



## FORMING A SENSE OF SELF: Multiple Choices for Adoptees

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All of us, in the course of growing up, form a sense of identity. We build our identity through our experiences and how we interpret them, how others respond to us, and what groups or individual role models we choose. The goal is to establish a stable and positive sense of self that will support our ability to function productively and to establish and maintain relationships.

Research and feedback from adoptees confirm that most adopted persons face extra complications as they follow the normal path to forming their sense of self. The most obvious complexity is that adoptees have not one, but two families to consider as they consider what kind of person they would like to be. It is normal for adopted children to identify with some real or fantasized aspect of their birth parents, along with their interest in following in the shoes of their adoptive parents. For some adoptees, these common dual feelings can create strong conflicts of loyalty. When adoptive parents are aware of this, they can validate and support their children.

It is also known that the self-esteem of some young children can be diminished by the conclusions they draw about their adoption. Children frequently wonder if they did something wrong that made the birth mother choose adoption. In addition, children often need to go through a grieving process for the “lost” birth family. If this loss is not resolved in some way, it makes it additionally difficult to move on with the developmental task of separation and individualization from family, both adoptive and birth. As adolescents, adoptees need to continue the process of grieving and resolving the loss of the birth family. Sometimes, they experience anger, which is part of the grieving process. This anger, combined with common adolescent angst, is frequently focused on the most available and safest parenting figure—very likely the adoptive mom!

Adolescents are also likely to want more information as they determine the influence of their biological family. Parents often wonder how their teens will be able to handle information that might be difficult to hear about their birth family. While some of it may be painful or confusing, facts are necessary for a teen developing identity. The reality is that unanswered questions can be disturbing for those who have little information.

### **Issues of Race and Heritage**

It is often assumed that a domestic or same race adoption removes many of the challenges of identity for adoptees. However, unless they have been adopted by relatives, adoptees do not share the same heritage as their adoptive families. Therefore, they are still likely to consider biological make-up, lifestyle, ethnicity, and educational background, as well as other differences they know about, when they wonder which parents they resemble.

With little doubt, international adoption and/or transracial adoption presents greater identity challenges. Regardless of how the adoptee feels, other people will often have their own view of who he is or who he should be. For example, one young adoptee from Korea grew into young adulthood feeling very multicultural, but when she went to college, other students thought of her as distinctly Asian. An adoptee’s self-perception will usually be based on the family and environment in which she has grown up. Another example involved a young, African American adoptee who was very involved with African American groups at his school, yet family gatherings included only those of European descent. It is a particular challenge to the trans-culturally adopted youngster to achieve an identity that has a comfortable ethnic and racial component.

Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall, in their book, Inside Transracial Adoption (2000), refer to predictable stages that William Cross has described in the development of black identity. Steinberg and Hall think these stages are similar to the stages of identity development “for most Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans living in a white-dominated society,” although there is no particular age range attached to each stage and some children may not go through each stage.

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**Pre-encounter: I'm a Person of Color, but Who Cares?** In this stage, individuals lack interest in the concept of race. Young people tend to interpret the world from the perspective of the majority culture and do not want to stand out as different. They may even think and behave in ways that devalue or minimize their own background.

**Encounter: Then Along Comes Racism Right Between the Eyes** The individual experiences one or more incidents of racism. Such incidences could be name-calling or stereotyping by others or awareness of an incident elsewhere in the country or world. Such incidents can cause young people to question previously held beliefs about the dominant culture. They may begin to develop new ideas and positive stereotypes about their own racial group as well as negative stereotypes about the dominant culture and/or other groups.

**Immersion/Emerging: Riding the Identity Roller Coaster** Youth at this stage are likely to reject the norms and practices of other groups and completely embrace the norms, values, and codes of conduct of their own racial group. Youth become immersed in the friends, language, dress, music, and other cultural manifestations of their cultural identification and reject those of other cultures. They may become confrontational with those of the majority culture or not want to associate with them.

**Internalization/Proud to be Me/Inner Peace/Fully Grown** Individuals in this stage feel secure and self-confident about their racial identity and being different from the majority culture. The intensity of the Immersion stage has mellowed and individuals have a more balanced sense of racial identity. At this stage, persons can appreciate and even take on traits from other racial/ethnic groups. They can comfortably participate in diverse groups. They can handle racist situations should they arise without taking them personally and without blaming others.

### **How Can Parents Help?**

- Parents **are** helping their children to develop a healthy identity by doing the normal, but frequently challenging, parenting tasks.
- **Keep in mind what stage your child is struggling with regarding sense of self.** Use your understanding to read beneath the words of an angry child who is saying, "You are not my real parent!" or "I'm not going to do it that way when I grow up!"
- **From the time your child joins your family, help her to be comfortable with adoption.** Develop for yourself a sense of ease with your child's adoption story, including information about the birth family. Consider carefully how you model conversations with others about being an adoptive family.
- **Talk about birth family realistically.** Your child needs help to understand the positive and negative aspects of the birth parents' situation that necessitated a separation from them. If you do not know facts, you can say "I don't know . . . but I imagine your birth mother might have . . ." Be aware that your child may need help to understand that he did not do anything to cause the loss.
- **Let your child know he can love or identify with positives of birth and adoptive families.** Be clear that your child does not need to choose between one or the other! Help your child to know that YOU are glad that some of his fine talents probably were given to him by his birth parents.
- **Learn as much as possible about your child's history and story.** The more you know, the more you can share.
- **If your child is adopted internationally or transracially, be aware of discrimination that might arise.** You cannot know all of the experiences your child may go through. However, you can listen well, express your concern, and help your child work out a way to handle it.
- **Show your respect for diversity and differences.** If children sense that parents don't like a particular group, they are likely to feel that it is "bad" to be different. It is very helpful for all children to know persons of other cultures, and to have positive role models of persons who are of diverse backgrounds.

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- **It is preferable that children know the details of their history by the time they enter adolescence.** Children need this knowledge to manage the heightened task of identity formation during adolescence.
- **Look closely at your expectations for your children.** Adopted children want to meet their parents' expectations, as all children do. Adoptees who feel they are not able to meet their parents' expectations can feel doubly rejected if they believe they are failing parents again.
- **Be especially sensitive to issues of loss.** Your child may struggle, even without awareness, to mourn the loss of the birth family and culture. If she remains stuck in the grieving process, it is harder to move to a healthy self-concept.

Because the task of developing a healthy, whole identity presents these special challenges in adoption, parents are encouraged to seek advice from adoption professionals or other community resources as their children grow up, if they have concerns.



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