Handout: Adoptees and the Seven Core Issues of Adoption

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Adopted persons tend to experience seven core issues related to their adoption. Discussions of adoption over the years have often overlooked the pain and struggles of adoptees, but identifying these core issues and helping children integrate them as they grow validates their experiences, decreasing feelings of being different and isolated.

Adoption can lead to both great joy and tremendous pain. While every adoption is unique, adopted persons tend to experience seven core issues related to their adoption. These seven core or fundamental issues are:

1. loss
2. rejection
3. guilt/shame
4. grief
5. identity
6. intimacy/relationships
7. control

Regardless of the circumstances of an adoption—infant, older child, international—children are affected by loss, which is the cornerstone of every adoption. Losses related to adoption are lifelong, life-altering, and intergenerational. These losses and how they are handled set the parameters within which an adopted child's life is played out. They intermingle with day-to-day attitudes, biases, and perspectives, as they unfold alongside the child's development. Adopted children vary in their response to these losses based on temperament, personality style, gender, subsequent experiences, and other factors, such as medical conditions and intellectual functioning.

The presence of these issues does not indicate, however, that the adopted child or the institution of adoption is pathological. Rather these are the expected issues, which evolve logically out of the nature of adoption itself. It is not the authors' intent to question adoption but rather to challenge some adoptionrelated assumptions, specifically the persistent notion that being adopted is no different from growing up in the family of origin and that children have only happy feelings about their adoption.

Discussions of adoption over the years have often overlooked the pain and struggles of adopted persons. Identifying, discussing, and helping adopted children to integrate these core issues as they grow universalizes and validates their experiences, decreasing feelings of being different and isolated.

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LOSS

Loss, the first issue, is like the hub of a large wheel. Without loss there would be no adoption. All adopted persons have experienced at least one major, life-altering loss before becoming involved in adoption. In adoption, to gain anything, first one must loose the family of origin. This is still true even in the most open of adoptions. Adoption transposes adopted persons from one location in the human mosaic into a totally new configuration. It is these losses and the way they are accepted and, hopefully, resolved, that set the tone for the lifelong process of adoption.

Adopted persons suffer the first loss at their initial separation from their birth family when they are young and most vulnerable. Current research is validating what adopted persons have felt for a long time. Awareness of the adoptive status is inevitable. Even if the loss is beyond conscious awareness, recognition, or vocabulary, it affects the adopted person on a very profound level.

Any subsequent loss, or even the perceived threat of separation, becomes more formidable for adopted persons than their non-adopted peers. Clearly, then, children who have had multiple placements, have come from other cultures and countries, and have had a series of transplantations, have compounded losses. Each loss rests on top of the others, sometimes piling up very high.

For adopted persons, loss in adoption is not a single event, but rather a series of ongoing losses. Birthdays, Mothers Day, Fathers Day can be experienced as both a reminder of the original loss and the ongoing nature of that loss. There is no end to the losses; no closure. The initial, identifiable loss rests beneath innumerable secondary or sub-losses. Loss becomes an evolving process, creating a theme in the adopted person's development. For example, losses in adoption can include: loss of culture, religion, ethnic and racial connections, medical information, birth history, siblings, birth order, country, language, family traditions, somebody/anybody with a physical resemblance, foster families, neighborhood friends, pets, teachers, therapists, familiar smells and tastes, social workers, the chance to be normal just like friends who are growing up with the families they were born to, and on and on. As children move again and again, the list gets longer and longer. Even after the adoption is completed, there are possible additional losses as adoptive families change—moves, deaths, illnesses, other adoptions or births.

Adopted children frequently remember best the so-called little losses, like the smell of the sheets or the way Grandma smiled. Because loss is always a part of adopted children's lives, it is crucial to support their expression of these losses in order to begin the healing process. For young children, non-verbal expression through art, music, puppets, or play may be most effective. Older children and adults benefit from being encouraged to write down all the losses—from the big ones to those little ones. Making the losses concrete allows for the grief work to begin.

An ounce of prevention, as the saying goes, is worth a pound of cure. Whenever possible, families must work to minimize loss for their children by keeping their connections to important people, places, and events. Parents must be assertive in acquiring information about their children's lives before they came

into this family. Pictures, videotapes, shreds of old clothes and blankets, things easily overlooked, can provide a link.

REJECTION

The second core issue with which adopted persons must wrestle is rejection. Feelings of loss are heightened by keen feelings of rejection. One way individuals, adopted or not, may seek to cope with a loss is to personalize it. This is the why me? question. Adopted persons attempt to decipher what they did or did not do that led to the losses. Young children, due to egocentric thinking (I did it!), take responsibility for the things that happen to them, including the negatives like abandonment, abuse, or neglect. Adopted persons, then, may become sensitive to the slightest hint of rejection, disapproval, or dismissal causing them either to avoid situations where they might be rejected or even to provoke rejection in order to prove their own negative self-perceptions.

Adopted persons are seldom able to view their placement into adoption as anything other than total rejection. Why did she leave me? is a frequent question, verbalized or kept deep in their psyches. Adopted persons view the placement by the birth family as a personal rejection regardless of the circumstances of the placement. Stories of the birth family relinquishing a child to adoption out of love, often fall on deaf ears. On the other hand, they separate those events from how they feel about their adoptive family. Loving an adoptive family does not take away the pain of those feelings of rejection. Adopted children, even at young ages, grasp the concept that to be chosen into an adoptive family, as the story is often told, means first that one had to be unchosen.

Adopted persons who come from other countries, for example, often ask why a whole country let them go. Wasn't there anybody in the whole place who wanted me? is a basic wondering. Children adopted in the United States wonder why other birth family members didn't come forward to take care of them. Adopted children witness poor families, single parents, young parents, and even ill parents keeping and raising their children. Their conclusion often, then, is that it is something personally about them which caused the adoptive placement. The language of adoption reinforces notions of rejection, such as an unplanned pregnancy, a mistake, or a special needs child, as do the explanations well-meaning adults give adoptees about why they were placed for adoption. They feel that they were unlovable, unwanted, unworthy, or defective. They wonder if they were better, taller, blonder, less demanding, cuter, etc., would they have been kept? The sealing of records, even for adult adopted persons, further perpetuates the feeling of not being worthy, not ever being entitled to receive ones fundamental information. Even if the adoption is open and the child has access to the birth family, he or she can have the same kind of questions as birth parents go on to have other children—why can they raise that child and not me?

One way to help adopted children deal with feelings of rejection is to help them sort out the facts about their adoption from their feelings about adoption. Children need support and validation when they express feelings of rejection. For example, when adopted children wonder aloud about not being allowed to stay in the birth family, adoptive parents can say, I can understand why you might feel that way, instead of yielding to the urge to deny those feelings with the happy adoption story. Parents need to be open and honest in giving age-appropriate information and to avoid taking children's comments

or questions personally as if the child were rejecting them. This stance gives parents an ability to better support the child's emotional work.

Feelings or fears of rejection can chip away at a person's self-esteem. Good self-esteem is built on having (1) positive role models; (2) a sense of belonging (being in the right place); (3) an awareness of one's unique role in a family, in a community, in the world; and (4) a sense of power and control in one's life. Positive role models could come from the child's birth family or from adult adopted persons who have already successfully met the challenges of adoption as well as from the adoptive family. A true sense of belonging comes from the adoptive family claiming the child and feeling entitled to parent without dismissing or being in competition with the birth family. Families can help children develop their sense of uniqueness by recognizing, exploring, and encouraging the child's abilities, looks, and special talents, even if they differ greatly from those of the adoptive family. Children feel powerful when they are given real, age-appropriate choices, from what they eat to what they wear to who their friends are. Good self-esteem supports the child's progress through the seven lifelong issues.

Many adopted persons, even those adopted as young children, struggle with attachment difficulties. An awareness of loss and rejection may reinforce an adopted persons wariness of close, intimate relationships. Children who are suffering from various attachment difficulties, due to these previous unresolved losses, experiences, or feelings of rejection often create further rejection in their adoptive placements. They tend to feel or believe that they will feel safer if they create a distance in their connections to others. Many of their so-called acting out behaviors are aimed at keeping distance. Other adopted children are actually struggling to overcome these tendencies, but the behaviors, which once worked in their dysfunctional birth families, are not appropriate in their new families. These, then, are maladaptive attachment behaviors. Parental commitment, different from attachment or even love, before the attachment becomes secure, is what holds these adoptions together.

GUILT AND SHAME

For adopted persons, a sense of deserving loss and rejection may lead them to experience accompanying feelings of guilt and shame. They may believe that there is something intrinsically wrong with them or their actions that caused the losses to occur. Guilt, the feeling of having committed an offense or of being responsible for some offense, refers to actions or behaviors, whereas shame is a painful emotion resulting from an awareness of personal inadequacy, deficiency, or deficit. Adopted persons feel guilty for what they did (or didn't do) that caused the adoption. For example, children placed as infants might feel that they kicked too much in utero or cried too much in the nursery. Children adopted at an older age feel that it was their behaviors or misbehaviors that caused the previous disruptions and familial loss. They report knowing that they caused the beatings or the sexual abuse. It is often very difficult to dissuade them from these beliefs, in part because of their egocentric thinking and, in part, because of the message they may have been given by abusive or drug-involved birth parents. In addition, because of the way adoption is often presented to children, especially those who come from the foster care system, they may feel ashamed of their origins. They come to sense that their parents are bad and, therefore, so are they. They are embarrassed by their adoptive status, often concealing it from peers.

Adoptive families need to be sensitive to their children's feelings of guilt and shame. Children need to understand that adults are responsible for what happens, not children. Adults also need to correct messages and misperceptions that children have about having caused bad things to happen. Sometimes children believe they have caused events purely by wishing or imagining them. These impressions, too, need to be corrected. Adoptive families must find information or individuals that can portray the birth family as real people—a mixture of good and bad. Children need a full picture of their family of origin, so that they can identify with more positives than negatives. This is where extended birth family members can prove to be an invaluable resource.

GRIEF

Every loss must be grieved. Adoption-related losses are no different. The losses in adoption, however, are sometimes difficult to mourn in a society where adoption is seen as a problem-solving event filled with joy. There are few rites to mark the loss of care-taking parents, lost dreams, or unknown family members. Grief washes over adopted persons in stages or waves, particularly at times of other loss or developmental transitions. It is important that adopted persons understand and can accurately label the feelings of loss. These feelings may include numbness, sadness, anger, depression, emptiness, or anxiety. Children frequently do not understand that feelings always change. They fear that they will always feel sad or mad, rather than grasping the notion of grief work. Adoptees in their youth find it difficult to grieve their losses although they are, in many instances, aware of them, even as very young children.

Newborns can and do grieve. Children, however, often look very different from adults when they grieve, so adults may miss the cues. Children may not visibly demonstrate their feelings, may numb out, may have physical symptoms such as stomach aches, headaches, or frequent colds, may regress, may appear disorganized, fearful, or hyperactive, may have explosive or acting out behaviors or may isolate and withdraw. Youngsters removed from abusive homes may be expected to feel only relief and gratitude, not grief. Children arriving from other countries may be expected to be excited and happy, not suffering from culture shock and grief. Children who are living in a survival mode cannot take the time or energy to work through these losses.

Grief can be at times a luxury. Adults frequently block children's expressions of pain or attempt to divert them. Sometimes, adults misinterpret an apparent lack of reaction as a lack of true feelings about the loss. In addition, due to the developmental unfolding of cognitive processes, adopted children do not fully appreciate the total impact of their losses until they become old enough to understand what really happened to them. This could take into mid-adolescence or even adulthood. This delayed grief drains resources from the child and may be lead to uneven learning, depression, acting out through substance abuse or aggressive behaviors.

Adoptive parents help their children best when they allow them to express the grief openly, listen carefully, and offer comfort and hope. Parents need to create a safe environment for the child to express the whole range of feelings. Parents must use simple, clear language to explain to the child what has happened to him or her, avoid rushing the grief process, and anticipate that the grief will surface and

re-surface as the child grows, especially at times of other loss or at anniversaries of other losses. Parents must address the past, define what is happening in the present, and give realistic hope for the future.

IDENTITY

Adoption may also threaten an adopted person's sense of identity. Identity is defined both by what one is and by what one is not. Adoptees, born in one family, lose an identity and then borrow one from the adopting family. Adopted children frequently wonder who they really are and where they belong. Are they more like their birth family or more like the adoptive family? What have they inherited and what have they acquired? Are they a bad seed, destined to become just like their birth parents?

Adoption, for some adopted persons, complicates the development of a complete or integrated sense of self. Adopted persons may experience themselves as incomplete, deficient, or unfinished. Sometimes, they state that they lack feelings of well-being, integration, or solidness associated with a fully developed identity. Adopted persons lacking medical, genetic, religious, and historical information may be plagued by questions such as why they were born; were they, in fact merely a mistake, not meant to have been born, an accident? For male adoptees, the problem associated with the development of a full identity may be compounded by the lack of attention and information about birth fathers. A lack of identity may lead adoptees, particularly in the adolescent years, to seek out ways to create a feeling of belonging. Sometimes, they devise extreme measures, joining radical sub-cultures, running away, becoming pregnant, or totally rejecting the adoptive family.

The task for adoptive parents, then, is to support their children's developing a sense of where they come from and who they are. Here again accurate, positive information about birth family history which provides role models and options for the child is crucial. Children need to understand the role of inheritance in the formation of the self as well as the role of nurturing and learning. An awareness of choice is a key ingredient. Adopted children may need additional support and acceptance to explore possibilities in their make-up which may fall outside those of the adoptive parents. For example, a tone-deaf child in a musical adoptive family might have skills as a basketball player that should be encouraged.

INTIMACY AND RELATIONSHIPS

The multiple, ongoing losses in adoption, coupled with feelings of rejection, shame, and grief as well as confusion around identity, may well affect the development of, or quality of, interpersonal relationships or intimacy for adopted persons. Adopted persons have reported that they are aware of holding back part of themselves in relationships, always cautious and watchful. Some state that they have never truly felt close to anyone. Others report a lifetime of feelings of emptiness, which they relate to a longing for the birth mother they may have never seen.

For some adopted children, the placement and subsequent losses may have disrupted early bonding and attachment. In addition the associated anxiety may have interfered with relationships in the adoptive family as well. Children coming from orphanages and institutions where they have had multiple caretakers and no clear attachment figure, for example, may have great difficulty relaxing into their

family. They may remain continually anxious and clingy or ambivalent and avoidant. Adoptees' intimacy issues are particularly evident in relationships with the opposite sex and may revolve around questions about conception, biological and genetic concerns, and sexuality. Adoptees, as adults, may find themselves staying in unhealthy relationships or may avoid intimate relationships altogether in order to avoid potential loss.

Adoptive parents find themselves challenged to move past their children's barriers and to create close, secure attachments and relationships with them. These processes may take years and may have to be re-worked again and again as children grow, change, and struggle to incorporate the adoption experience into who they are and who they will become.

CONTROL ISSUES

Finally, adopted persons must come to terms with issues of mastery and control and own the gains they have made through adoption. Adoption alters the course of an adopted person's life. This shift presents additional hurdles in development and may impede emotional growth, feelings of responsibility, and a sense of self-control. Adopted persons are keenly aware that they were not party to the actions and decisions that led up to the adoption. For many, adoption would have been their second choice. They had no control over the loss of their birth family or even in the choice of the adoptive family. The adoption plan proceeded with adults making life-altering choices for them. This unnatural change of course may impinge on the development of their feelings of mastery, accomplishment, achievement, fulfillment, competence, or completion. Adoptees may also lack internalized self-control, leading to a lowered sense of self-responsibility. Adopted persons, then, may view themselves as the victim in the adoption process and may seek to perpetuate that unfortunate role.

Adoptive parents must give children age-appropriate choices and responsibilities throughout their development, avoiding power struggles and control battles. It is also important to acknowledge children's feelings about their lack of control while helping them to take appropriate control over their lives today. Adopted children often need extra attention paid to skill building and problem-solving to re-gain a sense of control in their lives.

Rituals and ceremonies are ways to help children work through the seven core issues. Rituals can be as simple as lighting a candle to mark an anniversary or more complicated as planning an elaborate ceremony to facilitate the letting go of painful memories.

There are many gains to be won as adopted persons work their way through these issues. People who have faced and struggled with difficult issues seem to develop inner resources and become deeper human beings. Adoptees can gain a broader perspective and different outlooks on life. They can also come to know that they can and will survive and even grow from the loss experience.

The experience of adoption, then, for adopted persons can be one of loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, diminished identity, thwarted intimacy, and threats to self-control and to the accomplishment of mastery. These seven core issues permeate the lives of adoptees regardless of the circumstances of the

adoption. Adoptees may repeatedly do and undo their adoption experiences in both their unconscious minds and in their daily lives. Identifying these basic issues can assist them in doing the necessary work in order to move into the promise and joy of adoption.

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For an updated version, please see *Seven Core Issues of Adoption and Permanency* by Sharon Roszia and Allison Maxon with a forward by Deborah Silverstein, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers, released in July 2019, and available on Amazon.