



ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

Talking to Your Nine- to Twelve-year-old about Adoption

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

Are you ready for the preteen years? As any parent of a preteen will tell you, glimpses of teen moodiness can begin at this stage, especially in girls, who mature more quickly than boys. But for the most part, children of this age are open to talking and have the intellectual sophistication for satisfying conversations.

This is the time to establish your role as advocate and coach in preparation for the challenges that are soon to come—while you are still able to teach, guide, and set limits.

Don't attribute all problems to adoption. Research shows that most adopted kids do just as well as their peers who were not adopted.

We need to ask more questions at this stage; children may keep more to themselves as their own questions become more complex. Ask open-ended (not yes or no) questions. Reinforce the lines of communication that will be crucial in guiding your child into adulthood.

Reassure Them!

At this age children are coping with the demands of schoolwork and peers, teachers and counselors, coaches and teammates (and parents!). They want to know:

- ◆ Am I loved?
- ◆ Am I attractive?
- ◆ Am I smart and capable?
- ◆ Can I make and keep friends?
- ◆ Am I like my peers and my family?
- ◆ Was I adopted because my birthparents didn't love me? Is there something wrong with me?

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ILLUSTRATION BY WOOK JIN JUNG

Talking Strategies

- ◆ **REAFFIRM SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCES:** "Yes, we are both good at fixing things. You must get your talent for writing from your birthparents."
- ◆ **ACCEPT YOUR CHILD'S ANGER,** an easier emotion to express than sadness or hurt, especially at this age: "You're angry at your birthmother for taking drugs. That might be why you have some learning challenges. I can see why you might feel upset." Or "I wonder what her life was like?"
- ◆ **BE PHYSICALLY AFFECTIONATE.** Now is the time to cuddle; teenagers are often less open to physical affection. Hugs connect us when words fail, strengthen our bond, and inoculate us against future friction.
- ◆ **USE POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE**

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CONCEPT/TASK	CONVERSATION/ACTIVITY
LOTS OF PEOPLE WERE ADOPTED.	Tell the adoption stories of children and adults you know. Check out an adoption-related movie or book together. (See list below.)
THIS IS MY FAMILY.	Ask your child to draw a picture of her family. Talk about what, whom, and how she chooses to draw.
PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND ADOPTION.	Ask your child how others react to learning he was adopted. Let him know it is his choice to tell, ignore, or keep adoption information private.
EVERYONE HAS FEELINGS.	Ask your child how it feels to think about her adoption story—and how it feels to talk about it with others. Help her prepare answers in advance as a way of managing emotions.
I WAS ADOPTED.	Talk with your child about what that means to him. Look through his lifebook or your family's adoption scrapbook together.
WHO AM I?	Ask your child to draw a picture of herself. Use it to talk about what she sees as her strengths and weaknesses, which aspects she shares with you, and which she might share with her birth family.
BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM.	Plan outings with other adoptive families and with children your child feels comfortable around.

When Your Child Says Nothing at All

If your child doesn't bring up adoption, it doesn't mean that he doesn't want to talk about it. Let him know you're open to talking by saying:

- ◆ "Do you ever think about meeting your birthparents?"
- ◆ "Do you know if Elizabeth knows her birthparents?"
- ◆ "It's been a while since we have talked to your birthmother."
- ◆ "I noticed that you turned away when I brought up visiting your birthmother. What were you thinking/feeling?"

Losses Children This Age Are Coming to Terms With

- ◆ Loss of the biological family: "Why couldn't they raise me?"
- ◆ Loss of being a "normal" family: "I wish we could just be like other families."
- ◆ Loss of innocence about adoption: "Now I get it: special means different."
- ◆ Loss of status (real or imagined): "Will kids tease me about being adopted?"
- ◆ Loss of a wholly positive view of adoption: "That story about birthmothers on the news was scary."

In recognizing these losses, grieving them, and coping with them, children build inner resources and vital life skills.

When to Seek Therapy

Some children cope with their growing awareness by becoming angry or depressed, or by acting out. These behaviors or feelings may not be related to adoption; however, whatever is happening in your child's life, adoption comes along for the ride. Think about seeking help if your child:

- ◆ threatens to leave home
- ◆ has difficulty managing anger
- ◆ behaves in a way that is a dramatic departure from regular personality and temperament
- ◆ suddenly shuns social activities although she is typically outgoing
- ◆ suddenly challenges authority in school (Challenging parental authority is normal for American children; "You are not the boss of me" is their mantra!)

This is a stage when children may be more open to talking with a family therapist than they be will later. And many experts recommend this as the time to convey difficult or troubling aspects of a child's adoption story. A therapist can give a child difficult information, with the parent or parents on hand for support and discussion.

Conversation Starters

Movies and books are an excellent way to normalize adoption and to show that families have adopted—and authors have written about it—throughout history.

Anne of Green Gables, by Lucy Maud Montgomery (also VHS & DVD)

Annie (VHS & DVD)

The Great Gilly Hopkins, by Katherine Paterson

Heidi, by Johanna Spyri (also VHS & DVD)

Pollyanna, by Eleanor H. Porter (also VHS & DVD)

Superman (VHS & DVD)

Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael (VHS)