

Identity Issues Real For Adopted Children

by Dean Hale

At 3 years of age, my daughter told me she wasn't pretty. When I asked her why, she said it was because she didn't have blonde hair like her adoptive mother. She rejected her Asian dolls in favor of Caucasian Barbies.

Later, she told me, "Daddy, I miss my Korean mother! What did she look like? Does she like rice?"

At preschool, my daughter burst into tears and told the staff she missed her Korean mother. "I have a Korean mother!" she said. "Someday, I will see her again."

School staff didn't know what to do and looked to my wife and me for help. Now, nearly 7 years old, my daughter refers to her birth mother about once a week.

My daughter's comments reflect issues that are real to transracial adoptions. From early in life, she knew that she was different. Identity issues are real for children who are adopted, and these issues recur through life as children grow. This article touches on some of the early life cycle stages that you can expect and offers some simple suggestions and resources.

Building Trust

Adoption is a way to build family and is a lifelong journey for everyone involved in the adoption process. Parents who adopt transracially choose to become international and multiracial families. In a sense, parents who adopt a Korean child become a part-Korean family, those who adopt an Indian child become a part-Indian family, and so on. This is a powerful factor with multigenerational impact.

During infancy, children build basic trust and relationships. Children thrive under the reassurance and security that come from the predictability of daily household life. Adoptive children especially benefit from the constancy and security that develop during these early years.

Children will have various notions of adoption. During the preschool years, they develop a tremendous thinking ability, and their knowledge and understanding of the words that we use to describe adoption may result in confusion.

It is important, then, to use adoption language that is positive and descriptive in a way that a young child can understand. For example, use the terms "biological mother" and "adoptive mother."

Telling children that they are adopted in an open and honest way from an early age is important in building trust. Often it is hard to know when to share this information, and there are differences in opinion about this. But there is consensus that children need to hear this information from parents first in a way they can understand. Some say multiracial families have it easy—the fact of adopting obvious so everyone knows from the beginning. The same honesty is suggested for parents who adopt children who look like them.

Children love to hear stories of how they came to you. Just as biological children like to hear the family story of going to the hospital, their birth and your memories of their early times with you, adoptive children also like to hear your story about how they came to you.

Developing family events and celebrations such as Coming Home Day or Citizenship Day to celebrate the day of placement or naturalization can become parts of your family's history. This helps provide children with roots and a sense of belonging that go with identity.

Daily Reminders

While adoption is not the most important issue in our lives on an ongoing basis, it is a real part of our lives. Parents and children alike have daily reminders. Adoptive parents need to recognize that adoptive parenting is simultaneously similar to, and profoundly different from, having biological children.

This article only lightly touches upon the issues that adoptees experience in their early years as a normal part of growing up. As children grow older, they encounter a wider world. As children go through the later developmental stages of school age, adolescence and adulthood, adoption adds another layer to mastering each one. Parental sensitivity and openness are important in providing support and encouraging dialogue.

Parents seeking more information may want to join a local adoptive parent group and benefit from sharing with other adoptive parents. Adoptive children also appreciate contact with other children with similar experiences.

There are many good books on identity and adoption available in libraries or bookstores. Some of the more readable include writings by Claudia Jewett, an adoptive parent and family therapist who speaks not only as a professional, but with the insight of personal experience.

Other current publications include: "Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self," (Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1993, \$14) and "The Psychology of Adoption" (Oxford University, 1993, \$40), both by David M. Brodzinsky; "The Adoption Life Cycle" by Elinor Rosenberg (Free Press, 1992, \$27.95); and "Are Those Kids Yours?" by Cheri Register (Free Press, 1990, \$26).

The Internet is another good source of information. The key words "adoption" and "identity" will provide hits from a number of credible sources.

Dean Hale, who has a Master's degree in social work, is director of social services (India) for Holt International Children's Services in Eugene. He is a parent of two children, one by birth and one by adoption. He has also been a volunteer at Birth To Three.

Original publication date: 05/29/2000 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon