

Adoption:

Guidelines for Parents

Part II Adopting an Older 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.

Adopting the older child

Becoming a new parent is tough, but becoming a new parent of a school-age child or adolescent can be tougher.

An older child may bring problems from the past into his new family. He may have lived in a number of foster homes, each affecting him in some way. He may have lived with one or both birth parents for a time. There may be a history of drug, alcohol, physical, or sexual abuse. He may have been separated from siblings. Many factors could have affected your child's life before he came to your home. Following are some suggestions that will help you deal with them:

- **Learn as much as you can about your child's background** and that of his birth parents. The adoption agency can help you gather as much information as possible. By learning everything you can about your child and his past, you may become more aware of problems that may lie ahead. Keep in mind, it is impossible for you or the adoption agency to know everything your child may have gone through.
- **Keep a connection to your child's past.** It is important that your child feel connected in a positive way to the life she had before coming to your home. Keep in touch with someone she knew; a grandparent, relative, friend, or neighbor. If possible, put together a "life book" by collecting mementos and photos of your child's previous home, school, and people she was close to. These things will be important as your child adjusts to her new life.
- **Don't be afraid to seek help.** Adoptive parents should understand that an older child with serious problems may need professional help to resolve these issues. Constant and persistent love can work wonders for most children, however, in some cases, love may not be enough.

- **Don't blame yourself.** An older child may rebel against his new family. This anger is usually because of the child's past losses. These problems are not your fault. Remind yourself that you are part of the solution as you help your child work out his issues. Most of all, be patient.
- **Talk to your pediatrician.** He or she may be able to help or suggest counselors or support groups.

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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