

Identity Formation During the Adolescent Years

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Identity Formation During the Adolescent Years.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize adolescence as a pivotal time in identity formation and understand the importance of helping the youth integrate their story, and
- Identify and describe the nature of “stuck spots” in identity formation experienced by adopted children and youth, related developmental tasks, and therapeutic interventions recognized as effective.

2. Identity Formation

2.1 Identity Formation

Let's first look at the importance of knowing one's adoption story and its role in identity formation.

2.2 Laying the Groundwork

In previous lessons, we have talked about the importance of youth knowing their complete, true story and the timeline of events in their life. Your role as a clinician is to facilitate the youth putting the pieces of their story together in a coherent way, and helping to elicit memories about their experiences, so that they can bring them forward in a safe environment.

Some memories may be painful, and having open conversations about difficult and missing information about birth family, the circumstances of relinquishment or removal from family, and other significant life events may be a slow process, to be taken in small increments.

The construction of their story is critical for the developmental task of identity development, especially in adolescence.

2.3 Tools for Identity Work

Remember that we have talked in previous modules about using lifebooks, storyboarding, journaling, digital stories, and other tools for doing this work.

If there is missing information, it would be helpful to join the youth in contacting past caregivers, or a previous case worker, to gather more information. Help the youth create a list of questions, so that they are focused on what is important for them to ask.

In addition, clinicians need to help parents understand the critical importance of their role as supports for their teenagers during this process.

In helping their children pursue identity work, parents are affirming and honoring their connection to the past, and supporting their integration of this history into their emerging sense of self.

2.4 Exploration During Adolescence

Adolescence is a time for exploration and searching for answers. Questions such as, “*Who am I?*,” “*Who am I like?*,” and “*Who do I look like?*” are paramount for *all* teens. For youth in adoptive or guardianship homes, these questions have more complex meaning and the answers may be hard to address.

For youth in relative placements, there is likely more familial evidence, but they may not have information about part of their heritage if they are estranged from one birth parent’s family.

2.5 Adoptive Identity Statuses

The outcome of adoptive identity formation in adolescence and adulthood, as in all other areas of identity, depends on two factors: The extent to which the person actively explores the meaning of being adopted, and the degree of commitment the person makes to a particular point of view about their adoptive status.

The interaction of these two factors leads to one of four possible adoptive identity statuses based on Marcia’s theory of identity development.

1. Identity achievers
2. Moratorium
3. Identity foreclosure
4. Identity diffusion

Click each status to learn about it.

1. Identity Achievers: Those who are navigating the personal meaning of being adopted and have sufficient support and information to answer questions about this aspect of their life are often able to achieve a reasonable resolution to address the conflicts that arise in regards to their identity.

2. **Moratorium:** Others may explore identity issues related to adoption, but do not receive adequate support within or beyond the family, and are unable to find sufficient information about their background that allows them to resolve questions about their adoptive identity. These individuals remain in a state of limbo or moratorium with respect to what it means to be adopted. They continue to search, but as yet have not found the answers they are seeking.
3. **Identity Foreclosure:** Some people choose not to explore their own meaning of being adopted, but rather take on the ideas and beliefs of those around them, typically their parents. For these adoptees, their identity does not reflect a personal choice, but rather the influence of those around them. This lack of stability about their adoptive identity makes them more vulnerable to the impact of future life events.
4. **Identity Diffusion:** Others also avoid exploring the meaning of being adopted, but do not have any readily available alternative perspectives that they are comfortable taking on as their own. For such individuals, adoption is an avoided topic, one that they deny has much meaning to them. Unlike those who are in moratorium about adoption issues, these individuals are in a more stagnant and diffuse state regarding their adoptive identity.

2.6 Adoption and Guardianship Complicates Independence

Teens are differentiating themselves from significant others and deciding who they want to become. It is a time when the normal task of moving toward adulthood and independence can be compromised by the pain of past losses and unresolved or revisited grief.

It is especially difficult for a youth who is transitioning to a permanent family during these years, as they are expected to form new attachments at the developmental stage when they are supposed to be separating and moving toward independence. Issues of loyalty are likely to surface, in both relative and non-relative adoption as the youth has two families with which to identify and separate from - the birth family and the adoptive or kinship family.

2.7 Familial Factors

In relative adoption or guardianships, familial relationships may offer the adolescent less conflict and more role models to solidify their concept of self. Furthermore, when extended family or tribal members play an active role in parenting, the identity formation of the adolescent may be more prescribed.

Rituals and ceremonies can help facilitate identity formation. There may be certain expected roles and responsibilities that children are raised to accept.

Editorial credit: Teresa Otto / Shutterstock.com

3. Challenges in Identity Formation

3.1 Challenges in Identity Formation

Let's turn now to challenges that may arise in the process of identity formation.

3.2 Identity Formation Reflection

Thinking back to the stages of development that we talked about in the previous lesson, how might the journey of the child moving from one or more foster homes or an orphanage to adoption or guardianship impact the key task of identity formation in adolescence?

3.3 Identity Formation Response

Not only are young people separated from their family of origin and faced with having to differentiate from people that they may not know well, but they may also have to integrate the experiences of repeated moves, complex trauma, ambiguous loss, maltreatment, negative self-talk, and unresolved grief. They may also have to negotiate differences around things like religion, community, and belief structures.

As a clinician, this makes the work of exploring identity that much more complicated and layered. It requires a willingness to take the time to explore and integrate these dynamics on top of the identity and adoption tasks that come with normal developmental stages.

3.4 Developmental Challenges

What we know is that, too often, children and youth who have experienced multiple moves and changes in caregivers become developmentally stuck, struggling to achieve the developmental stages as defined. They may be emotionally much younger than their chronological age, yet be expected to be emotionally on par with their peers.

By contrast, if required to take on adult roles early, such as parenting younger siblings, they may exhibit behavior well beyond their years. Knowing the child's or youth's experience, norms, and the adjustments they have made to various environments is essential to understanding their current developmental and emotional level and needs.

3.5 Impact of Foster or Congregate Care

For adolescents who are moving to a permanent family from foster care, a group home, or an orphanage, where they may have had little or no say over life decisions, and much less involvement in typical teen behaviors, normal adolescent development will likely be delayed.

Additionally, the youth's emotional development level will need to be determined in order for you, as the clinician, to target your interventions.

3.6 Impact of Interracial Adoptions

In interracial adoptions, the issues we discussed in previous lessons take on even more significance during identity development, when teens are becoming a part of a social group, dating, and struggling with identity.

Take Keith for example. Keith is of multi-racial heritage raised in a white, Jewish family. He described his teen years as a “roller coaster.” He said he had less of an issue being Jewish than he had figuring out whether he was black or white. *“Being Jewish was defined, but the black kids said I wasn’t black enough, and the white kids could see that I wasn’t white, even though I acted white.”*

He tried on several identities throughout his teens, but ultimately identified as black, and when he reconnected with his birth family, he was able to confirm that identity in a completely authentic way.

3.7 Impact of Interracial Adoptions Video

Let’s watch Keith talking about this on the panel at Camp PAKK.

[Video Transcript]

KEITH: Yeah, I grew up in the '70s. I was born in 1970, so there wasn't a lot that I was listening to on the radio or anything. I mean, in the '80s is when we got Michael Jackson and Prince and we started having these superstars and rap music came in. Not that they weren't doing other--I mean, there was jazz and other things, but I'm saying my parents weren't listening to that. It wasn't readily available on the radio.

So I didn't have a lot of role models. We didn't have music videos yet. We didn't live in areas that had a lot of blacks, just in general. I had some cousins who were the exact same--I said, I have cousins who were adopted. Same boat as me. Black children, white parents. So the same things. We were kind of like, "Yeah, I don't know either. I don't know what the deal is."

And it was hard. It was tough growing up because, I mean, in the '70s it was a--I lived in Huntington Beach, Orange County, at the time, and like Roots came out, this mini-series about slavery. And it was a great mini-series, and I enjoyed watching it, but the problem was, it was when there were like 12 channels on TV so like everybody watched it, and kids at school immediately the next day, I don't even think they were trying to be mean, they just were like--they knew less about blacks than I did, and they just were like, "Hey, your name's Toby." They were just quoting things that was said to the slaves as that was supposed to be a connection for us, and it clearly didn't work.

So that was very hard for me, and I never really got that identity. My grandma was wonderful. She used to, when I was older, she would try to get me like books written by black authors and toys, but they always felt, because of the time, very forced, if that makes any sense. You guys know now there's--I don't know what shows you know--but there's shows like Doc McStuffins and all these shows on TV, cartoons that kids can watch where the characters are black for no reason. I mean, it doesn't have to be.

Like if you watched Fat Albert, it was Bill Cosby had made this show and it was the point of the show was that all the characters were black. I'm saying now there are shows where the leads in live action, cartoons, whatever, are all kinds of different ethnicities and there's no reason, it doesn't have to be; so it's a very different world.

But I had a really hard time because by the time I was old enough--and then we moved to different areas to try to get me to have some of that a little bit, a little more contact, and it felt very forced, so I kind of, at that point, when I was older, rejected it because it wasn't there from the start. And I mention all these kid-like things like cartoons and comic books and TV shows because that's the stuff I was into. I mean, that's where you get some of the role models. And they did stuff.

I had a therapist that I was seeing, who was African American, he was black, and I'm sure all those things helped to some degree, but I knew at that point, I knew that's--I mean, not that he wasn't trained and talented at what he did, but I knew my parents were like, "That's who we're going to get and that's a big factor." I knew, so it was difficult.

And for me it was really--what helped a lot is when the culture got to a point that was a little more accepting. I mean, I really--one of the funny things, like the first time I ever felt like proud to be black in a good, positive way, was when break dancing came in back in the '80s. And I was with my friends and we were all practicing and stuff, and then one day somebody rode their bike over and jumped off, "Hey, everybody's at the park. Everybody's break dancing. We got to go."

So bam, we all get on our bikes, boom, we get over there. And we were like--we didn't know that they had said anything, but people like moved the crowd, "Oh, we got some new blood here." "Uh-oh." And we didn't know like people were expect--I guess he was like, "I'm going to get some guys who are great." We didn't know that we were walking into that.

But we were doing our stuff, we joined in with everybody, and we were dancing and having a good time, and some white kid I didn't know, who was there, the same--too many bandanas just like me, was like, "Man," he said, "I wish I was black. You just look so cool doing that. You just look so much cooler."

Now, whether that was true or not doesn't matter. I just was like--I went like that probably on the outside, like no, but inside--I just like, explosions. It was like, "That was unbelievable." I couldn't believe that. It was just such an amazing thing for me. And that's when all the role models started to come out and I had other things. Teens are into music and that's why I bring up all that stuff.

And I also was--I was always like the token black kid like pretty much everywhere we were. There was like sometimes other blacks in the neighborhood, but not many. So frequently I was the one black guy in the group, in the classroom, in the camp, in the whatever it was, on the team, whatever, growing up. And so I took that identity and I was fine with like, "Oh, I am black." So my family was like, "Hey, you're different." I was like, "Well, I'm black."

But the weird thing was, what was harder for me is then when I'm faced with a group of blacks, I want them to accept me more. Like that's the harder part because here I'm carrying this torch of like, "I'm a black person. I'm a black man." And then black people go, "You're not very black." It's like, "You just ripped my entire identity out."

And the interesting thing is, I mean, obviously, the truth is whatever--you can be any type. There's no like you're black so you have to be--fit in this box. But it still feels like that when you don't have that identity. And for me like when I learned who my biological family was and everything, I found out my grandfather was a Tuskegee airman. Like that's huge for me. So I don't care who you are or how black you are, now, if you say I'm not black, I'm going to be like, "Hey, unless you can trump Tuskegee airman, like at least I got something there, so I'm going to be how I am."

But I mean, but that helped a lot just having that knowledge to be like, "Prove that you're blacker than me. I mean, prove it on that." So yeah, it's been an interesting ride that way.

[END OF VIDEO]

3.8 Relationship Skills and Sense of Identity

Teens who have been traumatized or who have not had stable relationships with caring adults who can provide guidance, and model appropriate behavior, may lack the opportunity to develop the relationship skills necessary for healthy peer relationships. They may be inclined to participate in risky behaviors, choosing friends who are also engaging in risky behaviors, impacting their identity development.

This adds to the struggles that teens will have in integrating into a family, or maintaining their family relationships as they begin to individuate.

4. Stuck Spots

4.1 Stuck Spots

Let's look now at the six "stuck spots" that might affect an adolescent's identity development.

4.2 Stuck Spots and Vulnerability for Adolescents

Debbie Riley, in her book, *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, states that adoption is a highly significant emotional event in the psychological development of teens. She writes that, *"The emerging recognition of their unique family situation as an adoptee has a powerful impact upon family relations, identity formation, and the achievement of individuation and independence."*

Riley has identified the six most common adoption-related issues where adolescents may get stuck. Although not all teens may be affected by each “stuck spot”, they often move in and out of each spot as they try to gain a deeper awareness of their adoption experience.

Let’s take a look at these “stuck spots.” Click the circles to learn about each “stuck spot.”

4.3 Reason for Adoption

The first “stuck spot” is the reason for adoption. As teens begin to think more deeply about the termination of their birth parent’s parental rights, or voluntary relinquishment of rights, they might ask questions such as:

- *“Why was I given away?”*
- *“Why didn’t my parents fight to keep me?”*
- *“Why did my parents mistreat me?”*
- *“Why did I end up in foster care?”*
- *“Wasn’t there anyone in my family who could take me?”*
- *“Is there something wrong with me?”*

These are more specific questions than they might have been at a younger age, and they involve more personal reflection. They also become more poignant during adolescence as the full realization of what adoption means emerges, and the reflections of the youth become more personal and painful.

- *“Why did my birth parents reject me?”*
- *“Why did my birth parents abandon me?”*
- *“Why did my birth parents leave me?”*

4.4 Missing or Difficult Information

The second “stuck spot” is missing or difficult information.

As adopted teens begin to make sense of their story, they must face very harsh realities. Their history may include abuse, mental illness, or incarceration of a parent, or parental substance abuse.

They may have been separated from one or more siblings. If separated, this is a time when they might have an acute interest in finding siblings or birth parents. They might push even harder for details about the facts surrounding why they were adopted.

For some teens, they may have very little information, creating feelings of helplessness and hopelessness as they chart the journey of identity development.

Sometimes parents have information they have not shared, and the longer they wait to share it, the harder it becomes. What parents don’t understand is no matter how hard the information is, the truth is better than what the child may have constructed in their minds.

Parents also need to remember that, even when information is missing, their affirmation of the child’s feelings about not having the information is supportive and normalizes their search for answers.

4.5 Case Example: Julia

Let's take a look at this idea through the story of Julia. Click the corner of the page to begin.

1. Julia's parents came in for a consultation initiated by her mother who was having increased anxiety about the fact that she and her husband knew that Julia's birthday was not her real birthday. Their daughter had been adopted from Russia, and the authorities told them to just pick a birthday for her. They chose May 4th.
2. Several years later, they gained additional information and learned that her actual birthday was a year earlier. This was fine when she was a young girl, but as she matured, it became obvious that she appeared older and more developed than her presumed age.
3. Mom could no longer harbor the secret, and wanted help with how to tell Julia the truth. There were several problems with coming clean on the subject. The extended family had an annual family reunion in May, where Julia's birthday was always celebrated. The parents worried about the reaction of all of Julia's relatives, who had been a part of this joyful tradition for years.
4. Still, they felt strongly that Julia deserved to know the truth. After some therapeutic assistance, they were able to let go of their guilt about keeping the secret and deal with their anxiety about everyone's reaction. They agreed on a plan to reveal the facts to Julia and the family.
5. Julia's response was so positive that it amazed her parents. She told them that she had been secretly worried that something was wrong with her. She wondered why her body was more mature than her friends. She was teased at times during sleepovers. It was a great relief to learn that she was actually older than she thought she was. At the same time, she was saddened by realizing she had lived her whole life with this untruth.

Case example from Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens

4.6 Difference

The third "stuck spot" is difference. This is a time when teens want to be more like their peers, to belong, and not stand out as different. The fact of their adoption makes them feel different, especially if they do not know other teens who are adopted.

If they are in an interracial family, their difference is even more evident. They may have experienced the stigma of adoption in the past, but now it can become more of an issue.

4.7 Identity

The fourth “stuck spot” is identity. For teens, “How can I figure out who I am if I don’t know where I’m from?” loom large in their quest for identity. They must determine how they are similar and different from the parents who raised them, how their birth family contributes to who they are, while also recognizing their own unique qualities.

Let’s watch Temera talk about growing up not having information about her birth family and not feeling connected to her adoptive parents.

[Video Transcript]

TEMERA: I'm biracial. My parents are not biracial, are the interracial couple. My adopted mom is Jewish and my dad's black. But I don't look anything like them. And most people don't even know I'm black. So for me, it was like, I'm trying to--and I was raised in kind of a black family. I had the Southern black grandma. Like I was raised in all that, but I also felt like I didn't fit in all that because people--I'd walk down the street and I've been put in some really scary situations, because people didn't know I was black and that I affiliate myself that I am black. I have black children. I have all of that.

So some of it is not--it's like even though my parents were a similar race as me, they didn't understand, one, what I was going through as a biracial person. They also didn't understand how me not fitting in connected to the adoption stuff. And how I was already struggling with who I was as a person and then to have the identity stuff. I was really bullied in middle school and high school about being biracial. It was at the time of like school days and being light skinned was not cool. And so it was a really awful period of time.

But my parents also just didn't get it and they didn't get the connection that as I'm struggling with this over here I'm also struggling with who I am and where I come from. And those are linked together. So I think it's more than just--you have to figure out how to immerse your kids in whatever culture they're in so that they have lifelong connections with people that can give them that real experience.”

[END OF VIDEO]

4.8 Fantasy Birth Parent

When there are unanswered questions about birth family, the adolescent may develop a “fantasy” birth parent and fill in the missing information with their own imagination. This fantasy can be a powerful influence on the youth’s struggle to determine their identity.

Factual information that has negative associations learned for the first time in adolescence can lead to an adolescent’s belief that they will or should exhibit the same qualities that their birth parent did. Supporting the family’s ability to share factual information before a child reaches adolescence helps pave the way for a more stable adolescence and formation of one’s identity.

Therapeutic work that places that information in a reality-based context for the child earlier can help reduce the ambiguity and uncertainty during this identity formation period.

4.9 Fantasy Birth Parent Video

Let's listen to Manuel talking about his identity struggles growing up because he didn't have the information he needed about his birth family to help him with his own identity.

[Video Transcript]

MANUEL: But I am a Mexican and I am placed in a white family. So when I was first adopted, I could speak fluent Spanish. Everything like--I could just speak fluent Spanish. And then when I got adopted and I got put in these schools and things, in Oakland it's--I went to school with a lot of African Americans, so I made friends with a lot of black people, so I forgot my Spanish.

In elementary school and middle school, I forgot a lot of my Spanish, and right now I struggle with Spanish. But in that time I made friends with a lot of black people, and then all I spoke was English. And then in high school I was put into a little charter school where it was predominately Mexican, and so in that school everybody was like, "You're whitewashed." And that didn't make sense to me because my parents may be white but all my friends before that had been black. You know what I mean? So it was like--

KEITH: You're saying you were blackwashed?

MANUEL: I guess.

KEITH: Is that where you're going?

MANUEL: No, I mean, I'm just saying that because I couldn't speak Spanish and because I didn't like typical Mexican music and I didn't wear my cowboy hat to school. You know what I'm saying? Like I didn't do all that that they thought I was whitewashed and that really put a lot of--that put a curve into my identity because I was like this whole time I've been like, "Oh, I'm Mexican. I'm Mexican. I'm Mexican. I'm Mexican."

And then I'm faced, like you said, with like people who grew up with immigrant families even and some immigrants themselves and then they say I'm not Mexican. And then I'm just like, "So then who am I?" Then I don't know who I am. And then I faced this whole little identity crisis in high school that led to my search to my biological family. Because I was like, "If anybody could tell me who I am it would probably be my biological family and people who were involved in my past."

And because of that I found my biological family and, yeah, that's pretty much it. Like I put a cap on my identity, I guess. I didn't really care what anybody else would say because if I knew who I was and I knew where I came from, that's all that really mattered to me.

[END OF VIDEO]

4.10 Loyalty

The fifth “stuck spot” is loyalty. Adopted teens may struggle with conflicting loyalties. While they may want to know more about their birth family, and may even want to search for them, they may be afraid of hurting their adoptive parents’ feelings.

This can cause feelings of guilt, and create a sense of isolation for the teen, if they cannot openly have these conversations with their parents. It may also contribute to a sense of alienation from adoptive parents if their interests are thwarted or misunderstood.

4.11 Permanence

The sixth and final “stuck spot” is permanence. The insecurity that many adopted teens feel about the permanence of their relationship with their adoptive parents may be magnified during adolescence. After so many losses, they may fear losing yet another family, and their behavior might reflect testing that commitment. In addition, they might fear the loss of their family after they turn 18, especially if they don’t feel ready to leave home.

On a positive note, growth in cognitive development helps them understand the legal aspects of adoption, which can be reassuring regarding any anxiety that emerges about the permanence of their family status.

4.12 Stuck Spots Summary

We encourage you to introduce these “stuck spots” in your assessment, when working with adopted teens to open dialogue with them. We will explore in future lessons how you and parents can help to support teens in addressing their “stuck spots.”

5. Openness

5.1 Openness

Let’s conclude this lesson with a discussion of openness and its role in identity formation.

5.2 Open Communication About Identity

As we have heard from the personal stories shared in this lesson, and also discussed in earlier modules, ongoing open communication from an early age about adoption and aspects of a child’s past contributes to positive self-image and identity, and establishes a firm positive foundation for the tasks of adolescence.

Research has shown that, among adopted adolescents, those who perceive greater communicative openness with their families reported more trust for their parents, fewer feelings of alienation, better overall family functioning, and greater emotional stability. Openness to birth family and maintaining connections also plays a role in positive identity formation for the adopted adolescent.

As a clinician, intentionally addressing the openness and structuring opportunities for conversations about identity with youth can help reduce the potential struggle of this developmental task. We will talk more about this in a later lesson, when we talk about supporting parents as they support positive identity formation.

5.3 Identity Formation Reflection

We have established that, during adolescence, the drive to gather information and fill in the missing pieces of one's story can be strong, and it is part of the task of identity formation. For the adopted adolescent, openness can make this journey a little bit easier by facilitating access to information and answers to questions as they seek to solidify their sense of self.

List 5 things adolescents could learn about their story from contact with their birth family that may help them with identity formation.

5.4 Identity Formation Response

You might have listed the following:

- Stories about family members
- Information about who the youth looks like, including obtaining photographs
- What talents and characteristics might the youth have inherited?
- Clarifying the story of why they could not stay with birth parents
- Clarifying why other birth family members could not care for them
- Information about siblings, and why they were separated
- Medical history
- Affirming or clarifying the youth's memories of what happened
- Community connections or connections to heritage
- Affirming that they were not forgotten and that they are loved

All of this information is important for the youth to incorporate in their story as they develop their identity. Supporting this process in your clinical work will be of great value.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, we have talked about adolescence and the importance of this developmental stage in identity formation. We considered common vulnerabilities and “stuck spots” for youth, and the important questions and information obtained to support the development of a coherent sense of self. We also talked about the role of openness to the birth family in identity formation.

6.2 Your Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

6.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how will you apply these in your practice?

6.4 Journal Response

Click the “Print Results” button to print and save your answers.

6.5 Conclusion

Congratulations, you have completed Identity Formation During the Adolescent Years

In the next lesson, we will discuss the therapist’s role in supporting identity formation.