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Options Magazine

## **Adolescence—Who Am I And Where Am I Going?**

No sooner do your children begin to understand the wonders of biology than their own bodies begin the surge of growth toward puberty and the awesome stage of adolescence. Adolescence, for all its newness—it was not considered a distinct stage of life until after the first World War—has quickly acquired a reputation as a difficult and trying period for children and parents. Physical growth changes the person from a child to an adult, in preparation for procreation, but mental and emotional development may take years to catch up with the body. Adolescents' behavior is in transition and not fixed; their feelings about the world and their place in it are tentative and changeable, like a chameleon's.

The adolescent's primary task is to establish a secure sense of identity; the process is arduous, time-consuming, and intense. Establishing a stable identity includes being able to live and work on one's own, to maintain a comfortable position in one's family, and to become a contributing citizen in one's community.

It is the nature of all adolescents, adopted or not, to question everything and everyone. It is also in their parents' nature to worry about their children's futures and their own survival in this period. Almost everyone agrees that, although often extremely difficult, open communication can smooth the process.

Adolescence is a time of trying on and choosing in all aspects of life. Two major aspects of adult identity formation will be choice of work and choice of a partner to love. Teenagers look for and imitate role models. They critically examine their family members (as they did in elementary school), peers, teachers, and all the other heroes and anti-heroes the culture offers from rock musicians and movie stars, to ball players and politicians, to grandparents and peers' older brothers and sisters. They idolize and devalue people, ideas, and religious concepts. They often bond tightly with peers in small groups that are intolerant of all outsiders. They vacillate between criticism of others and harsh self-criticism. They are sometimes supremely self-

confident and often in the depths of despair about their abilities and future success.

If normal adolescence involves a crisis in identity, it stands to reason that adopted teenagers will face additional complications because of what some have called "genealogical bewilderment" (Sants). The fact that the adoptee has two sets of parents raises more complicated questions about ancestral history now that intellectual development has assumed adult proportions. The search for possible identification figures may cause the adolescent to fantasize more about birth parents, become interested in specific facts about birth relatives, or wish to search for or meet them.

Although all adopted adolescents have to struggle to integrate their fantasies and future goals with their actual potential and realities, foreign, biracial, and other cross-cultural adoptees (as well as teenagers with physical or emotional disabilities) have additional challenges. They may suffer more from what Erik Erikson calls "identity diffusion," i.e., feelings of aimlessness, fragmentation, or alienation. They may appear outwardly more angry at adoptive parents, and more critical of what their parents did or did not do to help them adjust to their adoptive status. They may withdraw more into themselves, or conversely feel they need to "set off to see the world" in hopes of finding their true identity.

Adolescents often express their reactions to loss by rebelling against parental standards. Knowing that they have a different origin contributes to their need to define themselves autonomously. According to Dr. Nickman, "An adopted son or daughter cannot be expected to be a conformist. If he is, he may be inhibiting an important part of himself for the sake of basic security or out of a sense of guilt or responsibility to his adopters."

It probably helps a child to be told by adoptive parents that they understand their son or daughter's need to take control of his or her own life, and that they stand ready to assist in any way that they can, including giving their blessing to a child who needs to "to go it alone" for a while. Of course, a youngster under 17 years of age might be asked to wait until s/he could realistically manage in whatever environment would be encountered.

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## **Searching for Birth Parents**

Current adoption practice has mixed opinions about whether, when, how, and with whose help, adoptees should look for more information about or try to initiate a reunion with birth parents. Information on this process is available through the Clearinghouse. Adoptive parents tend to think about their children's wish to search when they first adopt, and again when confronted with their angry toddlers. The topic resurfaces in adolescence, either raised directly by the child, or when rebellious, defiant behavior such as threats to run away, makes parents wonder if their child is wanting or needing to contact a birth parent. It takes a parent with sturdy self-esteem and more confidence than most of us have to withstand the stony silences and stormy confrontations with teenagers in turmoil.

Parents are often tempted to escape perhaps by abandoning their teenagers who are having toddler-like tantrums, but you and your family will benefit more if you remain calm, stand up for the values you have taught, and continue communication efforts. For some adolescents, searching can be useful, while for many, the urgent activities and decisions of daily life are so pressing that they feel uninterested in or unable to confront such a heavy emotional undertaking. Waiting till they have reached adulthood when their lives will be more settled may be better for the latter group.

### **Anger, Sex, and Aggression—Again!**

Adopted adolescents have the same trouble searching for a comfortable identity as do non-adoptees. Problems involving aggression, sexual activities and pregnancy, delinquency and substance abuse, social isolation and depression are the most common ones faced by teenagers and their families. Although there appear to be more adoptees percentage-wise in adolescent psychiatric treatment programs than nonadoptees, the majority of these patients tend to be the multiply placed children whose problems stem from a variety of sources, often the least of which is their adoption.

Although sexual identity is an issue for all adolescents, adopted girls have the additional burden of conflicting views of motherhood and sexuality. On one hand there is their perhaps infertile adoptive mother and, on the other, the fertility of their birth mother who did get pregnant and chose not to keep her baby, or possibly had her child taken away from her.

No matter how open communication has been, it is often next to impossible for adolescents to discuss their feelings about sex with their parents. Additionally, the adopted girl, unless she has close friends who are adopted as well, would have difficulty finding an ear understanding and sophisticated enough for this discussion. This may be a time to encourage meeting with other adopted teenagers, either through an organized group or informally, to provide your child with support for some of these sticky issues. Looking for solutions outside of the family is also appropriate for an adolescent for whom one major developmental task is to learn to separate and live independently.

As adolescents move toward greater autonomy, a parent's most difficult task is to create a delicate balance of "to love and let go." Although there are many times when you could encourage your toddler—"me do it myself"—or elementary school-aged child to "try things alone" or learn a new skill, an adolescent needs to assert his/her independence by establishing differences from you, and real distance. The adolescent needs to take his or her independence or autonomy, rather than be given it.

This often means a period of estrangement, lessened communication, or outright strife. You may want to listen and talk to your friends who have weathered adolescence with their biological children to note the similarities, and as you have tried to do all along, to understand the differences, acknowledge them, and try to work on them with your child.

No matter how much you wanted to be parents, there are many times during the years of child rearing when you might ask, sometimes in humor, and sometimes in sadness, "Why did I ever sign up for this job?" Sometimes you can only reply feebly, "Well, it sure makes life interesting." But finally, you must have faith that the bonding that occurred in the early years between you and your child, the trust that has built as s/he grew up, and the communication that you have established, will come full circle and provide rich and rewarding relationships for you and your adult children.