

Post-Adoption/Guardianship-Related Developmental Tasks

Developmental Stage	Child's Tasks	Parents' Tasks
Infancy	Recovering from separation	Providing bonding & attachment experiences, including loving touch, cuddling, eye contact
	Adjust to new caregiver, new home	Attunement to baby's cues to meet needs
		Pleasurable interactions – rocking, games, talking, reading
		Awareness of own responses to child & addressing any barriers to bonding within parent

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Toddlerhood Age 1-3 years	Surviving trauma of separations and displacements	Providing bonding & attachment experiences Through meeting child's needs
	Beginning to hear/learn adoption/guardianship story	Helping child with emotional self-regulation
	Enjoying telling adoption story (repeating but little understanding)	Using adoption, such as "adopted", "birth mother"; reading adoption story books
	Remediating developmental delays due to maltreatment & instability	Encouraging questions and answering honestly; ongoing openness
	Gaining attachment security and felt safety	Gathering all information possible about child's history
		Teaching correct terminology for ethnicity, race, heritage; teaching & modeling cultural pride
		Bringing culturally appropriate dolls, toys, books, art, music into home to provide positive image of child's heritage

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Early Childhood 3-6 years	Asking many questions about birth family & adoption/guardianship	Prompting "autobiographical memory"; honest/open communication about past events;
	May recognize self & family are objects of others' curiosity	Creating or adding to a "Life Book" with child
	Recognizing differences in physical appearance, especially in transracial/cultural adoption	Supporting positive identity work with child
	Learning cultural pride through stories, games, & activities	Teaching & modeling cultural pride, experiences with diversity
	Remediating developmental delays due to past adversities	Therapeutic parenting related to "survival behaviors", self-regulation challenges, etc.
	Gaining security in attachments and sense of safety	Connecting with child through play & meeting needs; reassuring child that he/she will not lose adoptive or guardianship family

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Middle childhood 6-11 years	Develop a coherent life narrative, maybe in absence of concrete info.	Maintaining communicative openness in helping the child find answers to the extent possible
	Struggling with feelings of abandonment & loss; searching for answers re: relinquishment or termination of parental rights	Empathizing with child's emotional pain and support openness that is in child's best interest; helping child accept birth parents' limitations without blaming
	Concerns about divided loyalties; ambivalent feelings re: belonging	Validating child's connection to both birth & adoptive/guardianship families & can love both sets of parents; expressing respect for child's birth family
	Feeling different from peers; struggling at times to fit into peer group and family	Supporting child's positive identity formation; having contact with other adoptive families; adjusting expectations to child's abilities
	Coping with others' reactions to adoption or racial differences	Allowing the child to control telling his/her story outside the family; teaching child to cope with micro-aggressions from others
	Coping with anxiety about permanency of adoption or guardianship	Fostering child's trust, security, and sense of belonging; using/adding to Life Book

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Early adolescence 11-16 years	Deeper reworking & expanding his/her understanding of own story – reasons for relinquishment, resurfacing of trauma and loss issues	Validating and supporting teen's need to know his or her history; being alert to clue of emotional distress; communicative openness
	Coping with loss, lack of control to find answers, & self-esteem challenges of perceived abandonment	Sharing all available information with teen about his past history & empathic support of his/her struggles
	Acknowledging two sets of parents; ambivalence towards both; loyalty conflicts; searching for how like or not like both families	Understanding teen's adoption & identity issues; validating teen's connection to both families & communicating that you are not threatened by questions regarding past history
	Engaging in "distancing" behavior	Allowing child to exercise control whenever possible or appropriate
	Quest for identity intensifies; trying on traits of birth parents in process of self-definition & exploring self-identity	Understanding much of teen's anger is toward birth parents, hurt at not being kept by them, & lack of control to find answers; supporting teen in efforts to explore own identity & not imposing unrealistic expectations on teen
	Coping with differences from peers & bias related to adoption or racial/ethnic differences	Continuing openness in communication and teaching/modeling self-protective skills to cope with discrimination
	Coping with physical, sexual maturation without connection to genetic relatives	Validating teen's concerns about physical appearance & frustration with the unknown
	Working through complicated feelings re: dating & intimacy, whether to date across race/culture	Validating teen's feelings & experiences; accepting and supporting teen's efforts to work through issues

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Late adolescence 16-20 years	Yearning for connection to birth family & considering searching; lack of connection & info. about own history may feel like loss of part of one's self	Giving permission to search for information or connection to birth family; working through parent's own fear of losing child to birth family
	May overreact to losses & failed relationships	Being alert for intense emotions related to past or current losses; helping teen cope with loss & grief
	Equating separation with abandonment; facing fears of losing relationship with parents associated with independence	Recognizing teen's fears and assuring him/her that will always be his/her parents; dealing with parent's own fears regarding separation & fears of rejection by teen
	Integrating one's past experiences, relationships, adoption; strengths & limitations into a positive, coherent identity	Maintaining open communication about adoption & teen's feelings related to past history or current struggles

Adapted from: Hamilton, N., Howard, J., Smith, S.L., & 7 adoption preservation experts. (2004). *Guided curriculum: Best practice in adoption & guardianship preservation*. Normal, IL: Center for Adoption Studies, Illinois State University. Prepared for and funded by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

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