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## C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 6

# TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION — THE TEEN YEARS

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Part A of the series of talking with children about adoption emphasizes the fact that one of adoptive parents' important responsibilities is to become comfortable with talking about adoption with their children. The fact sheet addresses when and how to share the adoption story, how to answer children's common and often difficult questions, and how to initiate conversations with children who don't ask questions. While parents may find the task of talking with children about adoption daunting, most find that when those children become teens, talking about *anything* is even more challenging. However, it is no less important to communicate with teens about adoption, because difficult as it is, parents need to continue to be a source of guidance, comfort and support through the teen years.

### EXTRA CHALLENGES FOR ADOPTIVE TEENS

There are two major tasks of personal growth for all teens: identity formation and separation. Identity formation refers to the need to explore and answer questions independence and self-responsibility – which can be exciting, but scary, sort of a "Leave me alone, but don't leave me" theme. For adopted teens, these two tasks come with more complexity. Adopted teens must come to terms with their thoughts, feelings and knowledge of birth parents as they face questions related to their identity. They must psychologically, if not physically separate from birth parents. In addition, for some adopted teens, separation becomes synonymous with rejection, and independence feels like abandonment – feelings associated with their first separation from birth parents. Clearly, these extra challenges have the potential to be overwhelming. (SEE FACT SHEET ON ADOPTION AND ADOLESCENCE). Adopted teens who are not able to communicate these troubling thoughts and emotions to someone – either parents or therapists, are at risk for potentially serious emotional and behavioral problems including depression, substance abuse, school failure, etc...

### WHY COMMUNICATION IS DIFFICULT

All parents of adolescents at times become confused when their adolescent presents a brick wall of silence or withdrawal, particularly on subjects such as drugs, sexuality, friends, etc. Well-meaning parents who are trying hard to keep the lines of communication open find their teens unwilling to talk. This can happen for several reasons.

Teens may stop talking as a way of getting distance from their parents. Distance helps them to feel separate and independent; it is a normal task of adolescence. Even teens who once shared every thought with their parents as children, may now desire a great deal of privacy around their innermost thoughts and feelings. Parental attempts at communication may fail because the teens perceive their parents' interest in their feelings as intrusive and/or controlling.

Second, adopted teenagers may not be able to clearly articulate for themselves what they are feeling, let alone convey their feelings to others, especially their parents. Adoption-related issues can be the most emotionally loaded issues they will ever face. A range of feelings may impact the adolescent – anger, sadness, and confusion. However they often are unable to connect the experience of adoption with their feelings.

Third, their feelings and interest in birth parents or birth family may continue to make them feel disloyal to their adoptive parents, which would make adoption an extremely uncomfortable topic for them to discuss with their parents. Teens may also be painfully aware of their parents' discomfort with their teen's interest and feelings for birth parents, or it may be the teen that imagines that their parents feel this way. Even adults who were adopted often feel this way, which is why you often hear of adopted people waiting until their adoptive parents are deceased to search for birth relatives.



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There are several tools for parents to help prepare for communication with teens about adoption. One is to be aware of their child's personality and temperament style. Is their child generally quiet and reserved, does he have a flair for the dramatic, or enjoy being analytical? Is she likely to be more receptive to discussion at specific times of the day? Parents also need to be aware of their own moods. For example, many teens complain that they really don't have their parent's full attention when they are trying to talk. With so many balls to juggle, parents may think they are giving undivided attention, but if that is not the teen's perception, opportunities may be lost.

#### PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PARENT COMMUNICATION WITH TEENS

1) Send a clear message that you are open and willing to talk about adoption and the adoption story. Find ways to reach out to your teen that diminish the potential for emotional confusion or overload. Certainly there will be many rejections of these attempts, but sometimes you will get credit for the effort!

Some adoptive parents find that they can communicate with their teens around adoption-related themes in an indirect way. With all of the stories in the news, books and movies, and the internet, themes of loss and uncertainty abound. Teens may be willing to share their feelings and views on these stories without having to directly address adoption or their story.

Communicate respect for your teen's feelings in ways that demonstrate how much you value their opinion. Obviously, you can send this message on many topics, not just about adoption. However, be aware of your own emotions when adoption is discussed in any way—your teen will read you well and watch for signs that you are uncomfortable or disapproving.

2) Look for the "red flags" that can be evident through their behavior. These signals are ways to let you know what is going on inside. (See Fact Sheet # 10: Red Flags) Some teens, for example, may indirectly communicate feelings through their behaviors and parents will have to "decipher" or make sense of these signals. Example – a teen that suddenly dresses a certain way may be doing so to identify with his birth culture. Parents often miss signals because they may minimize what their teen is feeling when it is difficult for them to allow themselves to really "walk in their teen's shoes."

Part of working with teens is remaining upbeat despite the ever-present adolescent angst. Ms. Riley reminds us: "Teens need to know that parents are human, too. We make mistakes, we miss things - the important thing is to let the kids know we are trying, that we care. Say to your teen, 'I feel really bad, I don't understand what you're trying to tell me,' or 'I feel bad that I didn't get it.' Then, try to learn more...keep trying. This is part of being an adoptive parent . . . try to make sure they aren't walking alone."

3) Share all available adoption information. Many parents wish to protect their children from potentially painful aspects of their adoption story. Sensitive information can include birth histories where there are biological siblings to more serious difficulties such as drug abuse, mental illness, incarceration, or sexual assault. Certainly, difficult information must be shared in an age-appropriate manner. However, teens need to have information as they figure out who they are (identity) and while they still have the support of their families (before they actually leave home). As Dr. Joyce Pavao writes in *The Family of Adoption*, "It is our job to protect our children . . . from harm. The greatest gift we can give children is to tell them their truths and to help them make sense of these truths, especially when they are complicated and harsh."

4) Assist your teen in making connections to his heritage and his past. Many adopted children and teens find comfort in acquainting themselves with the places that are somehow a part of their birth family or birth culture. This may include trips to the places they were born, or to locations that are associated with parts of their adoption story or early life experiences. In those places, they may establish connections that provide answers to questions they have had, or they may find it easier to understand choices that led to their placement. Some teens search for specific facts related to their adoption story, and some may actually begin the journey of establishing connections with birth family through reunion with birth family members.



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In international adoption, homeland tours have become very popular in recent years. In the absence of information, the experience of the teen visiting his/her birth country can be an important experience to connect the teen with their heritage, culture and place of birth. Families share an emotional experience that can be the basis of communication and shared memories for a lifetime.

For teens in open adoption, teens may find it easier or more difficult to share feelings with their birth family members. Just as they are distancing from adoptive parents, they may distance from all parents— including birth parents, or again, may draw closer to birth family as a way to separate from adoptive family. Teens may also find it easier to confide in the parent of a friend, or a parent's friend, or favorite aunt/uncle. While parents may prefer it be them, it may be comforting to know that your teen is talking to someone!

### RESOURCES

Communicating with teens simply will not be an easy task for most parents. By becoming more private with their thoughts and feelings, the task of separating becomes easier for them. However, the extra set of tasks for adopted teens increases the need for *someone* who can guide them when emotions become overwhelming. Many times, they cannot turn to their friends, who do not share similar experience with them. Teachers or school counselors may be a resource; however without training, they may not understand the depth of their students' emotions and/or how these emotions are connected to the adoption experience. Mental health therapists trained in post adoption issues can be an excellent resource for adopted teens.

[Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens IN DEMAND webinar](#) and [book](#) by C.A.S.E. CEO Debbie Riley, LCMFT

Parenting Adopted Adolescents by Gregory Keck