Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child

School-age children—those between the ages of 6 and 12—learn critical skills and gain interests that carry into adolescence and adulthood. Adoption can add layers of complexity to a child's normal developmental tasks. You can support your child by learning as much as possible about the impact of adoption on your child's emotional growth and overall development.

This factsheet is designed to help adoptive parents understand and respond to their school-age child's developmental needs. It provides simple, practical strategies you can use to foster healthy development, including approaches for building attachment; addressing trauma, grief, and loss; talking honestly with your child about adoption; acknowledging their adoption history; using effective discipline; and enhancing your child's school experience. Because some adoptive families will need extra support to address their children's mental or behavioral health needs, the factsheet also discusses when and how to seek help.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Child Welfare Information Gateway
PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Children's Bureau
An Office of the Administration for Children & Families

ADOPTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Understanding the typical tasks and needs of school-age children and how adoption-related experiences may affect their development will help you meet your child's needs, strengthen your relationship, and identify important emotional or physical concerns.

There is a lot of information available about typical growth and development patterns for school-age children. It is important to remember that personal experiences—as well as background and medical history—and how they impact the development of children who were adopted vary greatly from child to child. Although detailed records about your child's background and medical history may not always be available, the following resources from Child Welfare Information Gateway can provide information that can help in your research: *Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child*, *Providing Adoptive Parents With Information About Adoptees and Their Birth Families*, and *Access to Adoption Records*.

EFFECTS OF EARLY EXPERIENCES ON DEVELOPMENT

Children with early adverse experiences may exhibit certain developmental delays (see the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) About Adverse Childhood Experiences webpage to learn more).

A medical professional can help assess your child's development and determine if delays exist. If your child is found to have a disability, they might be eligible for a variety of services, such as speech therapy, occupational or physical therapy, and counseling. Some services can be provided at home, while others may be offered at a child development center. Resources for parents of children with disabilities are available on the Center for Parent Information and Resources website, an online learning resource supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs.

To learn more, see the Families Rising webpage on raising adopted children with special needs and the CDC's Developmental Disability Basics webpage.

- The National Library of Medicine provides a brief overview of the typical developmental tasks of school-age children.
- Harmony Family Center, a Tennessee-based agency offering evidence-based therapeutic services to children and families, created a developmental timeline for children from birth through early adulthood.

YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL VERSUS CHRONOLOGICAL AGE

If your child came from an institution or an abusive or neglectful family situation, they may not have learned some important things, such as communicating with others or expressing feelings appropriately. Playing with other children, taking turns, or just having fun may be new experiences. As a result, your child may need time to catch up to children in the same age group. If English is not the child's first language, they may have added delays and challenges.

You can help your child overcome such lags by using parenting strategies based on your child's developmental level, not on their age. For example, a 7-year-old child may need the bedtime routine of a 3-year-old. A 12-year-old may need to learn how to get along in a group of two or three friends before they are ready to join a larger group activity. A child who is socially behind may play better with younger children. Playing with younger children will give your child a sense of confidence and teach empathy and helpfulness. Consult your adoption professional or an experienced peer about organizing and supervising constructive "learning" playdates.

Allowing your child to learn at their own pace is crucial. Although others may feel you are 'babying' your older child, you are simply helping them learn what they have missed. Some older children may need to learn tasks the way a younger child would. Break tasks down into small, manageable steps, so that your child will feel a sense of success and accomplishment. Let progress be guided by your child's readiness to move on to the next developmental level.

BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

Adoption-related issues, such as feelings of loss and grief, ambivalence over identity, and related insecurities, can impact your school-age child's day-to-day behavioral and mental health. Sadness, anger, and behavior challenges are normal as children in elementary school learn more about their family histories and come to terms with adoption. These behaviors may become more pronounced as a child becomes more secure and comfortable in your home. The need for extra assistance may occur even in children who previously adjusted well, as they grapple with developmentally appropriate issues such as identity formation. Difficulties with peers should not go unaddressed. Children with poor interpersonal skills may be picked on or excluded, putting them at risk for future social and emotional problems.

It is important to seek professional help if your child or other family members show any of the following signs:

- Extreme emotions and behaviors
- Difficult family relationships that persist or seem to be getting worse
- Difficult peer relationships
- Substance use

Finding an adoption-competent therapist you are comfortable working with is essential and may take some persistence. For more information, visit Information Gateway's factsheet *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists* and the Center for Adoption Support and Education's Adoption Competence National Directory, and National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative.

Adoption-Related Behavioral and Mental Health Issues

Several resources can help you understand your child's behavioral and mental health needs:

- *The Impact of Adoption* (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- Mental and Behavioral Health Needs of Children in Foster Care (American Academy of Pediatrics)

ADOPTION-RELATED LOSS AND GRIEF

Children who experience separation from their birth parents may feel an unresolved sense of grief that may recur, particularly at milestones in life, even when the adoption was a positive experience. Unresolved grief can affect a child's emotional and mental development. For example, children who were adopted may feel sad or angry about being separated from the people and the life they remember (their community; culture; and, if relevant, their former school). This may include birth family members, foster parents, and/or brothers and sisters. Here are some ways you can promote communication about grief while helping your child work through a sense of loss:

- **Address the issue early.** Don't wait for your child to bring up the subject of adoption or express sadness about their family history. Even if your child never mentions their birth parents, most adopted 6- to 12-year-olds have frequent thoughts about them. If you are open and matter of fact about the subject, it will help your child feel more comfortable, too.
- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** Tell your child that it is natural for children who were adopted to think about their birth families and feel sadness about the loss of family members or unknown family histories.
- **Resist the urge to rush in and cheer up a grieving child.** Just as children need the chance to learn and develop in their own ways, they need to work through their own grief and loss issues. You can help your child by being supportive (e.g., 'You seem sad. I wonder if you are thinking about your birth [or other] family."). Efforts to lessen their pain, on the other hand, can make children question the value of their feelings and reduce their confidence in their ability to cope.
- **Help your child express sadness in the manner that best fits their stage of emotional development.** A school-age child may need to sob like a toddler and be held and comforted like one.
- **Be prepared for grief disguised as anger.** Although it is challenging for parents, anger is a way for children to vent loss and sadness. Anger and difficult behavior will often subside after children have vented or worked through their emotions.
- **Be prepared for your child to make up stories, especially in the face of uncertainty.** Children who lack details and information about their adoption stories and backgrounds may fabricate stories as a protective and defensive mechanism against their not knowing.

Extreme behaviors or moods (e.g., control issues, withdrawal, apathy, extreme fearfulness, poor appetite, aggressiveness) may result from unresolved grief or may be signs of untreated trauma. If your child shows these behaviors, look for an adoption-competent therapist or counselor and ask other adoptive parents for recommendations whenever possible.

Learning to be comfortable with your own feelings about adoption and why you chose to adopt (e.g., infertility) creates a positive and significant bond with your child. You may acknowledge your own sadness by saying something like, 'I'm sad, too, that I didn't get to be with you when you were just a little baby, but I'm happy that your birth mother (and father) had you and that you came to live with me, and now we can always be together."

ADOPTION-RELATED FEARS AND FANTASIES

Children who have experienced the loss of at least one family or home may be fearful of losing another. Fears may take the form of sleeping or eating difficulties, nightmares, separation difficulties, nervousness, and even increased allergies and illnesses. The following are some things you can do to help your child understand your commitment to them:

- Reassure your child that you intend to be their parent forever. Demonstrate this through both words and actions. Some children may test their adoptive parents with misbehavior.
- Engage the child in planning future family events (e.g., 'Next Thanksgiving, would you like to ...?").
- Purchase a photo album with spaces designated for school photos and memorabilia all the way through high school.
- Go away and come back. Although it is extremely hard to leave a child with separation anxiety, it is only through practice that a child learns you will always return.

All children fantasize about an alternate family life (e.g., a 'real" mother who never reprimands, a father who is a famous person). Sometimes school-age children who were adopted use fantasy to attempt to undo their losses. They may imagine their birth parent returning for them or the adoption agency calling to report that they mistakenly placed the wrong child. The following are some actions you can take to reassure your child:

- Encourage your child to talk about fantasies and express their feelings about adoption.
- Reassure your child that it is normal to imagine what their lives might have been like had they not been adopted. Point out that everyone, adopted or not, does this occasionally. ('I wonder what would have happened if I had ... [gone to a different college, taken another job, been born into another family].")

ATTACHMENT ISSUES

Healthy child development depends on a secure parent-child attachment that ideally is established in infancy. If the parent-child attachment was disrupted, a child may not have developed the secure base needed for healthy development. A school-age child with insecure attachment might experience anxiety when away from home or even show developmental delays or traits of a younger child. You can help your child by interacting with them in a way that is consistent with the child's developmental age, not chronological age. When you interact with children at the level of their emotional and physical development, you help them grow and improve and repair attachment. A skilled adoption counselor or professional can help by offering therapy that encourages safe touch and gentle connection, such as eye contact and nurturing behaviors.

For related resources, visit Creating a Family's Creating and Cultivating Attachment webpage.

THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

Many adopted children have experienced some degree of trauma. Potentially traumatic events include abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), neglect, unpredictable parental behavior due to addiction or mental illness, or separation from loved ones. Exposure to trauma can affect how

children learn, think, feel, and interact, and it may have consequences for their health and development that persist even after they join safe and stable adoptive homes.

The experience of multiple traumatic events over time can result in the development of challenging habits or behaviors (for example, hoarding food, fighting, distrust of adults). Keep in mind that these behaviors may have helped your child survive a dangerous situation.

Parenting a traumatized child can put a strain on other relationships and trigger what is known as 'secondary trauma" (or 'vicarious trauma") in parents. Symptoms of secondary trauma may be physical (headaches, stomachaches, lack of energy), behavioral (increased drinking or smoking, avoiding others), emotional (anxiety, depression, loneliness), or mental (inability to concentrate or make decisions). In some cases, this may be the result of past, unresolved parental trauma that is rekindled by the child's issues. These issues must be healed before you can help your child.

DISCIPLINE CONSIDERATIONS

Children act out as a way of communicating specific needs or fears. It is important for parents to recognize these actions and decode what their children are trying to say so they can meet their needs and curb negative behaviors. Children will often escalate such behaviors until they feel they are heard. Effective discipline will help children develop internal controls and practice more acceptable behavior. The right approach will depend on a child's abilities, learning style, and family history. Many resources are available to help parents learn positive discipline techniques. This section offers a few strategies that may be particularly useful for adoptive parents.

Resources to Help Families Cope With Trauma

- *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma* (Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet)
- *Parenting a Child or Youth Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* (Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet)
- Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma (American Academy of Pediatrics)

The most important first step for adoptive parents is to focus on forming a positive relationship with their children. While some discipline will be needed from the beginning, these efforts will be more effective after a strong attachment is established between you and your child. Likewise, children with serious attachment problems may not respond to discipline in the same way as children who have a healthy, secure attachment with their parents (see the earlier section on Attachment Issues).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROUTINE

School-age children do best with consistency in both rules and routines, as they feel more secure and confident when they know what to expect. Be patient when teaching your child about family rules and routines and use

language like, 'In this house, we ..." Children who were neglected, had frequent changes in caretakers, or lived in group settings may need extra time to understand the workings of a healthy family structure. They may have to unlearn past patterns as they learn new ones and experience consistency.

Consider your child's previous experiences and skills when you set rules or decide if a particular activity should be allowed. A child who was neglected often needs more parental supervision than other children of the same age. You may need to protect and supervise as you would a younger child. Giving children too much freedom too soon can set them up for failure.

USING REWARDS AND CONSEQUENCES

Never underestimate the importance of recognizing and rewarding good behavior. Praise is often far more effective than punishment and can go a long way in encouraging your child's positive behavior. Be sure to praise *specific* actions (e.g., 'Great job cleaning your room," or 'I appreciate how nicely you shared with your little sister!") rather than saying something that labels behavior more generally (e.g., 'You're a good girl").

You can help your child understand the consequences of their negative behaviors. Imposing a consequence or taking away a privilege (e.g., not going to the playground or allowing less time for video games) is more effective when the child can see a logical connection to their actions. For example, if your child rides a bicycle on a busy street where they have been told not to ride, then a fitting consequence might be no bike riding for the next 3 days. Try to give warnings about what children can expect *before* they get into trouble (e.g., 'If you don't do your homework, you won't be able go to your friend's house") rather than surprising them with consequences.

Children with learning delays or those who experienced neglect or prenatal substance use may need extra help understanding cause and effect and may not be able to make a connection between behavior and rewards or consequences.

RETHINKING THE *TIME-OUT* DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUE

Many parents like to use *time out* as a discipline technique. Time out involves removing a child from an activity and placing them in a safe place to think things over or to cool down alone. This method, however, is not always appropriate for children who have been maltreated, have attachment issues, or were raised in group settings. The first goal in parenting these children is to help them form healthy attachments. In these cases, it is better to have the child remain close to you (*time in*) until they regain enough control to return to the previous activity. This is useful because it avoids isolating children from their parents, playmates, and the rest of the family and helps support attachment (see the section on Attachment Issues). It sends the message, 'You are having a hard time with control. I am here to help you." This can also help the child with problem solving and learning how to self-regulate (Taking a Time-In With Your Child, a how-to guide developed for parents by Rainbow Kids, an adoption and child advocacy group, offers useful tips).

SOCIAL MEDIA USE

When your child begins to use the Internet and social networking sites, provide appropriate guidance and set 'ground rules" for social media use. Some adopted children are contacted by birth family members via the Internet without their adoptive parents' knowledge. If you would prefer that your child wait to be contacted by or contact birth family members, let your child know that. It is important to talk about these things before they occur, so that everyone is better prepared for the issues that can arise.

Consider the following points:

- Recognize that information and photos shared via social media sites are not private. Stay on top of changing privacy policies, and keep in mind that anything you post could be made public.
- Connecting via social media exposes everyone involved to a lot of information about each other's daily lives. This can be positive, but it also can be overwhelming or difficult, especially for children. Setting boundaries from the beginning will support a healthier long-term relationship.
- Be especially cautious about posting information about your child's adoption and birth family on the Internet. Your child should learn this information directly from you, at the right time, rather than by searching the Internet. Likewise, your child deserves to decide when and how they feel comfortable sharing this information with others.
- If you receive an unexpected request to connect from a member of your child's birth family, consider reaching out to your agency or an adoption-competent professional for advice and support before responding. A professional can help you set safe and comfortable boundaries for contact (including redirecting the birth family member to a more private form of communication, if desired).
- As with any extended family relationship, there may be inconveniences and challenges. Handle these with sensitivity and respect. Seeing that you value their birth relatives or previous caretakers will help your child's self-esteem and encourage a closer relationship with you.

See Information Gateway's *Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers* for more information.

TALKING OPENLY ABOUT ADOPTION

Parents who feel good about adoption, are comfortable talking about it, and can openly acknowledge their child's feelings are best able to help their children do the same. Parents who tense up when the topic is raised or keep it a secret may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. This section presents tips for communicating about adoption and recognizing your child's history in a positive way.

When talking with your child about adoption, pay special attention to the words you use and remember that *how* you say something is just as important as *what* you say.

How to Talk about Adoption

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING WORD CHOICES:

SAY THIS	NOT THAT
Birth mother/father **Biological mother/father** **First mother/father**	"Real" mother/father "Natural" mother/father
Mother/father	"Adoptive" mother/father
We could not have a baby *born to us*.	We could not *have our own* baby.
Your birth parents had grown-up problems, so they could not take care of a child.	Your birth parents were not able to take care of you.
They *made a plan* for you to be adopted.	They *gave you up* for adoption.
The child was adopted.	The child is adopted.

Below is some advice for communicating with your child:

- **Think about what your child might hear**. Many adoptive parents try to build their child's self-esteem by saying things that may seem positive but can be misinterpreted. For example:
  - '*Your birth mom gave you up for adoption because she loved you so much.*" A child may start to wonder if the adoptive parents also will send them away because of their love.
  - '*You are very lucky to be adopted.*" Children who are adopted should not be expected to be grateful to have a family or to be cared for. This can lead to self-esteem issues (i.e., Why do other children deserve families, but I have to be grateful to have one?)
  - '*We chose to adopt you—you are special.*" Children may later realize the loss that is implied by being 'chosen" (they first had to be 'unchosen").
- **Do not sugarcoat the adoption experience**. Doing so denies children the support they need as they grieve their unique losses. For example, talking only about how wonderful it was for your child to be adopted ignores the fact that gaining your family also means losing the experience of being raised with the birth family. In order to heal, a child must first be allowed to grieve and be angry.
- **Practice talking about adoption** in an adoptive parent support group or with others in your support network and let them give you feedback.

HANDLING DIFFICULT INFORMATION

Adoptive parents often try to protect their children from the more painful aspects of their histories. You may wonder what to tell and what to hold back from your child. Here are some guidelines for addressing your child's past:

- Your child has a right to their own history and will eventually learn what happened. You are the best person to share this information and help your child understand the facts. It is not a question of whether to share this information but deciding when and how to most appropriately do so.
- Do not force your child to talk about the past if they are not ready. Remain open and available for when the time is right.
- State the truth simply. Do not provide details that might be too complex for them to understand. Many details are too traumatic for young children, so more information can be given as your child develops and is able to handle more. An adoption professional can guide you in this process.
- Present the facts about your child's history or birth family without judgment or criticism. Realize that children who are adopted identify with their birth parents even if they have no contact with them or memory of them. Criticism of a birth parent will at some point be reflected in how the child feels about him- or herself.
- Offer an alternate viewpoint if your child criticizes their birth parents (e.g., 'Your mom had a lot to juggle and did the best she could"). However, resist the temptation to make up information or put a better spin on

your child's history. Be sure to explain that caseworkers and other professionals may have tried to help your child's birth parents, but that change was not possible. This may help alleviate anger the child may feel about being removed from their birth family.

- Help your child understand that the choices and mistakes birth family members made have no bearing on your child's value. Explain that the actions of that adult do not mean they didn't care for the child. Reassure your child that they have the power to make choices and find happiness.

RESPECTING YOUR CHILD'S BACKGROUND

Find ways to acknowledge and show respect for your child's birth parents and birth family members. This will strengthen your child's attachment to you.

- Take the initiative by talking about birth families and prior caregivers (e.g., 'I bet your birth mother is thinking about you today" or 'I wonder if you miss the people who took care of you before you came here"). Avoid statements that may arouse a child's sense of concern for their birth parents' welfare (e.g., 'I bet she misses you so much").
- Create a 'lifebook" together that records your child's personal history through pictures, objects, news clippings, and other memorabilia that have a personal meaning. A lifebook can help your child understand more about their history and process any feelings of loss about their birth family at each developmental stage. (Be aware that sometimes photos and mementos can bring up pain and loss and cause temporary acting out.) For more information, see the Lifebooks webpage on the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange website for resources, tips, and samples.
- If possible, encourage safe, developmentally appropriate contact with the birth family and others from your child's past. Such contact will help your child understand their history and promote identity development, self-esteem, and attachment to your family (Information Gateway's *Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family* and *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* provide helpful tips).
- Show your interest in finding as much information about your child's past as you can:
  - For intercountry adoptions, learn with your child about the food, history, and traditional dress of their country of origin. Develop relationships with members of your child's birth country and, if financially possible, plan a future family trip to the child's homeland.
- Create adoption rituals, such as the following:
  - Some adoptive families honor birth parents and grandparents on Mother's Day and Father's Day with special prayers, cards, or candle-lighting ceremonies.
  - Adoption anniversaries can be acknowledged with special meals or events.
  - Holidays and significant events of a child's birthplace can be celebrated (for example, the date that your child's country of origin recognizes its own independence day, thanksgiving, or the new year).

COMMUNICATING WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL

In deciding how much information to share with school personnel about your child's history, follow the 'need-to-know" rule. Share only the information needed to ease your child's adjustment and ensure their needs are met. Here are some things you can do:

- Try to connect with your child's teachers before each school year. Let teachers know if any subjects might be distressing to your child (e.g., a child whose birth family was affected by addiction might be upset by a presentation on substance use).
- Ask teachers to include adoption in lessons on family diversity and nontraditional families.
- Offer to make a presentation about adoption to the school staff or to your child's class (with your child's input and approval).
- Encourage school personnel to use positive adoption language (e.g., the 'Choose Your Words Carefully" suggestions on page 8).
- Donate books and materials about adoption to the school library.
- Ask your child's teachers to offer options or adjust assignments about family history. For example, instead of asking students to bring in a baby photo, students could bring in or draw a photo of themselves when they were *younger*. For a 'family tree" assignment, children could be allowed to include their birth family as the root system or draw a figure that better reflects their unique family structure.

HELPING YOUR CHILD WITH SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

You can help your child decide how to talk about their adoption with classmates and others. It is important to recognize that for some children, it may be challenging to relate to others as a result of being affected by the core issues of adoption (see Information Gateway's factsheet for families, *The Impact of Adoption*, for more information). The following are ways you can help your child prepare for adoption-related comments or questions:

- Encourage your child to think in advance about how they want to respond to questions about adoption.
- Offer 'What if ...?" scenarios, and practice responses with your child.
- Teach your child that it is up to them to decide how much personal information they are comfortable sharing. This includes allowing your child to choose how to respond to certain class assignments, such as family trees.
- Help your child understand the possible consequences of what they tell others.
- Make sure your child knows that it's okay to say, 'I don't want to talk about that," or "That's private."
- Normalize your child's experience as much as possible by helping them realize what they have in common with peers (rather than drawing attention to how they are different). This will help your child identify with peers. Consult a professional who can help your child with appropriate communication and social interactions.

- Work with your child to master some general statements about adoption that can be used to educate peers. This might include, 'I am part of two families that love me: my birth family and my adoptive family."
- Encourage your child to be proud of the fact that they were able to be strong and resilient enough to come through early hardships and join a new family.

The Center for Adoption Support and Education website offers resources to help parents talk to children and help children talk with peers about adoption. 'Talking About Adoption Part 2: Talking With 6–12 Year Olds," a Creating a Family blog post, also provides useful tips.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Center for Adoption Support and Education provides resources for adoptive parents.
- The National Council for Adoption provides resources for adoptive parents.
- Support for Parents Who Adopt From Foster Care, an AdoptUSKids webpage, focuses on helping adoptive parents understand the emotional needs of children who have experienced foster care.

CONCLUSION

Parenting a child during the elementary school years, as they venture further into the outside world, is both challenging and enriching. With sensitivity to adoption issues, honest communication, and effective discipline, parents can support their child's healthy development during this period and reap the rewards as their child matures.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2020). *Parenting your adopted school-age child*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/parenting-your-adopted-school-age-child/

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau