

Delayed Launching: Adopted Adolescents and the Not-So Empty Nest

By Gregory C. Keck

So many parents are familiar with the adolescent anthem “When I’m Eighteen, I’m Leaving.” This refrain is as common with adopted adolescents as it is with adolescents who were born to their families. Upon hearing this, some parents reel in fear...others silently feel joyful and ask, “ what kind of threat is THAT? I can hardly wait until you turn eighteen!” Of course all adolescents strive for autonomy—it is a part of their developmental journey. However, individuals who have experienced trauma in their lives find it more difficult to leave their families in a planned, orderly manner. Often these young people have what I term a “delayed launching” from the family home.

The experience of being separated from their birth parents can result in developmental lags and/or transition-sensitivity in adopted children. In addition, children and adolescents being adopted today through the foster-adopt system are largely available for adoption as the result of traumas such as abuse, neglect, abandonment, or sexual abuse. Children being adopted from other countries may share the same kinds of trauma as American kids in foster care, in addition to some period of institutionalization, which produces its own type of developmental interruption. Delayed launchings can often result from all of these types of developmental interruptions and derailments.

Parents of children and adolescents who have experienced chaos, confusion, and multiple care-giving situations should expect that transitions through various developmental stages may be more complicated than they had anticipated. In fact, life will be easier if parents of these children can resist expecting smooth transitions and remind themselves that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. In other words, they should ask themselves questions like these and pay attention to the answers:

How did she manage the transition from home to kindergarten?

How did he handle the change from grade to grade? Elementary school to middle school? Middle school to high school?

How did she do when we moved from our old house to our new one?

What happened when her best friend in 8th grade moved out of state?

How’d he act just before he left for summer camp? When he came back home?

The answers to these questions can help parents prepare for the time when their young “grown” child flirts with leaving home and/or when they decide to come back home for a while. Many adopted adolescents will leave home for typical reasons such as college or military service. This kind of move may buy the adolescent time to mature, but one needs to remember that the rate of maturation will be related to the individual’s degree of developmental delay. If leaving home triggers old feelings such as abandonment, loss, or fear, the person may need to maintain more frequent contact with his family than do his peers. The adolescent’s peers may not understand just why he wants/needs so much emotional support from his parents.

If the newly legal adult leaves home to demonstrate his autonomy and his ability to “make it” on his own, he will, in all probability, have some difficulties. The transition certainly will be easier for him if the terms of his leaving are comfortable; parents can play an important role in supporting such a move by maintaining open communications. The struggle for an individuated identity does not have to equal rejection of the parents or of the family. It may be just what “has” to happen for the young adult at a specific point in time. Being “on his own” may allow him to add a component to his self-definition. In other words, “I’m on my own, I am working, and I’m taking care of myself—even if it is with some support from my family.” If the parents can remain involved with their child on a comfortable level without seeming to run the show, the launching may be more successful. However, they should not be surprised if he asks to return home to live for a while. Things change, and should the move toward autonomy break down for some reason, the older adolescent or young adult may need to go home. If the family has remained patiently involved with the autonomy-experimenting young person, a move back home will be easier.

Families, unlike foster homes, allow their members to remain a part of them for a lifetime. Individuals who age out of care at age eighteen have little or no support, and study after study seems to confirm that they are over-represented in prisons, mental health facilities, and in the homeless population. Parents who have the idea that their adopted adolescents and young adults who have experienced trauma will be on the same path and pace as adolescents who have not had such experiences are bound to be disappointed. A huge part of parenting is accepting what you can and cannot do. Too many parents get stuck in attempting to control their young adult children, and end up stressing the relationship. Maintaining positive family relationships and connections should be the ultimate goal for any family.

It's difficult to compare psychological development with physical development, however, there are parallels. Everyone would agree that you would not expect a four-month-old infant to begin speaking or walking. Families need to understand that they may have to wait longer than expected for their traumatized adopted children to "find their feet": to get where they're going, and ultimately, to be whatever successful means in their families. Parents can't push the developmental accelerator in order to push the process faster than it is going. All development happens at its own pace, and while emotional attachments facilitate development, not every individual can act like a twenty-one-year-old simply because he is twenty-one. (Of course, current neuroscience tells us that the adult brain is not finished developing until perhaps the mid-twenties, which should help us understand why even typically-developing people in adolescence and early adulthood sometimes make decisions that are outright foolish and sometimes dangerous.)

I am sure that some readers are wondering about those situations in which there is conflict, drug and alcohol addiction, or criminal activity on the part of the adolescent or young adult child. Of course, each family has to make decisions about how to handle these kinds of things; I believe that these decisions are extremely personal and take a toll on everyone involved. It is so easy for people to proclaim, "If this was my kid, I'd..." Unless you have personally faced one of these very difficult situations, please refrain from such comments, as you may not know what you would do when actually confronted with what may seem insurmountable. There is not one right way to approach anything. Whatever families do needs to fit with their family's own culture and belief system. It is very easy for people to talk about "tough love," but that approach is not helpful or productive for everyone. It seems to me that it is sometimes used when people are frustrated and want to bring about a disconnection in a relationship.

Most delayed launchings finally do happen. Parents need to be patient as they watch, sometimes helplessly, their grown children trying to fit into the world—floundering as they may.

Parents often ask for strategies that will help them traverse this difficult part of their grown child's journey. I don't think there are specific strategies that can be identified. This is a part of a journey which has set its own course. Parents can be supportive. They can be partners to their children, but they are sure to fail if they attempt to take control of the process. Since most of these delayed launchings finally get out of the gully between adolescence and adulthood, I think that it might be helpful for parents to remind themselves of some facts. They may need to repeat them out loud repeatedly. Here are some suggestions for a mantra parents might develop as they face tough times.

Most kids do fine in the end.

Very few of them get killed or maimed in the type of disasters their parents fearfully imagine.

Most of them don't get in legal trouble or get arrested.

Most of them return to the base they have in their adoptive families.

Many of the difficult times fade as time goes on.

Things that seem tragic now may even be laughable one day.

When struggling with what to do in the face of things that seem monumental, try stepping back a bit and thinking about how you would talk to a friend's son or daughter if they were having the same kind of problem your child is having. What would you say to your friend about what's going on with their grown child? Don't try to solve your child's problems, but do find ways to stay engaged with the struggling young adult in your life. Your efforts will pay off.

Gregory C. Keck, Ph.D., is the founder and director of the Attachment & Bonding Center of Ohio. He is the parent of two sons who were adopted in adolescence and is the co-author of *Adopting the Hurt Child* and *Parenting the Hurt Child*. He is the author of *Parenting Adopted Adolescents: Understanding and Appreciating Their Journeys*.

Reprinted from Pact's Point of View, Summer 2009