Parenting Your Adopted Teenager

The teenage years bridge the transition from childhood to young adulthood. It is a time of enormous change and development, when youth forge an identity and embrace new interests. Adoption adds complexity to the normal development of teenagers, regardless of whether they were adopted as infants or when they were older. This factsheet is designed to help adoptive parents understand the needs and experiences of their teen and use practical strategies to foster healthy development. These strategies include approaches that acknowledge potential trauma and loss, support effective communication, promote independence, and address possible behavioral and mental health concerns.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Child Welfare Information Gateway
PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

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

ADOPTION AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Adolescents experience rapid physical and hormonal growth. As a result, they may begin to look like young adults in their teenage years. Although some youth may begin to embody adult physical features, their brains are still developing and they need emotional support and nurturance from caring adults and continued parental guidance—whether they seek it or not.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

The chemical changes that occur in the teenage brain during adolescence spur youth to take risks and engage in new challenges. At the same time, teenagers are less able to control impulses and think through the consequences of their actions. As a result, it is especially important they receive guidance from caring adults and have opportunities to take healthy risks they can learn from.

Research shows, when exploring adolescent brain development, the teenage brain experiences significant cognitive and social-emotional development that may be vulnerable to the impact of early childhood trauma and/or adoption. Sometimes the effects of trauma do not show up until adolescence. While adoption itself may not significantly affect brain development, early life experiences do. For example, the brain of a teenager who has experienced trauma may become "wired" to be hyperalert for ongoing safety threats and anticipate a chaotic environment and a lack of support. Unaddressed, this can thwart a youth's ability to thrive physically and emotionally and hamper their capacity to learn new skills.

Families Rising published an issue of *Adoptalk* called "The Teen Years: Brain Development and Trauma Recovery." For additional resources, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's publications *Child Maltreatment and Brain Development: A Primer for Child Welfare Professional* and *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma*.

What You Can Do:

- Expose your teenager to healthy activities (physical, social, and cultural). Set reasonable limits on isolating or passive activities (e.g., screen time).
- Help your teenager take healthy risks (e.g., encourage them to try a new sport, musical instrument, or dating; or apply for a job, vocational school, or college).
- Allow your teenager to assume some control by helping them to set personal goals and make plans and decisions. Help your teenager understand the consequences of actions and decisions.
- If you suspect a developmental delay, seek a professional assessment and advocate for your teenager. If the assessment reveals a disability, talk with school officials about creating an individual educational plan to help meet your teenager's needs. Teenagers who do not qualify for special educational services can still benefit from simple adjustments in the classroom.

INDEPENDENCE

Teens often go back and forth between wanting more freedom and wanting the safety and protection offered by their family. As they prepare to transition to more independence—living on their own, getting a job, or attending community or a residential college—they may question their permanence in the family. The impending separation may trigger emotions associated with the loss of significant others, including birth parents, siblings and other relatives, or foster families. Some teens may adapt by acting more mature or independent than they feel to cope with fears. Others may become more anxious and fearful of "losing" yet another parent and find ways to avoid or even undermine these transitions.

Children who were adopted and experienced previous neglect or abuse often need extra time and practice to adapt to independence and learn life skills. Adolescents who are newly adopted have the added challenge of trying to develop attachment to a family at the very time that normal development would have them pushing away. These teens may need to spend more quality time with parents to build their attachment and security in the family. Slowing the transitions described above may be in their best interests.

What You Can Do:

- **Set consistent, clear limits and boundaries while allowing some independence.** Let your teenager work through his or her normal adolescent developmental stages and assert some independence within a nurturing and guiding environment. For example, look for opportunities to affirm your teen's choices in fashion and music.
- **Allow for a gradual increase in your teenager's independence as he or she shows signs of readiness.** Ask your child if he or she feels ready for specific responsibilities or privileges. Remember that teens who have experienced trauma and/or who have attachment issues may not be ready for responsibilities at the same time as other teens their age. If your teen is not yet ready for certain responsibilities, make it a goal to work toward them.
- **Give your teen a voice in decisions.** Teenagers who feel heard and respected are more likely to cooperate with family rules. This is particularly important for teens who may have come from situations where they felt powerless.
- **Support your teen's exploration of their identity and community.** Teen years are an important time for youth to explore. Provide an open, supportive environment and access to peer and adult mentors and roles models they can turn to for information and guidance as they wrestle with important issues.
- **Clearly state your values regarding alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors, and emphasize healthy lifestyle choices.** If your teen came from a birth family where substance use was a problem, be aware that he or she may be at greater risk for experiencing a variety of negative outcomes (see Information Gateway's *Parental Substance Use as Child Maltreatment*).
- **Reaffirm your teen's place in your family.** As your teenager gets ready to leave for college or move to independent living, offer reassurance that he or she is an important part of your family and that you hope and

expect he or she will be part of holiday and family gatherings even when no longer living at home. Stay in touch through texts, phone calls, or email so your son or daughter feels like a central part of your family even while living apart. Model this behavior by demonstrating how you stay connected to extended family members who live elsewhere.

- **If your teen is anxious about separating,** encourage options that allow for smaller steps toward independence, like community college or job-training classes while he or she is still home.

IDENTITY FORMATION

Many teenagers may struggle with the questions, "Who am I?," "Where did I come from?," and "Where do I belong?." Ultimately, it becomes a question of defining their beliefs and values, their educational and career paths, and their expectations for themselves. Younger teens may start to define their sense of self by expressing their individuality through clothing, hair, music, and body décor (piercings, tattoos, etc.). Exploring how they are different from their parents can be a healthy part of growing up.

Teens may also start to identify more with peers and less with family, often deepening their friendships with peers and starting to explore romantic relationships. Some adopted teens may be struggling with relationships, especially because of trauma.

Teens who were adopted may question who they are more deeply than their nonadopted peers. Forming an identity is more complicated for them. Not only must they think about how they are similar to and different from their adoptive parents, they must also wonder how they are similar to and different from their birth parents.

When birth family information is missing, it further complicates the task of identity formation. Unknown or missing information may prevent youth who were adopted from knowing the source of certain characteristics or abilities. This often drives the need to know more about the birth family. They may worry that they will take on certain "negative" characteristics or repeat challenging behaviors of a birth parent. Teens whose race or ethnic background is unknown, or whose race or ethnicity is different from their adoptive parents, may struggle with how they fit within their family and community. They may have a particularly strong interest in meeting or spending time with birth family members or others of a similar background.

What you can do:

- **Talk to your teenager about his or her birth parents and extended family.** Be open and willing to explain what you know, no matter how challenging the information (see the Talking Openly About Adoption section later in this factsheet). Encourage your teen to communicate openly about his or her thoughts and feelings. If there is limited information, make a commitment to help find the answers. Provide information about the birth family's cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. Share photos, if available.
- **Develop a lifebook.** If your teenager does not already have a lifebook or similar tool that records personal history, key events, and important people in his or her life, now is the time to help create one. Some

adopted teens make creative photo-essays, videos, or blogs to tell their story. For more information, see AdoptUSKids' Life Books 101 for resources, tips, and samples.

- **Provide opportunities to interact with other teens and young adults** who have experienced foster care and/or who were adopted. This can help normalize your teenager's experience and ease the feelings of differentness and isolation. Look for an adoption support group or mentorship program that includes members with the same cultural background as your teen. Check with your adoption agency or search Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory.
- **Point out similarities between you and your teen.** If your teen can see similarities between the both of you, it may help strengthen his or her attachment to your family. A strong attachment can help your teen feel safer as he or she enters the adult world. Find activities and interests to share and bond over to reinforce the ways in which you're alike.
- **Talk openly about intimacy and sexuality with your teenager.** Communicate your values on dating, sex, and relationships. Talk about what it takes to develop and maintain healthy relationships. This is equally important for teens with developmental delays or other physical, cognitive, or mental health challenges. Educate youth about abstinence, safe sex, and birth control. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers Talk to Your Kids About Sex and Healthy Relationships webpage.

APPROACHING ADULTHOOD

An important part of parenting teenagers is creating the conditions in which they can master adult tasks as they take on greater independence. Teenagers need time to gradually learn and practice adult life skills and will need ongoing support systems to negotiate the adult world.

Developmentally, teenagers who were adopted at an older age may need extra time and encouragement to learn adult tasks. They may not be ready for adult responsibilities at the same age as their peers. Additionally, teens who have experienced unstable living situations may not be emotionally ready to live away from their families, even if they are developmentally able. Some may choose to live at home and attend a local community college. Teens with learning delays or disabilities will require extra time and effort to learn adult life skills. They may need to find alternatives and adjustments for certain life skills, such as driving.

What You Can Do:

- **Teach essential life skills.** Provide varied opportunities to learn about and practice daily-living activities, such as managing their finances, cooking, doing laundry, making medical appointments, filling prescriptions, or maintaining a car. Help your teen identify other adults who can help them with specific skills, such as an uncle who knows a lot about cars or a mentor who is a whiz at creating a budget.
- **Promote ongoing, supportive relationships.** Few young adults are ready for fully "independent" living. Your teenager will need continued assistance and

guidance from you, other relatives, friends, mentors, and others. Even after your young adult moves out of your home, you can help him or her feel less overwhelmed by providing emotional and tangible support—perhaps by helping to paint a new apartment, showing up with a care package of groceries, or giving tips on filling out tax forms.

- **Be clear about how you will help your teenager move into adult life.** Young adults need to know how long they can live at home and whether they can expect their parents to help them with college tuition, rent, health insurance, and other expenses. Base your support and expectations on your youth's abilities, level of emotional security, and history—and not on his or her age. If you feel it is time for your son or daughter to move out, be sure to help him or her find suitable housing, employment, or schooling, as this can be overwhelming for young adults.
- **Advocate for services for youth with disabilities.** Under Federal law (the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act), by the time a special-education student reaches age 16, the school must provide a plan that may include help in obtaining further education, getting a job, or living independently. Talk with the school's "transition coordinator" about your teen's transition plan and available services.

BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

The teenage years can be a time of intense emotions and when behavioral or mental health issues surface, including some with genetic links, making this a difficult time for some adopted youth. Adoption-related issues, such as feelings of loss and grief, ambivalence over identity, and complexities surrounding their relinquishment and related insecurities, can add to those feelings. Your teenager needs your love and understanding more than ever during these transitional years.

In addition to your unwavering support, your son or daughter might benefit from talking with a counselor or therapist who is skilled with adolescents and knowledgeable about adoption issues. Having a teen adoption support group or a peer who was also adopted and who is a good role model or mentor can also be valuable.

For some youth, inner turmoil may lead to risky behaviors. Teens who were adopted may be at increased risk for a variety of negative outcomes due to previous abuse or neglect. Depression, anxiety, or relationship problems might indicate a response to trauma and loss. Childhood trauma does not resolve itself; it often needs to be treated by a qualified, trauma-informed behavioral/mental health provider.

Information Gateway's *The Impact of Adoption* addresses some of the key emotional issues that can trigger behavioral or mental health concerns in persons who were adopted. The Adolescent Health webpage on Youth.gov provides detailed information and resources on teenage mental health.

What you can do:

- **Be aware of signs that can indicate your teen needs help.** (See the box below for more information.) Seek a professional opinion from your doctor or a mental health professional.

- **Find the right person to help.** Adoption support groups, postadoption programs, and other adoptive parents can provide referrals for mental health professionals who are knowledgeable about adoption and trauma. It is important that the professional understands the complexities of adoption and any special needs your teen might have, such as attachment issues, medical conditions, or learning disabilities (see Information Gateway's *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists*).

Harmony Family Center, a Tennessee-based agency offering evidence-based therapeutic services to children and families, provides resources to help parents and caregivers, including a developmental timeline with suggested sensory interventions for children from birth through early adulthood. Sensory interventions are various mind-body exercises or activities that can help your teen self-regulate, focus, and calm down, such as practicing yoga, listening to or playing music, or engaging in deep-breathing exercises.

THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

Children and youth who were adopted may have been exposed to trauma early in life. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, untreated trauma can interfere with physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development and result in behavioral and mental health problems. Depending on your teenager's prior experiences, he or she may overreact in certain situations, have a hard time with trusting, shut down emotionally, or act aggressively. The effects of trauma may be retriggered and/or reprocessed through the developmental lens of adolescence. Trauma-related effects that previously seemed to have gone away may suddenly reappear.

Signs a Teen May Need Professional Help

- Your teen exhibits extreme moods or emotions, such as the following:
  - Anger, sadness, or depression for much of the time
  - Extreme fearfulness or anxiety
  - Seeming withdrawn or completely lacking energy
- Your teen engages in risky or out-of-control behaviors, including the following:
  - Self-injury
  - Harmful sexual activity
  - Eating disorders
  - Drug and/or alcohol use
- Your teen has anger management or relationship problems and exhibits the following behaviors:
  - Shows extreme anger or aggression with peers
  - Finds family interactions stressful
  - Avoids family members and friends
  - Has unsafe peer relationships
  - Has no friends (is a "loner")

What You Can Do:

- **Be available, predictable, and understanding.** Build trust by being emotionally and physically available, even if your teen tries to keep you at a distance.
- **Identify trauma triggers.** Try to notice what might trigger past traumas and the accompanying behaviors or emotions. Certain noises, actions, and/or smells may trigger memories of traumatic events. Help your teen learn how to recognize and manage these set points.
- **Create a safe space for your teen to express emotions without being judged.** Emotional outbursts may be a natural response to reminders of past threats. Try to remain calm and reassuring.
- **Get professional help, if needed.** An adoption and trauma-competent therapist may be needed to help your teen and your family overcome trauma-related behaviors.

Child Welfare Information Gateway and others offers several resources to help you understand your teenager's behavioral and mental health needs:

- *The Impact of Adoption* (Information Gateway)
- Beneath the Mask: Adoption Through the Eyes of Adolescents (National Council for Adoption)
- *Child Maltreatment and Brain Development: A Primer for Caregivers* (Information Gateway)
- What Every Child Needs for Good Mental Health (Mental Health America)

EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Teenagers will frequently test the boundaries of family rules as they increasingly assert their independence. They may experiment with risky or forbidden activities while navigating peer pressures. It is important that you be clear and consistent about your expectations for youth and set reasonable limits (e.g., curfews). Talk openly about safety concerns. At the same time, allow your son or daughter to make choices and see that you trust him or her to make good decisions. Look for positive discipline approaches that emphasize strengthening your relationship and support independence while providing guidance and structure.

Teens who were adopted, particularly those who were recently adopted or who were previously abused or neglected, require discipline practices that emphasize relationship building and support attachment and trust. It is important to reinforce positive behaviors as often as possible and be clear about which behaviors are unacceptable. Some punishment can trigger trauma memories, create anxiety, lessen trust, and cause further harm. In addition, discipline should take the teen's prior experiences and developmental level into account. For example, an adopted teenager who has experienced severe neglect may not respond well to the removal of his or her valued belongings. Requiring a youth who has attachment issues to go to his or her room may not be as helpful as having that teen work alongside you to complete a household chore. If your child struggles with peer relationships or low self-esteem, it is not wise to remove an activity (such as a youth group or sport) that provides an opportunity for growth in these areas.

What You Can Do:

- **Focus on attachment and relationship building.** Create avenues of open communication and support that build trust and a strong relationship.
- **Encourage and reinforce good behavior.** Point out things that your son or daughter does right as often as possible, and more often than the things you find wrong. Say yes as often as possible.
- **Be specific.** Instead of telling your teenager to be home "at a reasonable hour," let them know the exact time you expect them in the door.
- **Give your teen a voice.** Engage your son or daughter in setting reasonable rules and resolving issues. For example, ask, “What can we do to help you remember to clean up the kitchen after you’ve used it?" Being invited into the problem-solving process shows your teen respect and motivates him or her to be part of the solution. If you find out that your teenager has broken a family rule (e.g., attended a party with no adult supervision), listen to his or her explanation yet be clear about limits and your concerns for his or her safety.
- **Make sure discipline matches your teen’s abilities.** Match your expectations to your teen’s developmental stage. While using logical consequences can sometimes discourage undesirable behaviors (e.g., limiting video game time in response to inappropriate behavior), it may not be practical for a teen who has difficulties seeing the connection between actions and consequences. In addition, tying incentives to short-term rewards (e.g., allowing use of the car if good grades are maintained) may be more powerful than longer-term goals such as studying for college.
- **Stay calm.** A teenager’s emotions can be overwhelming and result in challenging behaviors. Be a role model in how you deal with frustration. When emotions "heat up," stay composed and resist the urge to raise your voice. Take a few moments to calm down, if needed. Reassure your teen that he or she is safe and cared for and discuss the situation calmly when you regain composure.

Information Gateway's *Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect* offers recommendations for how to handle discipline issues with youth who have been maltreated.

TALKING OPENLY ABOUT ADOPTION

Parents who are positive about adoption, comfortable talking about it, and acknowledge their teenager's feelings are best able to help their youth do the same. If you tense up when the topic of adoption is raised, you may create a negative impression for your teen. Don't wait until your teenager raises the topic or asks questions about his or her birth family. Some children never raise the topic for fear of offending their adoptive parents. Others may act disinterested when they might really like to talk about it. Bringing up adoption in a matter-of-fact way and inviting your child to explore questions will encourage healthy discussion and show your child you are not threatened by their curiosity.

You may struggle with sharing potentially upsetting information about your teenager's past (for example, if your teenager was abandoned early in life or if one of the birth parents was incarcerated). Remember that not being straightforward about your teenager's past might cause him or her to imagine

something worse than what actually happened and withholding information can get in the way of a trusting relationship with your child. The teenage years are an ideal time to help your son or daughter understand his or her birth family story and make sense of personal history.

What You Can Do:

- **Be direct about your willingness to talk about adoption and your teenager's feelings.** Your son or daughter may fear they are being disloyal to you if they want to talk about their birth family and/or want to have a connection with them. Let them know that you love them and will support these emotional and physical connections.
- **Be honest about your child's past.** Teens who were adopted can handle more sensitive and potentially difficult information than younger children. Let your teenager know what you know or can find out about their birth and adoption circumstances. Share information that may be upsetting or difficult and help him or her to manage the painful aspects of their past.
- **Help your teenager frame a full picture of his or her birth parents.** Hearing one side of the story (for example, the birth mother was not able to parent) provides an incomplete picture. Help your teenager consider the full extent of his or her birth parents' experiences and characteristics. Talk about them as individuals with strengths and challenges. It is important to let your teen express anger, disappointment, or frustration about his or her experience while also offering a more balanced perspective of the circumstances.
- **Look for "teachable moments" to open conversations.** A television program, current event, or a new family in the neighborhood might provide the perfect opening to ask about your teenager's thoughts and feelings.
- **Be patient.** Communication may be a struggle. Teenagers may shun conversation to assert independence. Talking while engaging in an activity, such as going some place together in the car, may come more easily. Your teenager is more likely to share his or her thoughts if you are calm, relaxed, and open.
- **Create opportunities for your teenager to talk with others.** Meeting with other teens who were adopted or someone who serves in a mentor role can create a safe haven for your teenager to discuss what's on his or her mind.

How to Talk With Tweens & Teens About Adoption on the Creating a Family website offers additional tips.

CONNECTING WITH BIRTH RELATIVES

Helping your teenager maintain or explore a relationship with birth family members—assuming this is in his or her best interests—can help develop your teen's sense of identity. Talk with your adoption professional and see Information Gateway's factsheets on *Searching for Birth Relatives* and *Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family* and *Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families* for more information. The internet and social media have made it easier for youth to have contact with their birth families. While new connections may be made, this may happen without your son or daughter being emotionally prepared and without your knowledge.

What You Can Do:

- **Build healthy relationships with birth family members if connections exist.** Show respect for the family and maintain a genuine commitment to supporting your teen's relationships.
- **If your teenager has not established connections with the birth family** and wants to find his or her birth parents or additional family members, explore options for learning more. Ask your son or daughter about his or her feelings about potential contact with birth relatives. This can be a very emotional process. Emphasize the importance of being prepared and having supports in place before starting a search.
- **Be familiar with your teenager's social media use.** Establish internet rules and provide guidance for safe use (e.g., don't give out identifying information and location). Let your teen know that you want to join him or her in searching and that you prefer your teen not to do this alone. Discuss the possibility that a birth relative could try to make contact through social media, the importance of you knowing about any attempts at contact, and the various ways you might respond—together (see Information Gateway's *Social Media: Tips for Foster Parents and Caregivers*).
- **Find support.** You and your teenager may benefit from learning about other people's experiences, for example through support groups for persons who were adopted and adoptive parent support groups. To find groups in your State, search Child Welfare Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory.

Postadoption Contact With Birth Relatives

Child Welfare Information Gateway offers several resources to help adoptive families maintain or develop relationships with birth relatives:

- *Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family* (factsheet)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (factsheet)
- *Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families* (bulletin for Professional)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Center for Adoption Support and Education provides resources for adoptive parents.
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides a webpage, Information About Teens (Ages 12–19), that includes health, safety, and parenting tips.
- The National Council for Adoption provides resources for adoptive parents.
- Post-Adoption and Guardianship Support Services in Your State, by AdoptUSKids, provides information and examples of postadoption services.
- Support for Parents Who Adopt From Foster Care is another webpage that focuses on understanding the emotional needs of children who have experienced foster care.

CONCLUSION

Parenting your adopted teenager can be greatly rewarding as you help your son or daughter navigate the need for greater independence while offering continued guidance, supervision, and support. It is exciting to watch a young person strengthen his or her identity and develop new capabilities.

Parents who show respect for their teens' background and histories will help create long-lasting, positive relationships with their sons and daughters. With clear communication, trust, and support, parents can help their teenagers prepare for healthy, happy, and productive adulthoods.

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