

When Adopted Children Become Teenagers

Written by Mark Gregston. www.heartlightministries.org/blogs/markgregston May 27, 2009

Many adopted kids seem to have more than their fair share of issues when they reach the adolescent years. Some can suddenly turn on the very people who rescued them years before, the family who adopted them. Why is that?

Here's why...just as self-awareness begins to grow in the early teen years, adopted children can begin to struggle with the who and why of their adoption at this time — even kids who were adopted at birth. Feelings of abandonment by their birth mother can burst to the surface and add to an already emotionally charged adolescence, fueled by a search for meaning, belonging, and validity in their life.

Many adopted children question their true identity during the teen years. For the mortified adoptive parents, their teenager may demonstrate a profound and shocking lack of appreciation and even a temporary hatred of them. So, the obvious question from these parents is, "What have we done wrong?" My answer to them in most cases is that they have done nothing wrong.

As with every teenager, they are trying to find their own identity and to accept themselves for who they are. They are seeking to be comfortable in their own skin. But adopted teens have **the added burden of figuring out, "Why did my birth-mom give me up? What was she really like? What was happening in her life at the time? Who am I really? Was there something about me she couldn't accept? Who and where are my biological extended family members? Do I look like my dad? Do I have any biological brothers or sisters?"**

Almost one third of all the kids who have ever come live at to our **Heartlight residential counseling program** have come from adoptive families. The questions listed above, coupled with the extreme need for belonging, a knowledge of origin, and a feeling of being different, can lead this child into a world of inappropriate behavior, even when they were raised with much love and support from their adoptive parents.

At *Heartlight*, we daily counsel bewildered and broken adoptive parents who are surprised by the intensity of the struggle with their adopted child, which suddenly sprang up with the onset of the teen years. We help them realize that no amount of love and nurturing might have prevented the problem, and we encourage them to walk with their child during this difficult time.

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We teach parents that their adopted teen is facing a specialized set of challenges, and it requires a willingness to hang in there, even in the face of rejection. We also tell them that most teens work through this phase after a few years and come out on the other side unscathed, if their adopted family sticks with them and loves them unconditionally.

Other Reasons Why Adopted Teens Struggle

High-Risk Pregnancies

Some domestic adopted children come from high-risk pregnancies with the birth mother having drug or alcohol addiction problems, poor prenatal nutrition, or may have lacked adequate medical care. These problems may not be known to the adoptive family, or even to the adoption agency, for that matter. Even if it is known, sometimes it is either overlooked or entirely forgotten once the child is home. The result of a higher-risk pregnancy is that the child may come pre-wired with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), an emotional or psychological disorder, or exhibit extreme impulsivity and emotional detachment. These effects of a high-risk pregnancy usually don't show up right away, but become evident over time, and may come full-bloom during the teenage years.

A Lingering Sense of Wonder

Adopted children also struggle with how life may have been different, had they not been given up by their birth parents. Questions are swirling in their minds, like: "What was my name supposed to be? What genes will I passing along to my own children that

I don't know about? Where are my parents today? How would my life have been different if they had kept me? How does my coming into my adoptive family affect their biological children — do I disrupt the family just by being here?"

Certain Celebrations May Trigger Difficult Behavior

If an adopted child is feeling a keen sense of identity loss, then the adoptive parents need to understand that certain holidays like Mother's Day, Father's Day, a birthday, or celebrations like a baby dedication or baptism may prove especially tough to manage. These events can trigger emotional outbursts or other difficult behavior.

What Can Adoptive Parents Do?

Keep in mind that it's not wrong for an adopted teen to struggle through these issues, nor have the parents necessarily done anything wrong to cause the teen's behavioral issues. It is just how life is sometimes. Instead, the parents can see it as an opportunity to respond in a Christ-like, selfless manner, just as they did the day they signed the paperwork at the adoption agency and took their adopted child home.

I believe that God is the ultimate adoption authority. He places children with parents for specific reasons. God may have given you the child He did because He knew that he or she would need you for just such a struggle. So, be assured that He is also prepared to help you handle it. And just as He, our heavenly parent, restores us, so we are to love, nurture, and restore an adopted child through love and understanding.

I trust that just by knowing that difficult behavior is not uncommon for adopted kids during their teenage years will help you deal with it in the right way. Don't take it personally. It isn't a slap in the face (though you may be slapped in the face). It isn't teenage rebellion (though that could be mixed in as well). And, it isn't that they don't appreciate or love you. It is something only they can fully understand, and your role is to continue to love them while remaining their parent. Giving up that role or trying to "fix" the problem with "things" or avoidance will only add to their confusion.

Most of all, what your adopted child needs is stability in your home, understanding, and time to work through these issues, coupled with your love and support. They need you to remain steady while their world turns upside down. Be assured, everything will right itself before long.

If you think that I am discouraging adoption through these cautions, that cannot be further from the truth. I believe in adoption and I applaud every family who makes this selfless commitment. But I also want adoptive parents to understand the issues that can come up for a short period in adolescence, so they aren't caught off guard and feel rejected or otherwise respond in the wrong way.

Most of all, I believe that God's thumbprint is on the life of every child, and that includes every adopted child. Restoration comes from the knowledge of an adopted child's unique challenges in the teen years, and that will make all the difference in our response.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Gregston is an author, speaker, national radio host, and the founder of Heartlight, a residential counseling opportunity for struggling adolescents.