

Beneath the Mask: Understanding the Adopted Adolescent

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Most parents of children consider adolescence to be a roller coaster ride. This is because the developmental tasks of adolescence can be quite challenging. For adopted children, these tasks present “an extra layer” of challenge because of adoption. For parents to be equipped to guide and support their child through these important years, they must understand what the developmental tasks of adolescence are, how adoption impacts those tasks, the key adoption issues teens may struggle with, as well as the issues adoption presents for parents. Parents also need to know that they do not have to be their child’s own source of support during these potentially turbulent years. They need to know what behaviors of their teens signal that something may be troubling their teen, when professional intervention may be indicated, and how to identify and locate the appropriate therapeutic resource for their teen and their family.

Adoptive parents need to know that during adolescence, their children will struggle with concerns related to

1. Separating and becoming more independent – feelings of loss can cause anxiety.
2. Developing their own conscience – whose values does the teen draw from?
3. Controlling their sexual and aggressive impulses – how do the perceptions of their birth parents and adoptive parents’ sexuality impact the choices they make.
4. Forming their identities – adopted teens have two sets of parents instead of one to decide who they are like and different from.

These tasks may be complicated by adoption issues we call the “Six Spots Where Teens Can Get Stuck”

1. Reason for adoption – The why question can cause a lot of anger and pain.
2. Missing information – The lack of information can cause great frustration.
3. Identity – Figuring out similarities and differences from two sets of parents can be daunting.
4. Difference – Feeling different from family and peers can be hurtful.
5. Loyalty – Feeling disloyal to either set of parents can cause guilt.
6. Permanence – Leaving home can cause anxiety.

There is much adoptive parents can do to help. Understanding their own “stuck spots” is the first step. Overcoming feelings related to sharing information, honoring birth parents, accepting their teen’s feelings is key. Keeping the lines of communication open with your teen is extremely important.

Sometimes a teen’s behavior can signal that something is seriously troubling your child. Whether it’s a change in affect, school performance, relationships, obeying rules, parents need to take these “red flags” seriously and consider professional intervention.