

# How children understand adoption over time

## Introduction

This guide sets out some of the common ways in which children and young people's understanding of the meaning of adoption develops over time and how you can help as parents. It also highlights what a move to a new family might mean at each age stage. It is based on research by Elsbeth Neil, Mary Beek and Julie Young at the University of East Anglia and on the work of Brodzinsky and Fahlberg (see references at the end of the guide).

Practitioners are encouraged to share the guide with the adoptive families that they work with.

## How children understand their history and meaning of adoption

The way adopted children and young people understand their history and the meaning of adoption is central to their developing identity, although each child is different and their interest in this may vary over time. But we do know that adopted children do best when the adults around them recognise and accept that they have thoughts, feelings and questions about their birth families and are able to talk about this. For most adopted children, birth families live in their hearts and minds even if they never talk about them or see them or have no conscious memories of them at all.

Adoption brings many benefits for children, but it always involves the loss of their first family. This is still significant, even if that family hurt them. This is a 'disenfranchised loss', without grieving rituals or customs. Adopted children may even be told they are 'lucky.' Grieving is a normal response and supporting children with feelings of sadness, anger, confusion and worry helps to build a strong bond. Loss is at the heart of adoption but so is loving acceptance of the child and their history as well as recognition that all kinds of families are 'real families.'

## Talking about adoption

Explaining what adoption is and why it happened can be a challenge. You may worry about saying the wrong thing or choosing the wrong time and upsetting your son or daughter. Your own feelings about the harm caused by birth parents may make some things difficult to talk about. Some people decide to wait until their child asks a question, but children often hold back for fear of upsetting adults, and this can lead to a conspiracy of silence. When young people feel that they can't talk to their parents about their family of origin, they may resort to searching online, perhaps even meeting up in secret with people who are a potential risk. The best online protection is knowing that it's OK to talk about birth families.

The sooner these conversations begin the better so that children can't remember not knowing they were adopted, even if they did not fully understand what that meant. Starting early gives children time to absorb difficult information before puberty arrives or they end up finding out for themselves online. If young people learn later that key parts of their own history have been concealed or distorted, they can feel betrayed and wonder what else they don't know. But when adopters can talk openly, it shows the child that they are accepted and loved for who they are, with all their history. If adults don't talk about what has happened, children can feel that it is too terrible to speak of and imagine something even worse – or feel responsible for holding on to family secrets.

If difficult facts are softened too much – for example, describing domestic violence as ‘lots of arguments’ – this can make children worry that they may have to move again if their parents have a row. Thinking about the harm your child suffered can be painful but it’s important to be honest about what happened without condemning birth parents as this can make the child feel as if they are a bad person too.

Birth parents’ hopes and dreams for themselves and their child, the care they wanted to give, the support they did or didn’t have and what went well are as much part of the story as what went wrong. A birth father who scared his child because he found it really hard to stop hitting people, might also have made lovely spaghetti bolognaise, scored lots of goals for the school team and had hopes of his daughter playing for England one day.

Children don’t need to learn everything all at once – it’s OK to say that you will tell them more as they get older. If your son or daughter is not ready to hear part of their story or if today is just not the right day, their response will soon tell you. You can return to the subject another time – talking about adoption is a lifelong process, not a one-off event. How adults tell the story matters, but listening is important too, ensuring you respond to what the child wants to know now and their current thoughts and feelings about being adopted. Explanations need to build over time in line with your child’s unique emotional and cognitive development.

Table 1 describes these age stages in relation to children’s understanding of adoption.

<b>Infants</b>	<p>Newborn babies accept safe loving care from those around them regardless of what kind of family they are in, although those who were exposed to drug use in the womb may be harder to settle. Babies perceive the world primarily through their senses – sounds, smells, touch, taste. They do not have any words to think about adoption or communicate feelings, which are all consuming. They do not know that a parent still exists when they are not there and babies who have experienced multiple carers need extra reassurance. Responsive care which names and attends to emotions lays the foundations for future conversations about adoption feelings.</p> <p><i>A move between the ages of six and 12 months (‘the clingy phase’ when children can experience separation anxiety) can cause distress – a gradual move with plenty of overlap between carers can help, as can consistency of routine, milk, familiar washing powder etc.</i></p>
<b>Pre-school</b>	<p>For pre-school children, a family means the people who live with you, love you and look after you, regardless of biological or legal connection. They are learning who they are, for example, a girl, who is three, has red wellies and is good at jumping. They are also beginning to notice differences such as skin colour or whether their family has a Dad and a Mum like the one in stories. Children this age are able to say they are ‘adopted’ or have a ‘birth Daddy’ if these words have been used at home, but that does not mean they really understand this. They are also very literal, for example, a ‘new family’ might come from the shop. They need to ask lots of questions – often the same question repeatedly, especially ‘why?’.</p> <p>Parents can help by talking about how there are lots of different kinds of families, but that everyone has a birth Mum and Dad who made them. Seeing a pregnant friend or neighbour can help a child understand that babies grow ‘in Mummies’ tummies’. Reading adoption stories is another good way to open up these conversations. Looking at photo albums and simple life story books together can also help. Children adopted transracially need images and stories that reflect their experience as well as support with racism and contact with people who ‘look like me’.</p>

## Pre-school

*Pre-school children are egocentric, seeing themselves as the centre of the world. They are magical thinkers, believing their thoughts and feelings affect the outside world. Those who move to adoption at this stage may blame themselves because they think they were naughty or had bad thoughts (like being angry with their sister, crying too much or wetting the bed). They may grieve deeply for birth relatives or foster carers with whom they have formed an attachment. Accepting the child's feelings of loss helps to build a strong bond – children can have multiple attachments. It is much more worrying when children move without obvious distress.*

## Middle childhood - the primary school years

As children's general understanding grows during this period, their understanding of adoption also increases, bringing new thoughts, questions and feelings. Some don't think much about being adopted, whilst others are more interested but accept their situation as normal, feeling positive about both families. For some, particularly those placed at an older age, adoption is more complicated, raising lots of mixed feelings. Thinking or talking about adoption might feel sad and difficult. Feelings of sadness, worry and confusion are common; some children try to avoid thinking about being adopted whilst others become preoccupied with this issue. They start to realise that not everyone is adopted, and this makes them different. For some, this is uncomfortable, and they may not like other people knowing. Children become more aware of how others see adoption and may face intrusive questions about their 'real' family, especially at school. Parents can help with working out how to answer these.

During middle childhood, children begin to make sense of the difference between their birth and adopted families, why they needed to be adopted, why their parents adopted them as well as what it means to be an adopted person. Parents can help by starting conversations and finding out what questions the child would like to ask. Talking about feelings and encouraging the appropriate expression of emotions give children the tools they need to talk about complicated adoption-related feelings.

At this age, children still don't fully understand the legal basis of adoption and may worry that they might have to return to their birth family or feel as if they have been kidnapped. For Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised children growing up in white families, there are additional complexities in terms of understanding difference and dealing with racism; opportunities for socialising with other Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised children and adults remain important.

It is hard for children to understand the complex reasons why they needed to be adopted. They tend to interpret the idea that birth parents 'couldn't look after you' in quite black and white terms, for example, not having enough money or anywhere to live. Some children may feel they were given away (regardless of their actual history) and have a sense of rejection. Children may begin to think more about biological connection and sometimes yearn to have been born into their adoptive family. For children placed as babies, a sense of adoption grief can emerge during this period as they understand that being part of this family meant separation from their first family, whom they are increasingly able to imagine.

### Middle childhood - the primary school years

During middle childhood, improved problem solving allows children to wonder about new questions: 'If my birth Mum was poorly why didn't she go to the doctor? Why couldn't my Dad look after me?' They might need more specific information – birth Mum was poorly because she took drugs or had mental health difficulties – and help to understand that taking drugs or mental health difficulties make your thoughts and feelings all muddled up so it's hard to think about your children. Everyone gets a bit sad sometimes, but birth Mum was in such a muddle that she couldn't get out of bed or cook the tea and your birth Dad did not come and help or check if you were OK. Children also become more logical: 'If I had to move because my birth Mum was poorly, does that mean she is going to die? What happens if my adopted Dad gets poorly too?' They might need help to understand that this was 'big poorly' not 'little poorly,' so the doctor could not make her better.

### Adolescence

Teenagers develop the capacity for abstract thinking and often practise their thinking skills by questioning everything their parents tell them. They are better able to understand the legal basis of adoption and may develop more empathy about their birth parents' situations. Adolescents also begin to develop an understanding of adoption as a system designed to provide security for children but also a family that might be regarded as 'second best' by some. Young people may feel acutely aware of how adoption makes them different from friends and others and face new, more intrusive questions from their peers. Parents can help them work out how to answer these and how much information to share on social media.

Teenagers become more able to think about how life might have been different if they had not been adopted, wonder if they might have had a better life with birth parents or if their circumstances have now improved. They are working out their identities and this is more complicated with two families. Some may feel torn loyalties or worry they might have inherited negative qualities such as violence. Young people tend to think a lot about sex and relationships during this period but often feel self-conscious about talking to parents. They may have awkward and embarrassing questions that they want to ask about how they were conceived, such as why their birth father is 'unknown'.

For some but not all, this is a period of intense curiosity and emotional pre-occupation with families of origin. Others wish to focus more on different aspects of their lives and identities. Whilst some teenagers want to renew or increase contact with birth family, others want to put this on hold for a while. Adolescents are working out how to become independent adults, separate from their families. This can result in them seeking information or making contact with birth relatives without involving parents, especially if they do not feel comfortable talking about adoption at home. Openness is the most important protection.

## Adolescence

*Parents can help by accepting these feelings and supporting young people to make contact with relatives in a safe and supported way or helping them sort things out if they have done this alone. Starting new conversations about how young people feel now about arrangements for keeping in touch and any changes they might like can also help. Parents may also need to share more detailed information about family history, including letters for later life if available. Therapeutic life story work or other trauma-informed interventions may be needed for some young people.*

## Adulthood

Views about adoption may change in the transition to adulthood, as understanding deepens and new feelings of anger and sadness emerge. Most adopted people come to feel largely positive about their adoption, balancing the losses and gains. Others never think about being adopted much; it just feels normal. A minority remain angry or pre-occupied or regard adoption as largely negative, an additional source of trauma.

Parents can support adopted adults by recognising that understanding adoption is a lifelong task, accepting mixed feelings, talking openly and being willing to help with making birth family connections. Adopted adults continue to need parental support, particularly when relationships have come under strain in adolescence. Close connection and understanding of behaviour as connected to loss and harm is key in difficult times.

*Understanding adoption is a lifelong task – some individuals only feel able to trace birth families after their adopters' death. For others, a personal event or crisis such as illness or becoming a parent triggers a desire to know more. Accessing adoption records or searching for birth relatives and negotiating these relationships brings many practical and emotional challenges. Support from parents can be invaluable, even though this may raise painful feelings for them.*

## Parenthood

Becoming a parent is treasured by many adopted people. For some, it leads to a new interest in finding birth relatives, whilst others distance themselves to protect their child. Old feelings of loss can re-emerge for new parents (and their adopters), as well as questions about genetic heritage. Having a child of their own can make it harder to understand how a birth parent gave them up or increase their empathy for this loss.

Being a good parent is often of huge importance to adopted people. Some worry about repeating a negative cycle by harming or abandoning their child. Others fear the baby will reject them or they will struggle to bond. Some do have to work harder to become close to their child whilst others find themselves over-protective. Adopted parents can feel anxious that professionals will judge them. In reality, parents who have experienced abuse and neglect may have some vulnerabilities but most people who were abused do not abuse their own children. Adopted parents need adoption-sensitive and trauma-informed parenting support.

## Parenthood

A small proportion of adopted parents suffer continuing psychological distress after starting a family, rooted in earlier experiences of rejection, loss and trauma. They may regard adoption as negative or even traumatic and have limited relationships with their adoptive family. For the minority of adopted parents who experience child removal, their worst fears come true. This situation can be particularly challenging for adopters, who must balance supporting their adult children with protecting their grandchildren, sometimes taking on their care.

*For many adoptees, becoming a parent can be a positive and rewarding choice, and a powerful motivation for change. When adopters reach out to support their adult children and grandchildren, this can lead to new closeness.*

## References

UEA. *Contact after adoption*. <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/contact-after-adoption>

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Fahlberg, V. (2012). *A Child's Journey through Placement*. Jessica Kingsley.

Click [here](#) to view all of the *Staying in touch: Contact after adoption* resources.

An open access resource hub for practitioners working with individuals to maintain meaningful relationships after adoption.

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