



## Editor's Comment

Adoption has become a common phenomenon in our society, and the past several years have seen a growing awareness of the impact of various forms of adoption on families. Parenting is a challenging job. Parenting an adopted child adds the extra challenge of helping the developing child to understand what adoption means and to integrate this knowledge into his or her life and unique sense of self.

In the future, as adoption takes different forms and long-term research adds to our knowledge, society's response and children's adjustment to the broad variability of adoptive families will grow and develop as well.

This is the second of two *NYU Child Study Center Letters* devoted to issues related to adoption. The previous *Letter* dealt with practical and psychological concerns related to the formation of the adoptive family. The current *Letter* deals with some concerns specific to raising an adopted child. Among the topics discussed are parent-child attachment, behavioral, emotional, developmental and medical issues, telling the child about adoption, and the specific concerns regarding children with special needs.

HSK

## The Expanding World of Adoption Part II Raising an Adopted Child

### Introduction

These are the voices of children talking about adoption:

*The parents I have now found me by asking an agency if there was a child who needed a family to love him.*

*On my birthday I think a lot about being adopted. On the other days I don't think about it at all. Maybe my first mom didn't really like me.*

*My parents who adopted me wanted me even before I was born.*

*I try and do the right thing because I don't want my father to give me back.*

For adoptive parents and their children the process of becoming a family is similar to the experiences of most new parents, yet in some respects it differs. When biological parents expect the birth of a baby they have nine months to prepare, to fantasize about their child, to talk with family and friends. Adoptive parents, while they may have been involved in the negotiation process for a period of time, may find themselves in their new roles without much notice. It's not surprising that many adoptive parents are frustrated by the whole procedure. In order to complete the adoption, many have had to be interviewed, analyzed, processed and computerized. They've been influenced by the attitudes of their friends, their families, their communities, and flooded with material and opinions generated by the media. They've had to sort out their own feelings about such emotionally charged issues as fertility, unwed parenthood,

religious and ethnic heritage. Parenting is a hard job, and parenting an adopted child has some additional challenges.

The arrival of the new adopted baby or child heralds a time of transition - the anxiety and uncertainty of waiting are over and the new family unit is established. For every family welcoming a new biological or adopted child, new relationships and new routines have to be created. All infants need adjustment time; they need to develop an attachment to a primary caregiver - be it a birth parent, a foster parent, or an adoptive parent. Early ideas about bonding led to the notion that an instant and automatic relationship occurred between mother and child immediately after birth. However, a true attachment develops gradually over weeks and months. It is an emotional and interactional relationship between parents and child that develops as a result of a combination of factors including consistent and responsive care, parent style and child temperament. When parent and child develop a secure attachment the child learns to trust his caregiver and thus is better able to develop other trusting relationships. Secure attachment is the best predictor of healthy subsequent development. Studies have shown that children adopted as infants are essentially just as secure in their attachments as non-adoptees.

If a child is adopted during the toddler or preschool years, the development of a secure parent-child relationship may take a different course. Children of this age may have experienced the loss of a previous caregiver or a series of moves. They may be able to recall meaningful



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relationships from the past, and need time to build a new relationship. A child born in a foreign country also has to deal with the loss of his original culture and language. Building new relationships can be helped if the child feels able to talk about the past and the adoptive family is sensitive to this issue. The older child adopted into a new family after the toddler or preschool years has to make still another adjustment in a series of adjustments and developing secure relationships becomes more difficult. Building an adoptive family takes time, patience and hard work. All families have difficult times and parents should not be too quick to attribute problems to adoption.

### What adoptive parents wonder about

Adoptive parents have numerous concerns about raising their children. The most important finding in follow-up studies is that the vast majority of adopted children do make good adjustments and ultimately show good academic, social and family functioning.

### Behavioral and emotional difficulties

The possibility of behavioral difficulties is one of the greatest concerns of adoptive parents. Although many attempts have been made to ferret out the facts in this emotionally charged issue, findings have been confusing or contradictory. It does appear that adopted children are over-represented in both outpatient and inpatient mental health settings. Interestingly, adopted children are referred for evaluation and psychological help due to less severe problems than children raised by their biological parents. The difference may reflect a higher level of worry on the part of adoptive parents. Since they are likely to be more alert to the possibility of difficulties, adoptive parents may seek help at the first sign of trouble.

What factors determine whether or not an adopted child will have behavioral problems? Research on the outcome of adoptions highlights the fact that children who come from backgrounds where neglect, abuse, and/or frequent caretaker changes have occurred are clearly at higher risk for maladjustment. Possible difficulties stem from

attachment problems, which can be seen in children who have not had a consistent caregiver early in life and have not learned to trust; they either lack affection for others or shower it on everyone indiscriminately. Other problems may include acting-out behaviors, school adjustment problems, and poor social skills. No one factor determines whether or not an adopted child will experience behavioral or emotional difficulties; rather a combination of factors, including age at adoption, stability and adequacy of the early environment along with genetic vulnerability, all contribute to a child's adjustment. Many of the problems encountered by adopted children are within the normal range, but when parents have concerns they should seek professional advice.

### Developmental and medical issues

Most studies which examine the incidence of medical and developmental problems in adopted children focus on international adoptees because of the stressful conditions under which many have lived as well as the different standards of health care around the world. Developmental difficulties occur more often among children adopted internationally. Even in orphanages staffed with personnel who attempt to provide adequate concern and nurturance, the number of children in each facility, coupled with frequent staff changes make it difficult to provide the consistency and time needed for appropriate personal interaction and stimulation. In addition, in many international adoptions children are adopted at an older age, which prolongs their exposure to unhealthy conditions.

Gross motor, fine motor and language delays are very common in institutionalized children. Many of these children improve significantly when they are placed in an appropriate home. Poor prenatal care is another risk factor, but prenatal histories are not always reliable in foreign countries or available in U. S. adoptions. However, if parents are able to obtain an accurate history, as is sometimes possible, as well as professional input before an adoption, they are in a better position to decide if a particular child is at risk for possible developmental difficulties.

Growth delays have been found in the majority of studies of international adoptions, with the severity of the delay related to the environment in which the children were raised and the length of time spent there. For example, one group which evaluated the medical status of international adoptees found 44% of the children had growth delays. Another group of clinicians evaluating children adopted from Romanian orphanages, which are known for their poor living conditions and high rates of neglect, found more than 90% of the children to have developmental delays. Inadequate vaccinations and infectious diseases are also common problems. Unfortunately, medical records and histories from many of the countries of origin are either unavailable, incomplete or utilize terms that do not correlate with any known medical conditions in the United States.

Although children receive medical screenings prior to coming to the United States, these are often cursory. Therefore, upon arrival in the US, a complete medical evaluation, preferably with someone familiar with the issues facing foreign adoptees, is essential. The US State Department Website has frequent updates notifying potential adoptive parents of medical issues endemic to certain areas of the world.

Many internationally adopted children do well with adequate care and nurturing. However, more long-term studies are necessary in order to accurately evaluate the degree to which developmental and growth delays are reversible. Although a child with difficulties is not "unadoptable," knowledge gives potential parents the option of thinking through their ability to contend with potential problems.

## Whether, when and how to tell children about their adoption

As society's views of adoption have become more open, so has the tendency to answer the questions of adopted children in a more open manner. The previously held attitude that adopted children should be protected from information about their birth families and about their early history has given

way to the belief that children should be spoken to honestly, but in an age-appropriate way.

Questions about adoption raise the anxiety level of many parents, and couples frequently disagree on what and how much they should discuss with their children. It is never too soon for couples to begin talking about these issues and come to an agreement comfortable for both of them. The ease with which the parents have accepted their status as adoptive parents is related to the ease with which the child accepts his status as an adopted child. Questions about adoption may trigger a range of emotions, particularly sadness and loss, for parents as well as children. Parents may feel the loss of the ability to bear biological children; children may feel the loss of their birth parents. Although sad and other feelings such as anger may occur, allowing them to surface and dealing with them honestly and sensitively can solidify the relationship between parents and child.

Most experts agree that it is crucial to tell the truth and that, whenever possible, the adoptive parents should be the ones to tell the child. If the child first learns about adoption from a source other than the parents, the child may not trust the parents and may view adoption as bad because it was kept secret.

There is some disagreement among experts as to the best time to speak to the child about adoption. Some advise parents to use the word 'adoption' as soon as the child can respond to language and the emotional tone that accompanies it, so that the word becomes familiar and comfortable. Others believe that although giving information early may relieve the parents' anxiety and desire to get it over with, telling too much too soon may place a burden on the child. Rather than tell the story of adoption all at one time, it's important with the young child to respond concretely to specific questions. If the child wants more information he'll ask more questions. "Telling" doesn't happen all at one time; discussions should take place over time when issues arise and should be tailored to the child's vocabulary and level of understanding. Children have varying levels of interest in adoption and their

origins. At times they will not want to talk about adoption, and parents should not press the issue.

## What adopted children wonder about

Parents can explain adoption in simple terms to a 4 or 5 year-old and then explain it again in different and more complex ways at older ages. Children under the age of five are not looking for the whole story and usually ask concrete questions such as: Did you take me from the hospital in a car? Where was I born? Did I sleep in a crib? How did you get me? Answers should be short and specific to the questions. Children at this age believe in magical thinking and may think they caused the adoption. The important message to convey is that they were born just like other children, are wanted and are loved.

The school-age child is becoming capable of more logical thinking and can assimilate more details. He can understand the idea of two sets of parents, wants to know the reasons behind the explanations and wants specific details about the adoption. Questions typical of the school-age child are: Why did my birth mother give me away? How did you choose me? Who made the adoption arrangements? Who is my real family? It's not helpful to go into excessive details, such as legal issues. Fortunately children usually block out information they can't understand. The important message to convey is that she was not 'bad' and she'll always be part of the family.

The adolescent can understand the abstract concept of adoption, and many are ready to understand the ramifications of the process as well as the information available about their birth parents. As the adolescent seeks to establish an identity and gain independence he may show a revived interest in questions about origins, background, and the reasons for his adoption. Information regarding possible parental substance abuse and other illegal activities should be revealed only when the adolescent is psychologically mature and able to handle the facts. Some of the normal life events of adolescence, such as leaving home for college or for a job, may trigger

earlier separation issues. At all ages parents should be attuned to nonverbal cues, since some children may have questions even if they don't ask openly.

In an open adoption the birth parents and adoptive parents may know each other, and there may be ongoing communication. The child knows she was adopted and may speak or visit with the birth parents. However, the child still needs explanations.

What matters above all is that the lines of communication are open and the child gets the message early in life that it's okay to talk and ask questions about adoption. Many adult adoptees report that they held their curiosity in check for fear of hurting their adoptive parents' feelings. Throughout all explanations, the underlying theme that adoption is a good thing and that the child is good should be emphasized.

## Special situations

Many people who want to adopt children are turning to nontraditional sources, such as international adoptions, adoption of older children or children with special needs. A majority of the children awaiting adoption have special needs. The term 'special needs' refers to youngsters who are likely to have difficulty in blending into a new family and therefore need a 'special family.' Parents who adopt these children face additional parenting challenges. The children may be emotionally or physically handicapped, may have lived in several homes, may come from a different ethnic or racial background, may be part of a large sibling group, may be refugees from war. Some have been victims of abuse or neglect. Many of these children, formerly considered "hard to place," are now finding adoptive homes not only with traditional families, but also with single women or men, gay couples, biracial couples, people over 35, or couples who already have biological children. Many adoptive parents who seek children with disabilities tend to already have large families with many biological children and/or other adopted or foster children.

They also tend to have had previous experience with health care professionals, school systems and administrators that helps them to navigate systems to advocate on behalf of their children.

The older child in a new family is called upon to make still another adjustment in life. He has to learn the organization of the family and the community, what's acceptable behavior, what the rules are, what life will be like. If the child has made positive connections with people in the past, he should be encouraged to maintain them. In many cases, supportive services and counseling are helpful to both parents and children. Older children may need special attention in school and can benefit from participation in groups with other children in similar circumstances.

Children adopted across racial lines often feel different because they look different from their adoptive parents. Differences should be acknowledged. Questions about why people look different, why some have different eyes, why skin color may be different should be encouraged. The child should be assured that there are many different kinds of people, many different kinds of skin and hair, and colors, and that all are attractive. Explanations should emphasize that skin and hair colors come from the birth parents and sometimes children grow up with birth parents and sometimes children grow up with parents who adopt them. The child should be assured that although he may not look like his adoptive parents he will always be part of the family. Research shows that approximately 75% of transracially adopted preadolescent and younger children adjust well in their adoptive homes.

The first and most important general guideline for parents is that all members of the family will benefit from an atmosphere in which ideas and feelings can be openly discussed. For children coming from another culture, their customs and holidays can become part of the adoptive family's traditions. Children should feel that their birth families and their cultural heritage are respected.

Making a photograph album or life history book, which includes important people, places and events in the child's life, is special for any child but is particularly meaningful for the child who comes from a foreign country or who has lived in several homes.

A good agency can enhance the success of the placement by preparing the family and the child with special needs and helping them both establish realistic expectations.

## The search for birth parents

As adolescents struggle to establish their own identity and to know who they are in a basic sense, they may want more information about their origins and some may want to search for their birth parents. Many adolescents, as well as adults, are unsure of the reasons they want to find their birth parents and what situation they expect to find. Some want to know why they were adopted, some want to meet their birth parents, and many want to know what their birth parents look like. If they can be helped to understand their motivation and to establish realistic expectations, the search has a better chance of success in terms of enabling them to integrate the role of the two families in their lives. The desire to search doesn't signify a rejection of the adoptive parent, rather it serves as a way of providing closure on one's history and family of origin prior to establishing new intimate relationships.

Again, an honest, open approach that will enable the adoptee to consider the numerous factors works best. The final decision about the search should be left to the individual.

## Summary

Although heredity is undoubtedly a factor in each child's life, the influence of the family and social environment molds the developmental path of the child. In interviews with individuals who have adopted children, they acknowledge the conflicts and demands of adoptive family life, but believe that the joys of parenting transcend the adoption issue.

## About the Author

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## Online Resources

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