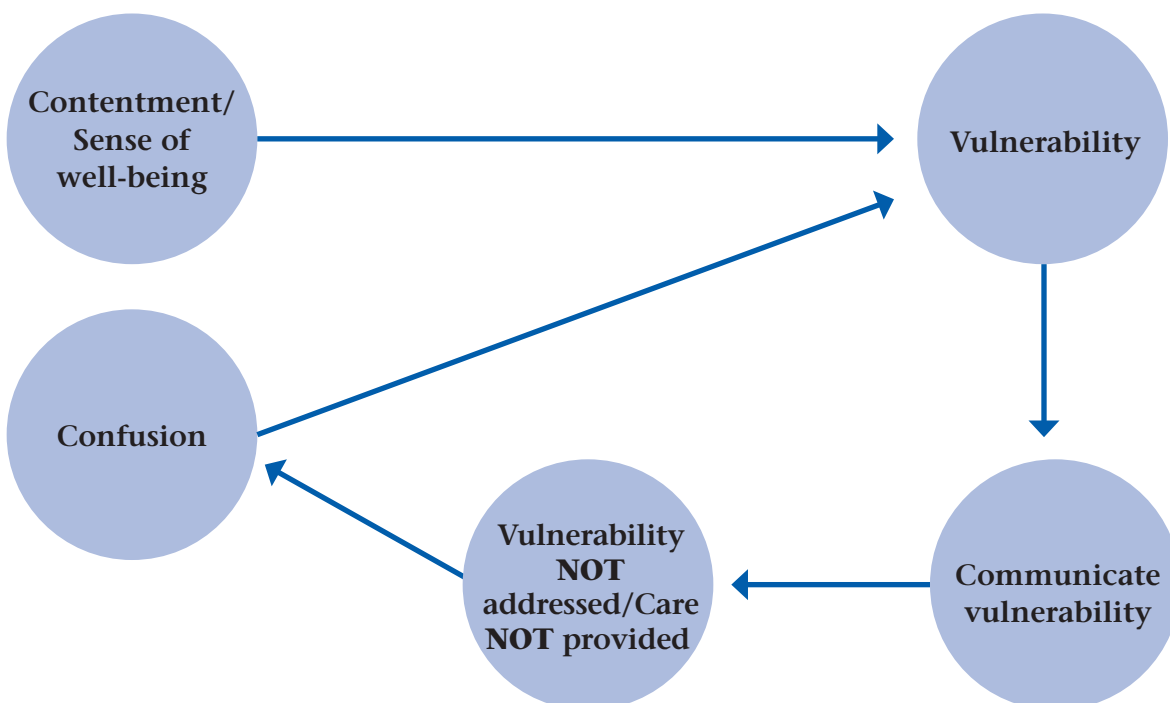
Relationships and routines are key ways to fortify your child's sense of status within your family and begin the process of transferring and forming attachment to you and your family. Some of these techniques include:

- Be aware of the enormous adjustment the child is making. You, too, are making a huge adjustment but have adult perceptions and skills to handle it.

Attachment Cycle



Disrupted Attachment Cycle



- Balance structured activities with unstructured time for conversation, especially during the first few weeks. Use a prop or gimmick such as a family game or talking stick to stimulate conversation as needed.
- Hold family meetings with a time set aside to evaluate “How are we doing as a family?” Encourage honesty and make adjustments as needed.
- Work together to create a written list of family rules. When everyone contributes to creating rules, everyone feels ownership of the rules. Discuss consequences for breaking the rules, procedures for modifying the rules, and family rewards for following the rules.
- As holidays or special occasions approach, encourage your child to discuss what his or her expectations are for the event.
- Incorporate elements of family traditions into your celebrations. Be sure to describe what celebrations with extended family may be like—they may seem overwhelming to your newest family members.

Conclusion

On the surface, it may seem easy for a child or youth to transition from foster care to adoption within the same family, but in reality, the internal process—both for a child and families—is much more complicated. Allowing children to “drift” into adoption without acknowledging the significant changes may lead to difficulties later.

You need to help your children consider and understand their own histories and the reasons why they cannot live with their birth families, help them adjust to this loss, and help them transfer their attachments to you and your family. In helping children, families will need to consider each child’s needs as they are related to the child’s age, health, personality, temperament, and cultural and racial experiences.

Other foster/adoptive parents can be a great resource for families. The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory has a list of foster and adoptive support groups in each State: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>

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Resources

“Adoption Scrapbooks Made Easy” and “Thanks for the Memories,” both by Jenni Colson, published in *Adoptive Families*, offer strategies for developing adoption scrapbooks:

<http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=1131> and <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=1305>

“Bibliography: Lifebooks for Children and Youth in Foster Care” is a selection of resources on creating lifebooks by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Services: <http://www.caseyfamilyservices.org/userfiles/pdf/bib-2009-lifebooks.pdf>

“Birds, Bees, and Adoption,” by Marybeth Lambe, published in *Adoptive Families*, offers tips for adoptive parents on explaining reproduction: <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=772>

Free lifebook sample pages are available through the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association: http://www.ifapa.org/resources/IFAPA_Lifebook_Pages.asp

“Get Talking,” published online in *Adoptive Families*, provides a number of articles on how and when adoptive parents should talk with their children about adoption: <http://adoptivefamilies.com/talking>

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<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactoadoptadas.cfm>

Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons



As discussion of the adoption process becomes more open and accepted in American society, and as more Americans have experience with adoption, there is also more attention focused on those involved in adoption—the adopted person, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents (often referred to as the adoption triad or the adoption constellation). This factsheet examines the impact of adoption on adopted persons who have reached adulthood.

What's Inside:

- Postadoption issues
- Openness, searching, and access to family history
- Managing adoption issues
- Resources



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While it is difficult to make sweeping statements about such a large and diverse group as adopted persons, adopted persons generally lead lives that are no different from the lives of nonadopted persons; however, they have experiences that are unique to being adopted, and these experiences may have an impact on their lives at various times. There are several themes that emerge from personal accounts and data from academic studies about issues that adopted persons may face. This factsheet addresses these themes, which include loss, the development of identity and self-esteem, interest in genetic information, and managing adoption issues.

Postadoption Issues

Adopted persons may deal with a range of issues at different points in their lives.

Loss and Grief

The loss of birth parents as a result of adoption may set the stage for feelings of grief for many adopted persons. The loss experienced by adopted persons may be characterized as ambiguous loss, or the loss of someone who still is (or who may be) alive (Powell & Afifi, 2005). This type of loss also may increase the feelings of uncertainty (e.g., “Do I resemble my biological parents?”) an adopted person feels. Adopted persons who feel secure in their adoption and have open adoptive family communication may be better able to manage their uncertainty and grief (Powell & Afifi). Additionally, adopted persons may have difficulty finding an outlet because their grief may not be recognized by others.

Feelings of loss and grief, as well as anger, anxiety, or fear, may especially occur during emotionally charged milestones, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a parent.

Adopted persons may also suffer secondary losses. For instance, along with the loss of their birth mother and birth father, adopted persons may experience the loss of brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. There also may be a loss of cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial adoption). For those who were adopted as older children, there may be a loss of friends, foster families, pets, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings.

Identity Development

Identity formation begins in childhood and takes on increased importance and prominence during adolescence (Grotevant, 1997). Adoption is a significant aspect of identity for adopted persons, even when they are adults (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). The task of identity development may be more difficult for an adopted person because of the additional issues related to adoption, such as why he or she was placed for adoption, what became of the birth parents, does he or she have siblings, and whether he or she resembles the birth parents in looks or in other characteristics. Adoption remains an important aspect of identity throughout adulthood, and one study described the development of adult adoptive identity as having five phases:

- No awareness/denying awareness: The adopted person does not overtly acknowledge adoption issues.
- Emerging awareness: The adopted person views adoption as a positive influence and recognizes some issues, but he or she is not ready to explore these issues.
- Drowning in awareness: The adopted person has feelings of loss, anger, and sadness about the adoption.
- Reemerging from awareness: The adopted person recognizes the issues related to the adoption, but also sees the positive aspects and is working toward acceptance.
- Finding peace: The adopted person has worked through his or her issues with the adoption and is moving toward peace and acceptance (Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, 2007).

Self-Esteem

Often accompanying these issues of identity are issues of self-esteem—that is, how the adopted person feels about him or herself. A number of studies have found that, while adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in most ways, they often score lower on measures of self-esteem and self-confidence (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996). This result may reflect the fact that some adopted persons may view themselves as different, out-of-place, unwelcome, or rejected. Some of these feelings may result from the initial loss of birth parents and from growing up away from birth parents, siblings, and extended family members. They also may be caused by an ongoing feeling of being different from nonadopted

people who know about their genetic background and birth family and who may be more secure about their own identity as a result. Additionally, some adopted persons report that secrecy surrounding their adoption contributes to low self-esteem.

Thinking About the Adoption

The amount and degree of thought an adopted person devotes to his or her adoption may change over time and may vary based on each person's circumstances. For example, the birth of a child to an adopted person, which may be the first experience with a biological family member, may cause the adopted person to revisit earlier issues of identity. The new parent may also be prompted to think about what his or her birth mother experienced in giving birth and what the birth mother and father may have experienced in making the adoption placement decision. Adopted adults who become new parents may be sympathetic to the difficulties of their birth parents, or they may wonder how their birth parents could ever have placed them for adoption. In a study of adopted adolescents' thinking about adoption, 13 percent never thought about adoption, 54 percent thought about their adoption once a month or more, and 27 percent thought about their adoption once a week or more, with males thinking about their adoption more frequently than females (Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002). Adolescents in closed adoptions were no more likely to have increased frequency of thought about their adoption than those in open adoptions.

Genetic Information

Adopted persons often lack birth family genetic and medical history. This information can be vitally important to the diagnosis and treatment of genetically based medical conditions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010). In addition, being asked to supply medical history information at a doctor's appointment may make adopted persons acutely aware of how they differ from those who were not adopted. Finding out later in life that they were adopted as infants puts adopted persons at risk of misdiagnoses or other medical issues due to their long-held assumption of a family medical history that they later find is incorrect. Additionally, when adopted persons plan to get married or become a parent, they may want to know about genetic characteristics their children may inherit.

In many cases, nonidentifying information, such as medical history, may be placed in the adoption file by the birth parents or agency at the time of the adoption. Adopted persons are allowed access to this nonidentifying information, which is usually at least as old as the adopted person. In some States, adopted persons can petition a judge to have their adoption records opened, and some judges will agree to do so in order to provide urgently needed medical information.

However, obtaining access to information provided by the birth parents at the time of the adoption may not be sufficient to provide a full medical history. For example, a birth parent, sibling, or grandparent may later develop or be diagnosed with a genetic disease or condition. It is more useful if

birth parents regularly update the file that is kept with the adoption agency or attorney. Additionally, those in open adoptions may be able to get this information directly from their birth parents.

For more information about the collection of and access to birth family information, see the following Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheets:

- *Collection of Family Information About Adopted Persons and Their Birth Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/collection.cfm)
- *Access to Adoption Records* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm)

LATE DISCOVERY

Adopted persons who find out their adoption status later in life often call themselves an LDA (for Late Discovery Adoptee). Responses may include anger directed toward the adoptive parents, depression, and issues with trust in other close relationships. For additional information about late discovery in adoption, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/discovery.cfm.

Other Behavioral Health Issues

A review of the research on the mental health of adopted adults shows there is a divide about whether adopted adults' psychological well-being is comparable to

their nonadopted peers. Many studies report that adopted adults have a higher degree of mental health issues, but some researchers view these differences as minor while others view them as substantial (Baden & Wiley, 2007). Additionally, the studies are not always in agreement about what the differences are. For example, some studies cite higher rates of depression among adopted individuals than their nonadopted peers (Borders et al., 2000; Cubito & Obremski Brandon, 2000), while others have found similar levels of depression within both groups (Feigelman, 2005).

Even with the split in research conclusions about adopted adults' psychological well-being, most of the literature points to adopted adolescents and adults being more likely to receive counseling than their nonadopted peers (Borders et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2000). Studies comparing adopted persons to their nonadopted peers also indicate that adopted adults have similar rates of suicide ideation and attempts (Feigelman, 2005), that adopted adolescents have similar rates of antisocial behaviors (Grotevant et al., 2006), and that adopted persons are at an increased risk of substance use disorders during their lifetime (Yoon, Westermeyer, Warwick, & Kuskowski, 2012).

VARIATIONS IN THE ADOPTION EXPERIENCE

Even given all the research about trends in the lives of adopted persons, each adopted person will have unique feelings, experiences, and thoughts about his or her adoption. Some of these differences may be accounted for by individual personality traits, coping mechanisms, or other life events, but circumstances surrounding the adoption also may affect how an adopted person views the adoption. The following are examples of characteristics of adoptions that may have an impact on an adopted person:

- Being adopted transracially (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_ethics/types/trans.cfm)
- Having lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) parents (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_ethics/types/lgbt.cfm)
- Being adopted from another country (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_ethics/types/intercountry.cfm)
- Being in an open adoption (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_openness.cfm)
- Discovering later in life that you were adopted (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/discovery.cfm)
- Being placed for adoption because your birth parents' rights were terminated involuntarily (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm)

Openness, Searching, and Access to Family History

Being placed for adoption does not necessarily mean an adopted person will never be able to contact his or her birth parents again. Adoptions may have some degree of openness, meaning that there is some communication between the birth and adoptive families—possibly including the adopted person.¹ Additionally, the birth family or the adopted person may attempt a search and reunion later in life. The number of open adoptions (in which the birth and adoptive families know each other's identities and have direct contact with the adopted child) and mediated adoptions (in which contacts between the birth and adoptive families are made indirectly through a mediator) are on the rise. In a 2012 survey of adoption agencies with infant adoption programs, the agencies reported that only 5 percent of their placements during the previous 2 years were confidential, with 55 percent of the adoptions being fully disclosed and 40 percent being mediated (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012).

There are myriad reasons adopted persons may seek information about or contact with their birth families, such as a desire

to establish or reestablish a relationship, help further develop their own identity, or to obtain genetic or medical information. The desire to search may be prompted by specific life events, such as marriage or having children (Corder, 2012). Studies have shown that adopted persons rarely search for their birth parents because of a negative relationship with their adoptive parents (Muller & Perry, 2001). Perhaps half of all adopted adults search for identifying information or try to make contact with their birth parents (Curtis & Pearson, 2010; Evan B. Donaldson, 2010; Muller & Perry, 2001). Adopted persons in an open adoption or who otherwise have contact with their birth parents generally have positive feelings about the relationships (Grotevant et al., 2007; Siegel, 2012) and are glad they searched (Penny et al., 2007). Some earlier studies, however, found that adopted persons who search for their parents may exhibit lower self-esteem, have lower family and friend support, have higher incidences of anger and depression, and more frequently use mental health services (Borders et al., 2000; Cubito & Obremski Brandon, 2000).

For additional information about open adoption and birth family contact, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_openness.cfm

For additional information about obtaining birth and/or adoption records, including State laws that govern this access, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search/records.cfm>

¹ The level of communication between an adopted person and his or her birth family may vary due to the adopted person's age and developmental level or the particular openness agreement of that adoption. Additionally, some adoption advocates believe that an adoption is only truly open when all members of the triad (the birth family, the adoptive family, and the adopted person) communicate with each other.

SEARCH AND REUNION AND THE INTERNET

With seemingly everything available on the Internet, adopted persons and birth families are much more easily able to find contact information and establish connections than they had been in the past. This increase in information availability is changing the landscape of privacy and confidentiality, including in adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). With a simple Internet search or a review of social media sites, individuals may be able to quickly determine identities and establish connections. Search and reunion among birth parents and adopted persons is not new, but the speed at which it can occur is. Because of the sometimes instantaneous nature of the Internet, connections may be attempted without giving pause for self-reflection, consideration of the consequences, or assistance from support systems, such as family, friends, and professionals (Howard, 2012).

Since search and reunion can be enormously emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss, adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before search and reunion. Preparation will help individuals think through their expectations and prepare for a range of potential reactions from the other party, including rejection (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

Managing Adoption Issues

Most adopted adults overcome any adoption-related issues they experience during childhood and adolescence and are as well-adjusted as nonadopted persons (Borders et al., 2000; Corder, 2012). However, there is also significant research that suggests that many adopted persons struggle with issues such as grief, loss, identity development, and self-esteem. The following describes some ways that adopted persons manage these and other issues.

Support Groups. Many adopted persons are helped by support groups in which they can talk about their feelings with others who have similar experiences. The support group may provide a long-needed outlet for any lingering feelings related to the adoption, such as loss or grief. In addition, support groups may provide help with the decision of whether to search for birth relatives.

Counseling. Some adopted persons may need more help than they find from family and friends or through a support group. In these instances, adopted persons may seek professional counseling. Many mental health practitioners report not having enough training in adoption-related issues, so it is important for adopted adults to find a counselor who has the requisite skills, knowledge, and outlook (e.g., the counselor does not assume all issues are related to adoption) (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Corder, 2012). Also, support groups may have experience with local counselors and be able to make a recommendation. For more

information, read *Selecting and Working With a Therapist Skilled in Adoption*, available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm.

Education. For many adopted persons, learning about the experiences of others, whether through first-person accounts or through adoption research, can be a helpful coping mechanism. There are an ever-increasing number of books, articles, videos, and websites (including blogs) that focus on a wide range of adoption-related topics. Adopted persons may be reassured discovering that others who have gone through similar experiences have had similar reactions.

Conclusion

Adopted persons generally lead lives that are very similar to their nonadopted peers, but their adoption experience frequently can contribute to circumstances that the adopted person may need to overcome, such as feelings of loss and grief, questions about self-identity, or a lack of information about their medical background. The increasing occurrence of open adoption—and therefore the increased contact adopted persons have with their birth families—has dramatically affected the issues faced by adopted persons over the past two decades. Whereas adopted persons from a past era may have more frequently dealt with issues of secrecy and large gaps in information, persons adopted recently may more often be faced with issues related to having contact with their birth parents. Additionally, with the seemingly limitless

availability of information, in large part due to the Internet, adopted persons now have access to widespread information and resources, which can greatly aid them in discovering information about their birth families or finding resources for support and encouragement.

Resources

American Adoption Congress. This nonprofit membership organization provides education, advocacy, and support for families touched by adoption. <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/>

Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association (ALMA). This membership organization provides an adoption reunion registry and advocates for the right of adopted persons to know the truth of their origin. The ALMA registry has a one-time registration fee of \$50. <http://www.almasociety.org>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. This service of the Children's Bureau provides information and publications about a wide range of adoption topics. It also provides adoption statutes for each State.

- For Adopted People (web section) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (list of organizations) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?svcID=132&rate_chno=AR-0031A)

- *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)
- *Working With Birth and Adoptive Families to Support Open Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm)
- Laws Related to Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/laws/>)
- *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/index.cfm)
- National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>)

Donaldson Adoption Institute. The Adoption Institute provides information about a wide array of adoption issues. <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org>

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project. This website provides information on a longitudinal study of openness in adoption. <http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption>

Open Adoption Bloggers. This website lists more than 300 blogs about open adoption, including those by adopted persons, birth parents, and adoptive parents. <http://openadoptionbloggers.com>

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