

The Adopted Child

Approximately 120,000 children are adopted each year in the United States. Children with physical, developmental, or emotional handicaps who were once considered unadoptable are now being adopted ("special needs adoptions"). Adoption helps many of these children to grow up in permanent families rather than in foster homes or institutions.

Parents with an adopted child wonder whether, when, and how to tell their child that he or she is adopted. They also want to know if adopted children face special problems or challenges.

Child and adolescent psychiatrists recommend that the child be told about the adoption by the adoptive parents. Children should be told about their adoption in a way that they can understand.

There are two different views on when a child should be told they are adopted. Many experts believe the child should be told at the youngest possible age. This approach provides the child an early opportunity to accept and integrate the concept of being "adopted." Other experts believe that telling a child too early may confuse the young child who can't really understand the information. These experts advise waiting until the child is older.

In either case, children should learn of their adoption from the adoptive parents. This helps give the message that adoption is good and that the child can trust the parents. If the child first learns about the adoption intentionally or accidentally from someone other than parents, the child may feel anger and mistrust towards the parents, and may view the adoption as bad or shameful because it was kept a secret.

Adopted children will want to talk about their adoption and parents should encourage this process. Several excellent children's story books are available in bookstores and libraries which can help parents tell the child about being adopted. Children have a variety of responses to the knowledge that they are adopted. Their feelings and responses depend on their age and level of maturity. The child may deny the adoption or create fantasies about it. Frequently, adopted children hold onto beliefs that they were given away for being bad or may believe that they were kidnapped. If the parents talk openly about the adoption and present it in a positive manner, these worries are less likely to develop.

All adolescents go through a stage of struggling with their identity, wondering how they fit in with their family, their peers, and the rest of the world. This struggle may be even more intense for children adopted from other countries or cultures. In adolescence, the adopted child is likely to have an increased interest in his or her birth parents. This open curiosity is not unusual and does not mean that he or she is rejecting the adoptive parents. Some adolescents may wish to learn the identity of their birth parents. Adoptive parents can respond by letting the adolescent know it is okay to have such interest and questions, and when asked should give what information they have about the birth family with sensitivity and support.

Adoptive parents often have questions about how to deal with the circumstances of adoption. These parents need support from mental health and health professionals.

Some adopted children may develop emotional or behavioral problems. The problems may or may not result from insecurities or issues related to being adopted. If parents are concerned, they should seek professional assistance. Children who are preoccupied with their adoption should also be evaluated. A child and adolescent psychiatrist can help the child and adoptive parents determine whether or not help is needed.

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