

Adoption:

Guidelines for Parents

Part I Adopting a Young Child



If you have recently adopted or soon will be adopting a child, you are probably experiencing many different emotions. The excitement and delight of a new addition to the family is often mixed with concern or even fear of what lies ahead.

There are many different types of adoption. Children often are adopted by a relative or a stepparent. More and more families are adopting children of another race, country, or culture. Many families adopt older children from foster homes, but most children who are adopted come into their new families as infants or very young children. The fact is, children of any age or background who are adopted will bring special issues and challenges to your family that biological parents never face.

By better understanding the role adoption plays in your child's growth and development, you can help your child accept his own uniqueness and learn to be proud of who he is and how he helped form your family.

Better early than never

Talk to your child about her adoption as soon as she is able to understand—usually between ages 2 and 4. The word adopted should become a part of your child's vocabulary early on. These early discussions give you practice in talking about adoption and show your child that it is OK to bring up the topic. If you are uneasy that your child is not biologically yours, she will feel it.

Just as any child delights in the story of the day she was born, a child who is adopted will treasure details of how she came into the family. While going through the adoption process, keep a scrapbook or journal the same way an excited mother does during pregnancy. Keep track of important dates and steps in the process. Take pictures of the people and places involved in your child's earlier life. Details about your child's earlier life and the adoption process will help make both easier to understand.

Share with your child the joy you felt at bringing her home that very first day. Many families even celebrate the arrival or adoption date every year, in addition to a birthday. It shows that the child came to the family in a different way, but is just as valued and loved.

The longer you wait to discuss adoption with your child, the harder it will be. Any level of openness you can build when your child is very young will help as your child grows and begins to ask more difficult questions about her adoption.

If talking with your child about adoption is difficult, talk to your pediatrician. He or she can be a valuable source of support and understanding.

Is anything different?

As he grows into adulthood, your child may be asked questions by other people that he will not be able to answer. They may be simple, innocent questions such as, "Where did you get those big, blue eyes?" or "Do you look more like your mom or your dad?"

They could be questions on a form to be filled out at the doctor's office or when joining an athletic team at school, such as, "Has any blood relative ever had cancer? Diabetes?" or "What is your ethnic background?"

The most painful questions may be the ones the child asks himself. "Who am I?" "Where did I come from?" "Why did my parents give me away?" Sooner or later, these questions or others like them will come up. Many children who are adopted simply don't have the answers.

Being adopted can play a vital role in the development of your child's self-image. It becomes a basic part of who he is. Some children who are adopted grow up feeling different from other children. Those differences are real. Many adopted children have two sets of parents. Some may have been denied affection or even basic nutrition or medical care. Whatever the circumstances, it is important to recognize that your child's life experience has been quite different from that of other children.

Keep no secrets

As the years pass, your child will become more concerned about his place in your family. This may be especially true around ages 9 through 12, when most children become very worried about appearance and fitting in. Your child may begin to ask questions about his own appearance, his background, and the adoption and its circumstances. The following are some common questions your child may ask:

- "Did I grow in your body, Mommy?"
 - "Why did my birth mother give me away?"
 - "Did she and my birth father love each other?"
 - "What was my name before I was adopted?"
 - "What nationality am I?"
 - "Do I have brothers or sisters?"
 - "How much did it cost to adopt me?"
- **Do your best to answer questions honestly and in a way that will be easy for your child to understand at her age.** They may be painful questions for you to think about, but it is normal for children who are adopted to ask them. It is important to develop trust between you and your child. The more your child trusts you, the easier it will be for her to come to you with questions. If your child feels that talking about these questions makes you uncomfortable, she may keep them inside. She may then wonder, imagine, and perhaps fear the worst. Your child may also seek the answers elsewhere, perhaps from a relative or friend who may not give accurate information. Dealing with these issues openly is very important for your child. Be honest and as informative as you can. You may not know the answers for some questions. Be honest about that too.
- **Avoid responding with your own worries** like "Why do you want to know?" or "Are you unhappy with our family?" Your child's curiosity is healthy and natural. It should not be discouraged or seen as a threat to you—it's normal. Questioning your child's loyalties may only confuse him further. If your child believes talking about his adoption will hurt you, he will avoid it.

- **Don't force the issue on your child.** Some children are curious from the very beginning. Others may be afraid to bring it up. The best you can do is create an atmosphere in the family that lets your child know it is OK to talk about adoption. In a loving, supportive environment, when your child is ready to know more, she will ask.

Relatives, friends, and strangers

Even when adoption is handled well at home, there may be relatives who are not quite as understanding. This is particularly important when the child is from a different race or country. Some friends or relatives may disapprove of or even resist accepting your child into the family.

Explain to your relatives that your child is as much a part of the family as anyone else. You may not change their minds or correct old thinking, but it is important to show loyalty to your child. For a child to feel loved and welcomed, he needs to be treated like a full member of the family. Do not settle for anything less.

Questions from strangers can also be tricky. When a stranger innocently asks, "Where did he get those big blue eyes?," and everyone in the family has small brown eyes, tell the truth. Say simply, "From his mother." It may not be necessary to share personal information with a stranger, but don't lie. If your child hears you lying to a stranger, he may assume there is something about being adopted that he should be ashamed of, something that needs to be covered up.

You do not have to introduce your child as "my adopted son." He is simply your son. However, if a question comes up about differences in appearance or ethnicity, offer a simple, but honest explanation. When you are proud of your child's identity, he too, will learn to appreciate his own value.

Facing the past

It can be very difficult to talk with your child about the past. It may be painful to think about or acknowledge your child's other identity. Children who are adopted need to belong and to feel connected to their roots. Having kind and loving adoptive parents does not erase the past. Sooner or later, many adopted children want to know where they came from and why they were placed for adoption.

As your child gets older, make sure she knows where to look for information about the adoption. It is a good idea to keep copies of your child's important papers accessible to her at any time. She may want to look them over in private and in her own time. Someday, she may want to read through them with you. In some cases, she may never have the desire to see the papers at all. But it is important that the choice be hers and that the option be available to her.

Preparing for the future

As your child grows into adulthood, he may begin thinking about searching for his birth family. He may begin to feel less dependent on you, and more able to search for information on his own. Some states have programs available to help adults who were adopted get information about their adoption. Only a few states have open records. Check with your state government to find out about the laws concerning adoption records.

Birth mothers and fathers also may conduct searches. The pain or guilt of giving up a child may become too much to bear over the years. Many have gone on to raise other children and may feel a need for information about the child they placed for adoption.

It is important for you to consider the possibility that the birth parents may one day play a role in your child's life. By establishing an open, loving, and supportive relationship with your child, the issues that may emerge in the teen and adult years will often be much easier to manage. Search and reunion can bring pain and joy for everyone involved. The child, no matter what age, needs the continuing love and support of his adoptive family.

Your family, your child

Raising a family today is difficult. Raising a child who is adopted can present unique challenges. If the child misbehaves, gets into trouble, or has problems at school, it is tempting to blame adoption. The fact is, all children sometimes misbehave or get into trouble. It is possible your child's problems have nothing to do with adoption at all. They may simply be a normal part of growth.

As your child grows, he is influenced by family, the community, friends, school, and society in general. He is also influenced by the genes passed to him from his birth mother and father. There is no research that can tell us which is more important, but we know that both are powerful. Adoption is an important part of who your child is, but keep in mind that many other factors will affect who he becomes.

Helping your child accept the fact that he is different, yet just like everyone else, may not sound easy, but it is important to try. Talking openly and truthfully with your child about his adoption, his birth parents, and his feelings is the key. Adoption gives both you and your child a tremendous gift—the gift of each other. With love, honesty, and patience, you and your child will form a relationship that is as deep and meaningful as any bond between a parent and child.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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of Pediatrics



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