



Adoption and Adolescence

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It is common to refer to parenting adolescents as a *roller coaster ride*. This image conjures up the thrill and excitement of watching our children mature into adults, but includes the unpredictable, tumultuous, and often scary ups and downs of the journey. The ride isn't smooth because the normal tasks of adolescence aren't easy for either teens or their parents. While all parents find the ride somewhat challenging, it is quite normal for adoptive parents to experience an added degree of concern for their teens, who themselves have what C.A.S.E. has termed an *extra layer* of challenges to master.

What All Teens Need to Accomplish There are two major tasks of personal growth for all teens: **identity formation** and **separation**. Identity formation refers to the need to explore and answer these questions:

- *Who am I? Who do I want to be like? Who are my role models?*
- *How am I like my parents? How do I want to be like them? Different from them?*
- *What are my values, my beliefs?*
- *Who are the people I want as friends?*
- *How do I want to spend my time? What are my unique talents and interests?*
- *What might I want to be when I grow up?*

This exploration can be both a conscious or unconscious process, but it is normal for teens to try on different identities as they work on these questions. That is why one day your teen may look like the child you know well, and on other days, you will hardly recognize (or approve of) the person who walks in the kitchen.

The second task, **separation**, is the process of creating a distance between teens and their caregivers, and moving on to be responsible for themselves. In the process of separation, teens can experience sadness, fear, anger, and excitement (and so can parents)! These mixed feelings create mixed messages, sort of a "Leave me alone, but don't leave me" theme. The roller coaster ride is at full speed!

For all parents, dramatic changes in personality, interests, and appearance may cause concern. They may ask:

- *What do these changes mean? Is this a permanent or temporary change?*
- *Is this a passing phase or something that is ultimately harmful?* Often, parents will find comfort by hearkening back to their youth and recalling their own unique style of rebellion. They may remember their own need to be different during adolescence.

When parents can conclude that the changes are temporary, they relax somewhat. They can put it in perspective, and hope the vegetarian teen may return to eating meat at Thanksgiving, or that colors (rather than only black) will once again show up in the wardrobe of their lovely daughter. Conversations may someday be more than a battle of wills!!

Of greatest concern to any parent is risky behavior that can cause harm. It can be difficult to recognize the early signs which might predict dangerous behavior. Parents whose teens opt for extremes often benefit by counseling and community support services. With help, teens with school failure, experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sex, or extreme mood

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swings can usually be guided to healthier ways to accomplish the tasks of identity formation and separation.

The Extra Layer Created by Adoption

For adopted teens, the tasks of mastering identity and separation come with more complexity. Their *extra layer* involves tasks which are necessary and important to their growth and well-being.

1. Adopted teens need to complete their exploration of identity by considering their birth parents (known or unknown) as well as their adoptive parents. To fully realize who they want to be, they must successfully integrate BOTH families. The basic questions for all teens are altered by adoption to be:

- *How am I like my adoptive parents? How do I want to be like them? Do they respect my birth culture, my ethnicity?*
- *How am I like my birth parents? Based on what I know about them, and what I have learned about my heritage (possibly-my ethnicity, my birth country, my culture), how much of that is a part of me? How much more do I want to add to what I am now?*
- *Do I want to be more involved with people who might be more like my birth parents?(Or closer to those who share my ethnicity, culture?) How do I do that?*
- *Who are my role models? Do I have role models who share my adoptive experience? (Do they share my ethnicity? My birth culture?)*

Clearly, the lack of birth family information that many adoptees must cope with can become a big concern for teens who are working to find answers to these questions. Although *search* can raise alarms for some adoptive parents, it is important to understand that some form of searching for their roots is common for adopted teens.

Adoptive parents may see that their teens are trying on identities that relate to their birth parents, including their known or perceived values, lifestyle, socio-economic level, and culture. How parents react to this is critically important. Consultation with an adoption specialist may be helpful.

Meagan, 15, was adopted by parents who were professionals in their fields. Her sister was also adopted. Her parents experience her childhood as smooth and delightful. Unlike many adoptees, Meagan had a great deal of information about her birth family, enough to know that her parents never married and struggled financially. There was some history of alcohol abuse, and siblings who may be living outside the home.

Meagan had always been a good student who liked school very much. However, at 14, she suddenly changed her friends and began to dress in ways that upset her parents. Her hair changed color frequently. The school alerted them that she was skipping classes and not completing homework.

Meagan's parents decided to seek professional help. During the course of counseling, Meagan was able to recognize that the normal adolescent doubts she was experiencing were compli-



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cated by feelings about her birth family's background. Her self-esteem had plummeted as she began to doubt how bright she really was and whether or not she could live up to her adoptive parents' expectations for her academic and professional success. Fearing that her "true self" would emerge and her family would reject her, she decided to "get it over with" and just become now what the future had in store for her anyway. She also gained a sense of control by rejecting her parents "before they could reject me."

Meagan's parents admitted that while they believed they would love Meagan regardless of her academic skills, they consciously pushed her to do her best in school in the hope that she could succeed. As for Meagan, therapy helped her recognize that her normal thoughts about her birth family had grown into fears that she would inevitably make the same choices they did. She was helped to realize that her choices could be different, and that she wasn't being "true to herself." Sorting through the influences in her life, she came to believe that she did care about school, old friends, and the future she had hoped for when she was younger.

2. Adopted teens need to separate from both adoptive parents and birth parents.

Adopted teens are different from most of their peers because they are separating from a *second* set of parents. The range of emotions that teens carry about their first separation can impact the second, and may add turbulence to what is already a rocky ride.

For example, adopted teens' extra layer may involve fears in which separation becomes synonymous with rejection, and independence feels like abandonment. Adopted teens may wonder:

Once the caregiver role is over, what is my connection with my adoptive parents? Are they still my parents if they are not my birth parents? If I am different from them, will they still love me? Will I still be part of this family?

Some teens may be more reluctant to leave home. One adoptee asked his parents at age 15: "Where will you live when I go to college?" Some may seem to torpedo the process which leads to life after high school, hurting their chances for work or college. Others may be eager to show that they no longer need their family, creating hurtful distance even before the day arrives to pack their boxes and move out.

Adding to the mix is the fact that adopted teens are not alone with their emotions about separation. While all parents wonder about changes they see in their children, adoptive parents also ask:

- *Do these changes have to do with adoption? Are they temporary or permanent, are they genetic traits?*
- *Will I still like my child, relate to my child, understand my child if these changes are permanent or if these changes make my child so fundamentally different from me? Will I be able to handle them?*
- *Will these changes pull my child further away from me? Will we still have a relationship or will I be replaced, not needed anymore? Was I indeed only a caretaker and not the real parent after all?*

With each side concerned with the loss of the relationship, conscious or not, the



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dance between adopted adolescents and their parents is certainly a unique one.

Steven, 16, adopted from Korea, told his friends that they couldn't possibly understand him because they were not Korean. At school, he tried to befriend other Koreans, who in turn did not see him as Korean, and rejected his efforts. Try as he might to be like them, they tested him with knowledge of Korean customs, foods, and language, which he did not possess. He

refused to give up, keeping his old friends away. Steven's parents took him for therapy, which helped validate that his wish to connect with his Korean heritage was appropriate, healthy, understandable, and important. However, Steven was also helped to understand the confusion and pain he felt about his identity, as he had begun to question some of the basic aspects of his identity that he had always believed in. Steven was guided to see that placing himself in a hurtful situation was not the best route to take, and he was given opportunities to meet other

adopted Korean adolescents who more closely understood his interests. He also was able to embrace his old friends in a new way and recognize how those friendships supported his total sense of identity. He began to learn more about the Korean culture and enrolled in a language class.

Steven's parents were helped to understand that they were not losing their son. Steven's parents needed to learn how to cope with his desire for distance from them as he discovered aspects of himself he had previously never explored.

Yes, We Can Do This!

It is popular to say, "It takes a village to raise a child." Parents of teens know this to be true. To successfully parent--and remain sane--parents often seek support from many places. For adoptive families, a first step is acknowledging the *extra layer*. Teens are likely to be more open to learning about their *extra layer* by joining peer counseling groups which can provide them with a strong foundation of self-understanding, as well as tools for handling the challenges well.

