Child Welfare Information Gateway

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impactoadoptadas.cfm*

Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons

As discussion of the adoption process becomes more open and accepted in American society, and as more Americans have experience with adoption, there is also more attention focused on those involved in adoption—the adopted person, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents (often referred to as the adoption triad or, more recently, the adoption constellation). People who have experienced adoption firsthand are coming forward

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- Adoption issues
- Managing adoption issues
- Resources

to talk or write about their experiences, and researchers are conducting scientific studies to find out about the impact of adoption on all members of the adoption triad.

This factsheet examines the impact of adoption on adopted persons who have reached adulthood. While it is difficult to make sweeping statements about such a large and diverse group as adopted persons, it can be said that adopted persons generally lead lives that are no different from the lives of nonadopted persons; however, they have experiences that are unique to being adopted, and these experiences may have an impact on their lives at various times.

There are several themes that emerge from both the personal accounts of adopted persons and from the studies of academic researchers. This factsheet addresses these themes, which include loss, the development of identity and self-esteem, interest in genetic information, and managing adoption issues.

- The **Adoption Issues** section looks at some of the issues that adopted persons may face, including developmental and emotional issues and the need for genetic or medical information.

- **Managing Adoption Issues** reviews some of the ways that adopted persons handle adoption-related issues.

- **Resources** for adopted persons includes books, articles, websites, and more.

Adoption Issues

Loss and Grief

The loss of the birth parents as a result of adoption sets the stage for the feelings of loss and abandonment that many adopted persons may experience at some point in their lives. Even those who are adopted as newborns at times experience a loss of the early bond to the mother, although this loss may not become apparent until the child is older and able to understand the consequences. In the book *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, authors Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Marantz (1992) suggest that dealing with the loss of the birth parents, coupled with a search for self, are two processes that can contribute to shaping the psychological development of adopted persons. These authors outline developmental tasks that an adopted person should address at each stage of life in order to make a healthy adaptation and to cope with the feelings of loss and the search for self.

Loss, as well as feelings of rejection and abandonment by the birth parents, are frequent themes throughout the books and articles written by adopted persons about their experiences. Adopted persons, as children and as adults, may wonder why they were placed for adoption or what was "wrong" with them that caused their birth parents to give them up. Grief is a common reaction to the loss of the birth parents, and grieving may begin when the child is old enough to understand what being adopted means. Young children who are able to comprehend that they have gained adoptive

parents are also able to understand that they have lost birth parents, and comprehension of this loss may trigger grief. The adopted child or adult may have a difficult time finding an outlet for this grief, since grieving for birth parents is not a reaction that society acknowledges. If the adoptive family is a generally happy one, the adopted child or adult may even feel guilty for grieving.

Along with grief and guilt, the adopted person may react to the loss through the normal feelings of anger, numbness, depression, anxiety, or fear. These feelings may occur during childhood and adolescence, as well as during later points in life, especially during emotionally charged milestones, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a parent. In addition, new losses may trigger memories of the loss of the birth parents. For instance, some adopted persons who face divorce or death of a spouse may find the experience especially difficult, because this new loss reawakens the old fears of abandonment and loss. Adopted persons who experience feelings of loss or abandonment during adulthood may or may not recognize a connection between their current feelings and their old feelings about the initial loss of the birth parents.

Adopted persons may also suffer secondary losses. For instance, along with the loss of birth mother and birth father, the adopted person may experience the loss of brothers and sisters, as well as grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. There may be a loss of cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial adoption). For those who were adopted as older children, there may be a loss of siblings, friends, pets, foster families, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings. All of these losses

may trigger grief and may require some outlet or some form of resolution.

Identity Development and Self-Esteem

Adopted persons' questions about identity often occur first during adolescence. The task of identity development during adolescence is often more difficult for the adopted teenager because of the additional adoption issues. The adopted adolescent's identity development includes questions about the biological family, why he or she was placed for adoption, what became of the birth parents, whether the adolescent resembles the birth parents in looks or in other characteristics, and where the adolescent "belongs" in terms of education, social class, culture, peer group, and more. The question of the influence of nature (inherited traits) versus nurture (acquired traits) may become very real to the adopted adolescent, who is trying to determine the impact of all of these influences on his or her own identity.

Identity issues may continue into adulthood. The birth of a child to an adopted person may bring up some of these issues, as the new parent may experience a biological connection to a family member for the first time. For this person, there is now someone who "looks like me." This new connection may cause the adopted adult to revisit earlier issues of identity. The new parent may also be prompted to think about what his or her birth mother experienced in giving birth and what the birth mother and father may have experienced in making the decision to place the child for adoption. Adopted adults who become new parents may be sympathetic to the difficulties of their birth parents, or they may wonder

how their birth parents could ever have placed them for adoption.

Accompanying these issues of identity are issues of self-esteem—that is, how the adopted person feels about him or herself. A number of studies have found that, while adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in most ways, they often score lower on measures of self-esteem and self-confidence (Borders, Penny & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue & Benson, 1996). This result may reflect the fact that some adopted persons may view themselves as different, out-of-place, unwelcome, or rejected. Some of these feelings may result from the initial loss of birth parents and from growing up away from birth parents, siblings, and extended family members; some may also result from an ongoing feeling of being different from nonadopted people who do know about their genetic background and birth family and may be more secure about their own identity as a result.

Genetic Information

Adopted persons often lack genetic and medical history, as well as other family information. A routine visit to the doctor's office, where the adopted person is asked to supply medical history information, may make adopted persons acutely aware of how they differ from those who were not adopted. Those who find out only later in life that they were adopted as infants are sometimes put at risk by their long-held assumption of a family medical history that they later find is completely incorrect.

When an adopted person plans to get married or become a parent, the need for genetic information may become more

important. Adopted persons have different questions about the child they will produce, such as what the child will look like, and if the child will inherit any genetic disorders that were unknown to the adopted person.

In many cases, nonidentifying information, such as medical history, may be placed in the adoption file by the birth parents or agency at the time of the adoption. Adoption agencies or attorneys may allow adopted persons to have access to this nonidentifying information. In some States, adopted persons can petition a judge to have their adoption records opened, and some judges will agree to do so in order to provide urgently needed medical information. (See the Information Gateway legal factsheet *Access to Family Information by Adopted Persons* at www.childwelfare.gov/ systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/ infoaccessap.cfm). However, obtaining access to information provided by the birth parents at the time of the adoption may not be sufficient to provide a full medical history. It is more useful if birth parents, over the years, have updated the file that is kept with the adoption agency or attorney. In that way, an adopted person may learn if a birth parent or grandparent later developed a genetic disease or condition.

Managing Adoption Issues

Research shows that most adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in their adult adjustment (see research papers by Kelly, Towner-Thyrum, Rigby, & Martin; Borders, Penny, & Portnoy; Feigelman; and

Smyer, Gatz, Simi, & Pedersen). However, there is also significant research, along with the personal accounts of adopted persons, that suggest that many adopted persons struggle with issues of loss, identity, and self-esteem. There are a number of ways that adopted persons manage these issues.

- **Support Groups.** Many adopted persons are helped by support groups where they can talk about their feelings with others who have similar experiences. The support group may provide a long-needed outlet for any lingering feelings of loss or grief. Adopted persons may also find support for new losses that occur during their adult years. In addition, support groups may provide help for the adopted person with the decision of whether to search for birth relatives or other issues. Listings of support groups by State may be found in Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at www. childwelfare.gov/nfcad.

- **Counseling.** Some adopted persons may need more help than they find from family and friends or through a support group. In these instances, adopted persons may seek professional counseling. It is important to identify a counselor who has experience with adoption issues. Sometimes, the original adoption agency may be able to provide a referral. Also, support groups may have experience with local counselors and be able to make a recommendation. The Information Gateway website carries a factsheet, *Tips on Selecting an Adoption Therapist*, that can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r_tips.cfm.

- **Education.** For many adopted persons, reading about the experiences of others can be a helpful coping mechanism. Knowing that there are others who have gone through similar experiences can provide reassurance that these feelings and experiences are normal. A growing number of books and websites deal with adoption, and the adopted person who has the time to seek these out should be able to find stories and information about people with similar experiences. These may include information about persons adopted domestically as infants or as older children from foster care or persons adopted from another country.

- **Searching.** More and more adopted persons are acting on their desire to search for their birth families. This is reflected in the number of websites and books about searching and even in the change in some State laws that regulate access to adoption records. Reports of adoption reunions are mixed; some lead to happy new relationships, and some do not. Regardless of the result, most searchers report that they are content to have found the truth about themselves and that the truth has filled a void for them.

The searching process actually encompasses a number of steps, from making the decision to search for birth parents or other birth kin, to conducting the search, and, if successful, arranging the reunion and establishing a postreunion relationship with birth family members. The decision to initiate a search is a personal one, and many adopted persons never search. For those who do, the decision may be triggered by a life event, or it may be the culmination of many years of unanswered

questions. The search process itself can be stressful and time consuming; however, the rewards can be great when it results in a reunion that is desired by both parties. Adopted persons who are interested in searching should refer to the Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm).

- Searchers will find that there is no Federal law that governs whether an adopted person can access information about birth parents, the adoption, or an original birth certificate. Instead, access to adoption information is regulated completely by the laws of the State in which the adop-

tion took place, and these State laws vary dramatically. Information about access to birth family information and documents can be found in the Information Gateway legal factsheet *Access to Family Information by Adopted Persons* (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm); a search about access can be conducted on a State-by-State basis at the Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/search/index.cfm. Support groups for adopted persons may also be a good source of practical information about searching.

Resources

The following list of resources is designed to be a starting point for adopted adults who are interested in further information about the impact of adoption. The resources include books and articles by members of the adoption triad, studies by researchers, and websites. A brief description of each resource is included.

Books

Brodzinsky, D. M., & Schechter, M. D. (Eds.). (1990). *The psychology of adoption*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
The various chapters of this book are written by leading researchers in the field of adoption, and they cover such topics as theoretical perspectives on adoption adjustment, outcomes in adoption, identity formation, interracial adoption, family therapy, social policy, and open adoption.

Brodzinksy, M. Schechter, M. D., & Henig, R. M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
This book outlines developmental tasks at each of seven stages throughout the life of an adopted person.

Eldridge, S. (2003). *Twenty life-transforming choices adoptees need to make*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.
The author, a reunited adopted person, interviewed 70 adopted persons for this book, which addresses some of the hard questions that adopted persons face, and offers advice about taking control through making choices.

Freundlich, M. (2001). *The impact of adoption on members of the triad. Volume 3 in the Adoption and Ethics Series*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
This volume examines impact on all members of the adoption triad; for adopted persons, the topics of adjustment and well-being for children and adolescents, identity formation, and search and reunion are addressed.

Lifton, B. J. (1998). *Lost and found: The adoption experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
The author draws upon her experience as an adopted person and upon her work with all members of the adoption triad to explore the psychological issues faced by adopted people before, during, and after their search for their birth family.

Pavao, J. M. (1998). *The family of adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
The author, an adopted person and an adoption therapist, describes the developmental stages and challenges for adopted people, and includes real-life examples to illustrate these stages.

Rosenberg, E. B. (1992). *The adoption life cycle: The children and their families through the years*. New York, NY: Free Press.
Written by a clinical professor in psychiatry, this book draws on case examples to show how the different members of the adoption triad influence each other and to describe developmental tasks for those in the adoption circle.

Schaefer, C. (1991). *The other mother: A true story*. New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc.
The author tells her story of being a birth mother and of later searching for and finding her son.

Schooler, J. (1995). *Searching for a past: The adopted adult's unique process of finding identity*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.
This book was written by an adoption coordinator and discusses the emotional and psychological issues that adopted persons face in the different phases of searching for birth parents.

Articles

Borders, L. D., Penny, J. M., & Portnoy, F. (2000). Adult adoptees and their friends: Current functioning and psychosocial well-being. *Family Relations, 49*, 407-418.
The authors of this study found more similarities than differences when they compared 100 middle-aged persons who had been adopted as adults with 70 nonadopted adults.

Feigelman, W. (1997). Adopted adults: Comparisons with persons raised in conventional families. *Marriage and Family Review*, 25(3/4), 199-223.
This research article compared adult behavior patterns of 101 adopted persons with those of 3,949 adults raised in broken families and 6,258 adults raised with both biological parents. Results showed that adopted persons resembled nonadopted persons raised in intact families on most measures; however, adopted persons did have a higher incidence of adolescent identity crisis issues.

Grotevant, H. D., Dunbar, N., Kohler, J. K., & Lash Esau, A. M. (2000). Adoptive identity: How contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways. *Family Relations*, 49, 379-387.
This paper discusses the development of the adoptive identity in terms of the intrapsychic component, family environment, and contexts beyond the family; implications for practitioners are included.

Kelly, M. M., Towner-Thyrum, E., Rigby, A., & Martin, B. (1998). Adjustment and identity formation in adopted and nonadopted young adults: Contributions of family environment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 68(3), 497-500.
Adopted college students were compared with nonadopted college students on measures of adjustment and identity formation, and the two groups were found to be largely similar.

Lifton, B. J. (2001). Shared identity issues for adoptees. In V. Groza & K. F. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Clinical and practice issues in adoption: Bridging the gap between adoptees placed as infants and as older children*, (pp. 37-48). Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
The author discusses the identity issues common to children adopted as infants, those adopted as older children, and those adopted from a foreign country.

Sharma, A. R., McGue, M. K., & Benson, P. L. (1996). The emotional and behavioral adjustment of United States adopted adolescents: Part I. An overview. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(1/2), 83-100.
In a comparison of adjustment and family functioning in over 4,000 adopted adolescents and over 4,000 nonadopted adolescents, small but significant differences were found between the groups, with one finding showing lower self-confidence and optimism in adopted persons.

Silverstein, D. N., & Kaplan, S. (1988). Lifelong issues in adoption. In L. Coleman, K. Tolbor, H. Hornby, & C. Boggis (Eds.), *Working with older adoptees* (pp. 45-53). Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine. Retrieved April 23, 2004, from http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html
The authors describe seven issues that all members of the adoption triad must address.

Smyer, M. A., Gatz, M., Simi, N. L., & Pedersen, N. L. (1998). Childhood adoption: Long-term effects in adulthood. *Psychiatry*, 61, 191-205.
Researchers studied adult outcome variables in 60 pairs of twins who had been separated as infants or children, so that one was raised in the biological family and one was raised in an adoptive family; results emphasize the impact of socioeconomic status on adult outcomes, such that adopted adults were better educated but also showed greater psychological distress.

Support Groups

Child Welfare Information Gateway compiles the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, which lists support groups on a State-by-State basis. Go to www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.

Websites and Other Resources

American Adoption Congress: www.americanadoptioncongress.org
The American Adoption Congress (AAC) is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to adoption reform. Through education and advocacy, they promote honesty, openness, and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care, and assisted reproduction. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals, and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov
Information Gateway offers information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Information Gateway develops and maintains a computerized database of books, journal articles, and other materials on adoption and related topics, conducts database searches, publishes materials on adoption, and gives referrals to related services and experts in the field. Information Gateway also maintains a database of experts knowledgeable in various areas of adoption practice.

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: www.adoptioninstitute.org
The Adoption Institute seeks to improve the quality of information about adoption, to enhance the understanding and perceptions about adoption, and to advance adoption policy and practice.

Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network: http://www.kaanet.com
This organization links adopted persons, adoptive families, and other Korean-Americans, providing resources, a newsletter, and a conference.

Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project: http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/
This site provides research findings from this major study of variations in openness in adoption and the effect of openness on all members of the adoption triad.

National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning's packet on Searching: http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/information_packets/birthright_adoptees_right_to_know.pdf
This packet for adopted persons includes a factsheet on searching, a list of references and websites, and a summary of the debate about searching.

Stars of David International, Inc.: http://www.starsofdavid.org/
This is a Jewish adoption information and support network for all members of the adoption triad.

Information on the issues facing birth parents can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents*, which can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/index.cfm. The Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm. Information on open adoption can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption*, which can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm.