

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

The journey to adoption day can feel long and uncertain, often filled with a rollercoaster of emotions—anticipation, relief, joy, and sometimes sadness. The child you've been caring for is now officially part of your family in the eyes of the law. This moment signifies more than just the legal finalization of an adoption; it's an acknowledgment of the love, connection, and shared experiences that have already made you family. It's a day to celebrate your child's presence and honor everyone who was part of the journey, including their birth family.

Adoption is never an event with a clear-cut beginning or end. The finalization marks the start of a new chapter in an ongoing story—one that unfolds daily, with layers of connection and room for growth and understanding. It's important to honor the child's birth family and the complex emotions that may arise from their story. Adoption is not just about creating a family; it's about weaving together histories, identities, and relationships in a way that reflects the fullness of the child's life, including their connection to their birth family.

We 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 whether your child's behavior or emotional challenges are simply part of everyday child development or if adoption-related impacts are becoming apparent. One of the best ways to support your child in processing their identity is by maintaining meaningful connections with their birth family whenever possible. This can offer them a bridge between their past and present, giving them a more complete sense of their personal story.

As your children grow, there are many milestones to watch for and celebrate: first steps, first words, first days of school, and more. The older your child gets, the more their awareness grows, and the more we begin to see their individual identities and personalities. Part of this growth often includes the desire to understand their origins more deeply, which may include their birth family.

In their first year of life, children are focused on attachment. Their brains grow and develop as they experience the feelings of safety and being cared for. The toddler years build on this foundation, adding new elements such as the fear of being abandoned and learning



Continued on page 2

more about their personalities and place in the family. These years hold great opportunities for discussing adoption as a part of your everyday activities. You could read stories about adoption and talk to your child about their adoption story. By doing so, you offer your child an origin story they can learn and repeat, making it an integral part of who they are. This is also an excellent time to introduce the idea of their birth family as part of that story; they understand from early on that adoption does not erase their past, nor is their past something to feel shameful of.

Children entering preschool and kindergarten are naturally curious and eager to learn. This is probably when you will be answering many questions about adoption! Your child may notice that other families don't look or live the same way as yours. 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 complex questions, such as how they came to be part of your family and how babies grow in their mommy's tummy. 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—this is when your child will start to understand how your family came to form. Keep in mind 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. This is a great time to affirm the importance of their birth family, helping your child understand that their story includes both their adoptive and birth families and that each family plays a valuable role in their life.

When your child reaches school age and into their teen years, they will experience a surge of concrete thinking and understanding. With that new knowledge comes the 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 a sense of being “unwanted.” Feelings of loss can begin to surface even in infants and toddlers and may persist. Talking openly with your child in age-appropriate ways about how they came to join your family is essential, and the truth is vital. This is also when it may be important to consider how maintaining contact with birth family members could provide a sense of continuity and belonging for your child. Even if the relationship is not direct or frequent, knowing that they have access to their birth family (even if it is limited) can help reduce feelings of ambiguity and loss.

The fear and discomfort around talking about this often comes from us, the adults. If your child isn't talking about their feelings and thoughts regarding adoption, they may be avoiding the topic for fear of hurting your feelings. Letting your child know that you think about their adoption story and are open to talking about it whenever they are ready can open a door for them to discuss what may already be on their mind. It's also important to let your child know that their birth family is still an essential part of their story and that having connections to both families is okay and natural.

The teen years and beyond are often a time of building self-identity and exploring who they want to be. It's common for young people at this stage to want to search for their birth family. It's natural to want to know about one's past. Genetics tell a story of our origins and contribute to who we are. We know that grief and loss are inherent in adoption, and no matter how loved, safe, and content your child may feel in their home and with their family, there may be a strong desire to make connections with those who share the same genes and DNA. These feelings of ambiguous loss can be particularly intense when information is missing or when birth parents or relatives are alive but not in contact. Supporting your child's need to connect with their birth family—if they choose to—can be a

Continued on page 3

powerful way of acknowledging their ongoing journey of self-discovery.

It's important to remember that no two adoptions are the same. Just as every child is unique, every adoption journey is different. Children will process their adoption differently, and their emotional experience may be unlike that of other children, even if they've been through similar circumstances. Some children may feel a strong connection to their birth family from the start, while others may not feel that pull until much later in life. Some children may have questions or concerns early on, while others might not express them until adolescence or even adulthood. Your child's feelings about their adoption, their birth family, and their sense of identity may change over time, and it's essential to stay open and responsive to those shifts. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to adoption, and the emotional path your child takes will be uniquely theirs.

Having an understanding of the developmental stages and how adoption may have an impact on them can be incredibly helpful for adoptive parents. However, it's important to remember that developmental changes aren't set in stone or happen on a strict timeline! There is no tried and true way to predict precisely when our children will ask for a family meeting to discuss their feelings of loss, doubt, or sadness. Those are big feelings, and our kids aren't always able to name what they are feeling, let alone express it. You will often see these emotions in their behavior—through acting out, aggression, lying, depression, defiance, and other challenges. Being aware that these behaviors might be tied to how your child feels about their adoption journey allows you to help them recognize what's happening and support them in navigating it. And when those struggles surface, remember the importance of asking for help. This may also be a time when your child might want to reach out to their birth family for support, so fostering that

connection can be a helpful part of the process.

Tips to Support Yourself and Your Child Through This Journey

- Educate yourself. Access books, training, and online resources to learn about adoption at different ages and stages.
- 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 some time, your child may enjoy visiting Grandma once a week or having a babysitter instead of being with their parents. Taking care of yourself is crucial, not selfish.
- Talk to your friends. Both friends who have adopted and those who haven't can offer valuable viewpoints and support. Discussing challenges with others can help you determine if your child's behavior is typical for their age or if it might be related to feelings surrounding their adoption. However, it's important to be mindful of what you share. These stories are not always yours to tell, and respecting your child's privacy is vital. When talking with friends, ensure you're not oversharing or revealing sensitive details about your child's past or adoption experience that could make them feel exposed. This is especially true if your child is not yet ready to share those parts of their story themselves.
- Build your support network now. Start early and continue to expand your circle. Prepare those in your support circle by letting them know that there will be times when your family journey feels challenging. Let them know that when those times come, you may need to call on them for advice or to listen. You might also want to reach out to other adoptive families. While family members and old friends can be supportive, there may be

Continued on page 4

days when you need someone who really “gets it” without further explanation. Don’t forget also to share the joyful moments with your support circle!

- Learn about your child’s history. Maintaining relationships with birth family members can sometimes feel intimidating and emotional. However, those connections are your best sources of information about your child’s early life. Staying in contact may also greatly benefit your child as they grow older and ask more questions about their history.
- Educate your child’s school. Once your child starts school, they will encounter many new things—learning social rules, responsibilities, and information. It is a massive milestone for a child. Having open conversations with your child’s teachers about behavior triggers that may stem from past trauma can help ensure everyone involved with your child’s care and education is 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. Remind yourself why you began your adoption journey and reflect on the incredible, unique human you get to love for the rest of your life.

Everyone’s family is unique, and so is every adoption. Your child’s feelings, experiences, and sense of identity will be uniquely their own. Whether you have a transracial family, are part of a same-sex couple, are a single parent, or are a grandparent or an uncle caring for a relative child, your family is special in its own way. No matter the make-up of your family, you’ll experience both good and not-so-good days.

We encourage you to reach out to others—

whether it’s another adoptive family, a local organization that provides post-permanency support, or a support group. Remember, maintaining connections to your child’s birth family can also be a key part of their healing and self-understanding. You can do this—you can thrive—and we can help. You have a lifetime of love and support to share with your child.



Resources on page 5

Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *The Six Core Strengths for Healthy Child Development*, by Dr. Bruce Perry
- *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole*, by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass

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 From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)
- [Those Complicated Teen Years: Is it Trauma, Adoption, or Typical Development](#)
- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)
- [Understanding and Supporting Your Transracial Adoptee](#)
- [Understanding Tweens and Teens in Adoption](#)

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

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

Additional Resources

- [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#)
- [Connect - North American Council on Adoptable Children](#)
- *One Yes At A Time: How Open Adoption Transformed Our Family*, by Susan Strong