

## Through the Lens of Adoption: Understanding Child Development & Adoption's Impact

The wait to get to adoption day can feel eternal at times. You want to hear the bang of a judge's gavel, signifying that the child who you have been caring for for days, weeks, months, or even years, is finally yours for good – forever. When that day arrives, you fill each moment with celebration and family. For the first time in who knows how long, you take a deep breath and exhale – your family is complete.

Yet the finalization was just the beginning. Your life, and your family's life, after finalization is an entirely new phase of your adoption journey. We now know that even children who were adopted at birth or as an infant may have been affected by the trauma of separation or may have been impacted by the stress a birth mother felt during pregnancy. At times, you may question if what your child is facing or how he is behaving is a result of everyday child development or if the impacts of adoption are making themselves known.

As our children grow, there are so many milestones for parents to watch for and celebrate: first steps, first words, first days of school, and more. The older our children get, the more their awareness grows and the more we begin to see their individual identities and personalities.

In their first year of life, children are focused

on attachment. As they experience the feelings of safety and being cared for, their brains grow and develop. The toddler years are more of the same, with the addition of some new elements – the fear of being abandoned and learning

more about their own personalities and their place in the family. These years hold great opportunity for talking about adoption as a part of your everyday activities. You could read stories about adoption and talk to your child about their own adoption story, as well. By doing so, you give your child an origin story to learn and

repeat so that it is always a part of who they are.

As children get to be pre-school and kindergarten aged, they are seeking to learn everything. Curiosity and talking are the stars of the show at this age. This is probably the time when you will be answering lots of questions about adoption! Your child will start to be aware that other families may not be like theirs. If yours is a transracial family, your child might also ask why their skin is a different color from yours. There may also be more delicate or difficult questions, such as how they came to be part of your family and how babies grow in their mommy's tummies. Such questions present the opportunity to talk about two families or two mothers. Whatever language you decide to use in your family – birth mother, first mommy, tummy mommy -



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this is the time when your child will start to understand how your family came to form. Remember that this is an age of magical thinking; your child might make up stories about their other family as they try to wrap their little minds around all this new information.

When your child reaches school age, and up until his teen years, he will experience a surge of concrete thinking and understanding. With that knowledge, comes the solid realization that there is a reason why they are not with their birth family anymore. Your child may internalize that reason and might experience feelings of shame or being “unwanted.” Feelings of loss can begin to surface even in infants and toddlers, and may continue to be carried with your child. Talking with your child in age appropriate ways about how they came to join your family is important and the truth is imperative.

Very often, the fear and discomfort around talking about this comes from us, the adults. If your child isn't talking about his feelings and thoughts regarding adoption, he may be avoiding the topic for fear of hurting your feelings. Letting your child know that you think about his adoption story, and telling him directly that you are willing to talk whenever he is ready, can open a door for him to discuss what may already be on his mind.

The teen years and beyond involve building self-identity and determining who you are and want to be in this life. This is the most common time for young people to want to search for birth family. It's natural to want to know about our pasts and those who came before us, and genetics tell a story of where we

came from, as well as playing a part in who we are individually. We know that grief and loss are inherent in adoption and, no matter how loved, safe, and content your child may feel in his home and with his family, there is often a strong desire to make connections with those who share the same genes and DNA. The feelings associated with this ambiguous loss are often stronger and harder to deal with when information is missing or when birth parents or relatives are alive, but not in contact.

Having an understanding of the developmental stages, and how adoption may have an impact on them, can be quite important for adoptive parents. At the same time, we know that ages and changes in development are not set in stone, nor do they come with a time clock so that we can be ready for them! There is no tried and true way to predict exactly when our children will ask for a family meeting to discuss their feelings of loss or doubt or sadness. Those are big feelings and our kids

aren't always able to name what they are feeling, much less have the right words to communicate and ask for help. More often than not, what you will see are behaviors; things like acting out, aggression, lying, depression, defiance, and others. Being aware that those behaviors might be tied to how your child is feeling about his personal adoption journey means you can be there to help him recognize what's happening and offer a way through it. When those struggles surface, remember the strength of asking for help. We all tell ourselves a lot of things that often stand in the way of seeking help. *“This shouldn't be that hard.” “Other parents are doing it.” “We made this choice, so we need to handle it.” “I*



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*don't want anyone to think negatively about me or my child.*" The truth is, asking for help makes you the best parent you can be for your child.

Following are some tips on how you might help and support yourself and your child through this journey:

- **Educate yourself.** Access books, trainings, and online resources to learn about adoption at different ages.
- **Ask for help.** Seeking help and support is a strength! Simply put, you cannot be your best parent self if you are worn out, sad, stressed, or struggling. It may help to remind yourself that children go through different stages and phases. For a period of time, your child may enjoy visiting grandma once a week or having a babysitter instead of being with Mom and Dad. Taking care of yourself is strong, not selfish.
- **Talk to your friends.** Both friends who have adopted and those who haven't may both offer viewpoints and opinions that could help. Talking together could help you determine if your child's behavior is typical for his age, or if it might be something more that involves feelings surrounding his adoption.
- **Build your support network now.** Start early and continue to add people, resources, and tools. You can prepare those in your support circle by letting them know that there will be times when your personal and family journey feels hard. Let them know that, when those times come up, you may need to call on them for advice or just someone to listen. You might also want to reach out to other adoptive families. Family members and old friends are a wonderful support, but you may also face days when you need someone who really "gets it," without needing further explanation. And don't forget to return to those same support people and share the happy days, the joys, and the laughter, too!
- **Find out as much as you can about your child's history.** Maintaining relationships with birth family members can sometimes feel scary and emotional. However, those connections are your best sources of information about what happened during pregnancy, as well as in the time before your child came to be with you. In addition, keeping in contact may also be a great benefit for your child as he gets older and asks more questions about his history and his biological family.
- **Educate your child's school.** Once your child starts school, they will encounter a lot of new things – learning new social rules, responsibilities, information, and schedules. It is a huge milestone for a child. Having frank and frequent conversations about any behavior triggers that may seem like one thing (defiance or obstinacy, for example) to a teacher, but are actually indicative of past trauma, can help everyone involved with your child's care and education be on the same page.
- **Celebrate everyday victories.** When your struggles seem to take center stage, and you find yourself knee deep in books, doctors, blogs, and social media support groups, give yourself a moment to reflect. It may help to find three things that you feel grateful for right then, in that moment. Remind yourself of all of the reasons why you began your adoption journey in the first place – and reflect on the wonderful tiny (or big!) human that you get to love for the rest of your life.

Everyone's family is unique and so is every adoption. Your family dynamic shifts and changes every time a new person joins the fold. You may have a transracial family and may field a seemingly innumerable amount of questions. You might be part of a same-sex couple, or you might be a single parent; perhaps you are a grandparent or an uncle caring for a relative child. No matter what your family make-up, we all have good days and not-so-good days.

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We encourage you to make that phone call, reach out to another family who has adopted, call your local Post Adoption Resource Center, find a support group, tell your family that you need help. You can do it – you can thrive – and we can help. You have a lifetime of love to share with your child.

## Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- [The Six Core Strengths for Healthy Child Development](#), by Dr. Bruce Perry

Tip Sheets

- [Helping to Heal Invisible Hurts: The Impact of In-utero Stress & Trauma](#)
- [Is It Grief? Why Challenging Behaviors May be Signs of Grieving](#)
- [Depression in Teens Who Were Adopted: What Families Need to Know](#)

Training & Resources From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [What Do My Child's Behaviors Mean](#)

Additional Resources

- [Coalition Champions Facebook Group](#)
- [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#)
- [Connect - North American Council on Adoptable Children](#)
- [Adoption and the Stages of Development](#)
- [Wisconsin Adoption & Permanency Support](#)