

# Therapist's Role in Working to Support Positive Identity Formation

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Therapist's Role in Working with the Child or Youth to Support Positive Identity Formation.

### 1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

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

- Identify and integrate clinical practices to assist youth in exploring dimensions of their identity and integrating their life story
- Integrate into your clinical practice strategies to help youth manage difficult or intrusive questions or comments about their adoption story

## 2. The Search for Self

### 2.1 The Search for Self

Imagine what it would be like to look in the mirror and have no idea where you come from, who you resemble, or who you are.

This is the experience and challenge for many adopted children, especially those adopted at infancy or a young age with no memory of their first family.

### 2.2 Being Adopted

In the book, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, David Brodzinsky sums up the dilemma for the adopted person very clearly.

*The search for self is universal and ongoing. For adoptees and non-adoptees alike, an understanding of the self is one of the primary tasks of psychological development.*

*As many authorities in the adoption field have noted, adoptees have a particularly complex task in their search for self. When you live with your biological family, you have guideposts to help you along. You can see bits of your own future reflected in your parents, pieces of your own personality echoed in your brothers and sisters.*

*There are few such clues for someone who is adopted. Adoptees often talk about certain "cutoffs" in their history, from their birth parents, their extended birth family, their awareness of their genetic inheritance.*

*Image obtained from: <http://adopteereading.com/being-adopted-the-lifelong-search-for-self>.*

### **2.3 Keith Video**

Listen to Keith talk about the importance of open conversations in helping youth think about aspects of their identity.

*[Video Transcript]*

*KEITH: I think sometimes for the parents, I think it's best to kind of also force the issue of adoption a little bit. And I don't mean that like, "Let's have a serious conversation and talk about adopt." That can happen. But I mean, it should just be part of daily life, like a very natural thing. And I hear a lot of parents that say like, "Well, we don't have a lot of information about biological family," or, "We don't have a lot of positive information about that."*

*Even without any information, every once in a while you might, "You know what? You are such a good artist. You draw so well," to your child. "I wonder if you got that from your biological mom or your biological father? Because I'm not good at art at all." Like those types of comments where it's something positive about the child, which we all agree have many positive traits, like for that just to be open and to acknowledge.*

*Because I think a lot of kids who are adopted grow up and if they don't have a lot of information they don't really have anything positive about it. And the only time parents or anybody wants to talk about it is in a negative way and then they shy away from the whole subject of adoption and don't want anything to do with any of it, which doesn't put--it's just bad for everyone.*

*So it doesn't have to be a big deal, "Let's have that conversation," I just think it just needs to be worked in as often as possible. Just acknowledge that, "I don't know where you go that from," but let's give some credit where credit is due because our biological identity is very important to all of us, whether we're adopted or not. It's a big part of who we are.*

*[END OF VIDEO]*

### **2.4 Behaviors and Customs**

Similarly, conversations about what behaviors are part of a community's customs or rituals and what are personal can also be useful. For example, shaking hands and how we do it is a custom in many communities.

Children adopted after early childhood will have developed many behaviors that are customs, as these are some of the earliest learned unconscious behaviors.

The question, “Would I be different if I had stayed with my birth parents?” is a very common question. It makes sense that youth would consider what they might be like if they lived a different kind of life with different people.

The greater the community or economic differences between the birth family and the adoptive family, the more active this exploration may be.

While there is no definitive answer, this is a conversation that you, as the clinician, can pursue with the youth, giving them permission to explore what that life might have been like.

## **2.5 Exploring**

If there is contact with birth family, or if the youth is living with relatives, they may have a more realistic idea of what life might have been like.

Nevertheless, your willingness to explore this with them can be very helpful, since they may be reluctant to talk about this with their adoptive or guardianship parents initially.

Acknowledging and validating the importance and normality of these identity questions gives adoptees permission and support in their search for self.

## **2.6 Mitigating Barriers to Creating an Integrated Story**

We have already talked about openness and connectedness to birth family members as an important factor in gathering information for an integrated story and identity formation.

Click each tab to learn about a study on the mediating role of family conversation.

1. In their study, *Contact in Adoption and Adoptive Identity Formation: The Mediating Role of Family Conversation*, von Korff and Grotevant concluded that contact with birth relatives is associated with more frequent adoption-related family conversation, which in turn is associated with the development of positive adoptive identity.
2. Citing other research with similar conclusions, these results highlight the importance of supporting activities. Contact with birth family members encourages conversation in the adoptive family that allows the youth to identify with both the birth and adoptive family, distinguish what they have gained from both, and form their identity with that knowledge.
3. In addition, connection with birth family and previous caregivers gives the youth a sense of continuity about their life, an understanding of how they got to where they are, and an appreciation for the important milestones and people along the way. They are more likely to feel connected and have a sense of roots that might be missing without that connection.

## **3. Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation**

### ***3.1 Conversation Orientation and Conformity Orientation***

In discussing the adoptive family communication process, Martha Rueter and Ascan Koerner (2008) make an important distinction between two different patterns of family interaction: conversation and conformity orientation.

### ***3.2 Conversation Orientation VS. Conformity Orientation***

Click on either conversation orientation or conformity orientation to learn about each.

**Conversation Orientation:** Conversation orientation is characterized by frequent and mutually supportive family interactions that encourage all members to participate in exploring the meaning of adoption in their lives, with the recognition and acceptance that each person is likely to have their own unique ideas and feelings about adoption.

**Conformity Orientation:** In contrast, conformity orientation approach to family interactions focuses on maintaining harmonious relationships, with parental authority dictating the ultimate meaning and importance of adoption as a factor informing identity and family relationships. Topics which cause anxiety are avoided.

### ***3.3 Supporting Openness***

This distinction highlights the importance of recognizing that talking with children and youth about adoption is not inherently the same as supporting adoption communicative openness, as we have discussed in several previous modules.

Clinicians should encourage parents to engage their children in a true conversation about adoption in which children and youth are supported in exploring their own unique perspectives and feelings about the adoption experience and are not pressured to conform to the views of their parents.

Only then will children and youth be able to integrate their adoption narrative into a healthy and coherent sense of self.

## **4. Supporting Identity Formation**

### ***4.1 Supporting Identity Formation***

Now, let's talk about supporting identity formation. As the clinician, you can use a variety of tools to help children and youth integrate all the information they have into a positive and cohesive sense of self.

## 4.2 Identity Activities

One way to support identity formation is to talk with children and youth about any items, photos, documents, and mementos that are important to them. These may be items that were also included in loss boxes, memory boxes, or lifebooks.

If they do not have any of these items, work with youth to create them, and include actual items, or symbols they wish to include.

As we mentioned in the previous lesson, finding photos of important places, such as schools they attended, can help to encourage memories and fill in missing information about their story.

## 4.3 Examples of Identity Activities

In addition to activities discussed earlier, including lifebooks, storyboarding, digital stories, and group work, there are a number of creative ways to support a child's exploration of their identity. Click on each tab to learn more.

1. **Photography:** Give children and youth the assignment to take photos of things that represent who they are, and photograph their world, creating a photo album that is all about them. They can do this on their phone or with a camera. They can do this over many therapy sessions and they can share with you and their parents about how this view of the world around them represents who they are or who they wish to be. Over time their view might change and this can help them reflect on their emerging identity.
2. **Music and Poetry:** Creating a rap, or writing a song or poem, using the youth's interest in music or poetry can be another way of helping them express their identity. Here is a poem written by a 16-year-old in response to an assignment from her therapist to express how it feels to her to be adopted. She speaks to the ambivalence surrounding her adoption and questions what life would have been like if she had been raised by her birth mother.

*How I Feel About Being Adopted*

*I really do not know how I feel*

*I know I am confused at times*

*Sometimes it hurts when I think of how*

*Things could have been for me*

*Maybe things would have been different if my birth mother  
did not give me up*

*At times I imagine that if I were with her  
things would be better for me*

*Right now I don't enjoy being adopted*

*Why, I do not know*

*I am basically very confused and don't know who I am*

*Everyone has a goal in life and mine is to find my mother  
and confront her*

*[From Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens pg. 91]*

3. Collages: Have children and teens cut out words and pictures that represent themselves and create a collage with a theme. The theme could be “How I see myself” or “How I want others to see me.” Or it could simply be a collage about their family, interests, or talents.
4. Making Masks: Using a paper mache mask, have the child or youth draw their “inside self” on the inside of the mask, and their “outside self” on the outside of the mask. Talk to them about the difference between their inside and outside selves, what they keep private and what they show to the world, and how their inside and outside selves are part of their identity.
5. Journaling: Journaling gives the youth the opportunity to write their thoughts on a regular basis and to reflect back over time to see how their thinking has changed. They can journal about specific topics or just in general record their thought for the day. Using an inexpensive journal, and decorating it to make it their own, can set the stage for personal reflection. Here are some journals that youth have decorated, just to give you an idea.

## 5. Intrusive Questions

### 5.1 Intrusive Questions

An additional challenge to identity formation for youth who are adopted or in guardianship is the complication of trying to figure out who they are while being asked intrusive questions about the circumstances of their placement.

### 5.2 Intrusive Encounters

Over the years, children and teens have shared how difficult and uncomfortable this can make them feel.

They report feeling caught off guard as they frequently do not know what to say, and/or have not yet even thought about what is being asked.

They often later regret what they did say, and are left with a mixture of emotions: confusion, anger, embarrassment, shame, sadness, or frustration.

These kinds of encounters can be harmful to a child’s self-esteem and self-image, and even their identity.

Often, they do not have answers to these questions, or they have not yet, on a personal level, even considered these questions, and finally, they may not want to share personal information.

Whatever the result is they also lack preparation to answer the questions.

### **5.3 Examples of Intrusive Questions**

These questions or comments are just samples of the ones children and teens have shared with therapists across the country.

- *How come your family couldn't keep you?*
- *Do you know your real parents?*
- *How come you live with your grandmother?*
- *Did your parents do drugs?*
- *Why don't you look like anyone in your family?*
- *Where is your real family? Don't you want to see them?*
- *Why are you a different color from your family?*
- *Does your real family live in a teepee?*
- *If you and your sister or brother live with different families, then you're not really sisters or brothers, right?*

### **5.4 Camp Clio Video**

Such questions are hurtful and, at times, verge on bullying.

Sometimes these questions come from within the family, and even siblings in the heat of an argument might use the sibling's adoption status against them, saying something like, "I'm the real child in the family, and you're adopted." Imagine how hurtful that would be.

Listen to some kids talk about their experiences with questions.

*Video Transcript:*

*MALE-1: I was born in South Korea in a city called Daegu.*

*MALE-2: I was born in Cambodia.*

*MALE-3: During kindergarten, one of my friends asked me, "Why didn't your parents want you?"*

*PARENT: It starts at a very young age. I know Clio got it. She got it from her best friend. She was seven years old. And her best friend--I heard them at a play date. Her best friend said, "That's not your real mom. Where's your real mom?"*

*FEMALE-2: Sometimes when someone asks you a question like, "Why did your mother not keep you," you can just say, "Because she wanted me to be happy and not die of starvation."*

*MALE-2: Like some people don't have the best situations before, but now they're with new parents and they're living a wonderful life.*

*[END OF AUDIO]*

## 6. Empowerment

### 6.1 Empowerment

As a clinician, you can help children and youth practice answers to questions by role playing, giving them choices about how to respond, and building their self-confidence.

### 6.2 W.I.S.E. Up

One widely used program for accomplishing this is called W.I.S.E. Up, developed by the Center for Adoption Support and Education, which gives the child permission to respond to questions by:

- Walking away
- Saying, "It's private"
- Sharing something, or
- Educating others by giving a fact in answer

Giving a child the permission to respond to these situations with choices is empowering and can save them from feeling pressured to share more information than they want to share.

### 6.3 Naomi Example

Here is an example of an opportunity to use this method to practice responding to intrusive questions. The therapist is working with Naomi, age 16, who is in an interracial adopted family.

[Video Transcript]

*THERAPIST: Naomi, you seem very quiet today. Is there something bothering you that you want to talk about?*

*NAOMI: Somebody at school asked me why I don't look like my parents and my brother, and who my real parents are.*

*THERAPIST: Did you say anything?*

*NAOMI: I didn't know what to say. I thought she was being rude. I wanted to say something really rude back to her. Or punch her.*

*THERAPIST: So what did you do?*

*NAOMI: I stood there frozen, embarrassed, and hurt. I wanted to disappear.*

*THERAPIST: That must have felt terrible. Have you had other questions like that asked of you?*

*NAOMI: Sometimes. Kids don't understand and they ask really rude questions and I don't know what to say.*

*THERAPIST: Maybe we could practice some ways that you could respond when kids say things that make you uncomfortable. I would like to teach you a tool called W.I.S.E. UP, which will help you decide how you want to respond.*

*We could make a list of questions that people might ask, and practice what to say. Would that be helpful?*

*NAOMI: Yeah, I think it would help me to be prepared.*

*THERAPIST: Great, let's look at the list. While we do that, let's talk about some reasons why people ask such questions. We can help you prepare for different situations.*

[End of Video]

## **6.4 Practice Responding**

As the clinician, you can use the list of questions we talked about earlier, along with others you and the youth can think of, and practice responding so that the youth feels confident and able to take control of the situation. Additionally, the youth can practice responding using the 4 W.I.S.E. Up principles:

W: Walk away

I: It's private

S: Share something, and

E: Educate others

The last comment by the therapist engages Naomi's critical thinking, allowing her to engage in executive processing, and balancing her negative emotional memory.

Children and youth need permission to exercise the choices they have when others ask intrusive questions they do not want to answer.

## **7. Conclusion**

### **7.1 Wrapping Up**

In this lesson, we talked about how the mental health professional can use therapeutic tools to assist youth in providing a foundation for an integrated story and sense of self, thus supporting positive identity formation. Additionally, we discussed empowering youth to deal with intrusive questions about their story.

### **7.2 Learning Journal**

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

### ***7.3 Journal Reflection***

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

### ***7.4 Journal Response***

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

### ***7.5 Conclusion***

Congratulations! You have completed Therapist's Role in Working to Support Positive Identity Formation.

As a clinician, you are well-positioned to open conversations and use the tools we have talked about to help youth integrate and navigate their identity journey.

In the next lesson, we will address the mental health professional's role in working with adoptive and guardianship parents in order to foster positive identity in their children.