

## Adoption and the Stages of Child Development

Whether children are adopted as infants or when they are older, whether they are healthy or have physical or psychological problems, their adoption is bound to influence their development. Parents need to understand how and why.

Learning about the developmental stages of children and what can be expected in each stage is important to all new parents. When your child is adopted, there are additional considerations. This article examines specific issues such as separation, loss, anger, grief, and identity, and discusses how they might be expressed as your adopted child grows up. Some of these issues will be obvious in all stages of development; others surface at specific times. The more thoroughly you can understand how your child behaves and why, the more likely it is that you can be supportive and help your child to grow up with healthy self-esteem and the knowledge that he or she is loved.

### Infants

The primary task of a baby is to develop a sense of trust in the world and come to view it as a place that is predictable and reliable. Infants accomplish this through attachment to their caretakers. During their early months, children have an innate capacity to "bond" to ensure their survival. They express it through sucking, feeding, smiling and cooing, behaviors which, ideally, stimulate loving responses from their parents (or caretakers). These pleasant interactions and the parent's or parents' consistent attention form the parent-child bond and the foundation for a child's sense of trust.

During this period, a consistently nurturing and tension-free environment makes a child feel secure. The most valuable thing you can do is to show, through attention and affection, that you love your child and that your child can depend on you. Infants will learn to trust if you respond to their cries, and he or she will feel contentment if you hug and smile at them.

Although the need to attach continues for a long time, the process of separation also begins in the first year of a child's life. A milestone is reached when children learn to separate from their parents by crawling and then by walking. At the same time, babies often become fearful of separation. Psychological separation begins too: babies start, non-verbally, to express their own wishes and opinions. Many experts in child development view early childhood as a series of alternating attachment and separation phases that establish the child as an independent person who can relate happily to family members and friends, and be capable of having intimate relationships with others.

### Toddlers

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

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

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

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

If you adopt cross-culturally, it will be helpful for you to learn about attachment behavior in that culture. Children who are adopted when they are older usually follow the same attachment and separation paths as other children, but possibly in a different time sequence. This gives you the opportunity to make up for what might have been lost or damaged in earlier relationships.

## 2 to 6 Years of Age

If you thought a lot was happening in your child's development in the first two years, you will find that the preschool years are filled with activity and nonstop questions. Once children learn to speak, they need only a partner and the world becomes theirs for the asking and telling. This is when parents begin to feel pressure to explain adoption to their children. It is also when children's ears are wide open to adult conversation and they take in so much more than adults once thought they could. Parents are busy answering questions such as why the sky is blue, why leaves fall off the trees, why people are different colors, how birds fly and why a baby brother cannot join the family right now. The more comfortable parents are in trying to answer questions honestly, the more encouraged their children will be to learn.

Sometimes parents feel so embarrassed about not knowing all the answers to their child's questions or are so afraid of giving the "wrong" answer that they ignore a question or change the subject. In doing so, they often miss a chance to discuss critical feelings with their children.

Children between 2 and 5 years of age have fears, especially about being abandoned, getting lost, or no longer being loved by their parents. They also engage in "magical" thinking and do not distinguish reliably between reality and fantasy. They may be afraid of giants, monsters, witches or wild animals.

Children in this age group become increasingly familiar with separations from loved ones, often because they are attending daycare or preschool programs. They also make new friends outside their family, and their interests broaden. At the same time, they notice that their parents do not know everything and cannot control everything that happens to them. This can be frightening because it threatens their sense of security.

As you observe your children and others, you will notice that both boys and girls imitate their parents' nurturing and care-taking activities. They carry, feed, change and put to bed their dolls and stuffed animals. They kiss them and sometimes throw them or hit them. They are mimicking attachment and separation behaviors.

There is also an aggressive, competitive side to this stage. You may notice behavior that is challenging, stubborn and argumentative, usually directed toward the same-sex parent. These behaviors are part of children's working out their awareness of their smallness and insignificance compared to their parents and

their urges toward autonomy and independence. They want to be grown up, but also want the benefits of infancy.

Children who have been traumatized or abused may not show the kind of behavior described here. They may be seductive or fearful, uncertain about the appropriateness of being affectionate, or show symptoms associated with sexual abuse. These children need special help from their parents and possibly from a skilled therapist before they can feel safe enough to express feelings in their new families.

Preschoolers' reactions to adoption are almost entirely affected by the way their parents feel about the adoption and the way they handle it with their children. Children of preschool age will be as excited about the story of their adoptions as other children are by the story of their births. To help make your children feel connected and an important part of the family, share with them the excitement that you felt when you received the telephone call about them, the frantic trip to pick them up, and how thrilled everyone in the family was to meet them. As time goes on and bonds of trust build, your children will be able to make sense of their unique adoption stories.

## Elementary School Years

The chief task of elementary school-aged children is to master all of the facts, ideas and skills that will equip them to progress toward adolescence and independent life. During this time, children are supposed to consolidate their identification with parents and cement their sense of belonging to their family.

Emotional and behavioral problems frequently beset elementary school-aged children, even without contemporary pressures resulting from divorce or other family disruptions. Common problems include hyperactivity, poor school performance, low self-esteem, aggression, defiance, stubbornness, troubled relationships with brothers and sisters, friends and parents, lack of confidence, fearfulness, sadness, depression and loneliness. Adoptive parents wonder whether and how much these problems are caused or influenced by adoption or a history of faulty attachment.

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

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

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

You can help your children work through their loss if you can be non-defensive about their adoption as well as sensitive to how much they want or need to talk about it at a given time. Do not, however, place undue emphasis on the adoption, as this is likely to make children feel painfully self-conscious about it. But if facts and feelings about adoption are not discussed at all, children's fantasies about their backgrounds may be acted out unconsciously, thus carrying out their unconscious self-identification as an unworthy person.

Children of elementary school age begin to imagine things about their birth parents. Although preschoolers want to hear how they were adopted and entered their homes, older children discover the reality that their birth mother relinquished them for adoption and ask why.

During the elementary school-age years, children's identity comes from a combination of their genetic heritage, their experience with their families, and what happens to them as they try to find their place in the wider world. They want to be like their peers and their families. Children may not express these feelings, but they have to be acknowledged, lived with and digested before they develop a new understanding of adoption and themselves.

Since these are the years when youngsters appear to seriously confront the "sad side" of relinquishment and adoption, opportunities to meet with and talk to other adoptees their age, as well as with adolescent and adult adoptees, are beneficial. It helps children see a bit into their own futures.

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

Remember that all adopted children have feelings about their adoption and that many times in their development they will struggle with why their birth parents made an adoption plan for them. You can help your children by letting them know that they are not alone in these feelings and that it is all right with you if they express them and try to get explanations for what puzzles or troubles them. The more open family discussions have been from the beginning of verbal communication, the more likely it is that communication will continue no matter how intense or complex the subject becomes.

You may also want to remind yourself and your child that learning about adoption, like learning about life, is an ongoing adventure that you want to share with your child as much as you can, but that you understand that some of this learning has to be pursued alone as well. At this point, your child is old enough to choose the pace at which he or she wants to consider these new ideas. However, you as parents, are still in a position to guide, instruct and set limits.

Foreign adoptees can benefit from cross-cultural experiences appropriate to elementary school-aged children. Some children are thrilled to attend an adoption family camp or summer program. Others prefer to process their feelings within their adoptive families or even alone. The more sensitive to your child's feelings you can be, and the more experience you and your child have in discussing feelings together, the more consoling and comforting you can be to each other.

## Adolescence

The adolescent's primary task is to establish a secure sense of identity; the process is arduous, time-consuming and intense. Establishing a stable identity includes being able to live and work on one's own, to maintain a comfortable position in one's family and to become a contributing citizen in one's community.

It is the nature of all adolescents, adopted or not, to question everything and everyone. It is also in their parents' nature to worry about their children's futures and their own survival in this period. Almost everyone agrees that, although often extremely difficult, open communication can smooth the process.

Adolescence is a time of trying on and choosing in all aspects of life. Two major aspects of adult identity formation will be choice of work and choice of a partner to love. Teenagers look for and imitate role models. They critically examine their family members (as they did in elementary school), peers, teachers and all the other heroes and anti-heroes the culture offers.

The fact that the adoptee has two sets of parents raises more complicated questions about ancestral history now that intellectual development has assumed adult proportions. The search for possible identification figures may cause the adolescent to fantasize more about birth parents, become interested in specific facts

about birth relatives or wish to search for or meet them. Adolescents often rebel against parental standards, and knowing that they have a different origin contributes to their need to define themselves autonomously. It probably helps a child to be told by adoptive parents that they understand their son or daughter's need to take control of his or her own life and that they stand ready to assist in any way that they can, including giving their blessing to a child who needs "to go it alone" for a while.

## When You Need Help

If you have educated yourself about normal child behavior at different ages, chances are you will find yourself questioning behavior in your child that seems out of the ordinary at one time or another. Sometimes, a teacher, relative or friend asks if you have noticed a problem. Perhaps your child seems unduly sad or anxious, unable to concentrate, is angry or flies off the handle for no obvious reason. You may see behavior that is unusual or not characteristic of your child; sometimes it is the increasing degree of a certain behavior that is troubling.

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

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

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

Until recently, once a child was placed for adoption by an agency, little else was offered about general child development or rearing; and if the adoption was a private one, there were no professional helpers. Now there are state and local organizations and programs sponsored by adoption agencies that provide parenting education and other post-adoption services. Workshops, conferences, and seminars keep parents current with knowledge in the field. There are also support and self-help groups that offer educational and social activities. Ask your EAP provider, your agency social worker, a friend with adopted children, your pediatrician, a representative from an adoptive parent support group, a local mental health center or your local family service agency for recommendations of appropriate helping professionals.

The goals of these services are to support and maintain a healthy family life, to prevent problems through education and to make counseling and mental health services available as soon as problems appear.

## Resources

Information on this page was gathered from content found on the website for the Child Welfare Information Gateway. The website is located at [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov).

**Here when you need us.**

Call: 877-314-5841

Online: [guidanceresources.com](http://guidanceresources.com)

App: GuidanceNow<sup>SM</sup>

Web ID: TARHEELS

---

©2023 ComPsych® Corporation. All rights reserved. This information is for educational purposes only. It is always important to consult with the appropriate professional on financial, medical, legal, behavioral or other issues. As you read this information, it is your responsibility to make sure that the facts and ideas apply to your situation.