

Psychological Issues Faced by Adopted Children and Adults

Allan N. Schwartz, LCSW, Ph.D. Updated: Jun 18th 2009

Recently, one of our readers asked if we would write an article about the difficulties faced by children and adults who were adopted. This is submitted in answer to that request.

Case samples:

All names and places are fictionalized:

A. A woman discovers that her birth mother is alive even though her adoptive parents told her she was dead. In point of fact, her adoptive mother had tried to contact her and the adoptive family from the time she was five years old and onward.

B. A young woman from a war torn Asian nation was adopted by a white American family. She will not search for her parents and family because she is convinced they are dead and she does not wish to "betray" her American parents. She comes to therapy because she has difficulty maintaining intimate relationships and feels quite depressed.

C. An adopted girl is convinced that her parents are her natural parents. However, they are unable to explain to her why she is in their wedding photographs when they had told her she was born a year after they married.

D. A male baby is adopted by a Jewish family and is raised in the Jewish religion. There are no records anywhere of his birth parents and he knows nothing of his genetic origins.

These are just a few of the types of situations that adopted children find themselves confronted with either during childhood or after they enter adulthood.

Other Sources of Information:

Even though a lot more is known today about the importance of the adoptee learning about their natural parents and their genetic histories, many individual and family issues involving the people who do the adopting, interfere with good child development and adult adjustment.

There are many autobiographical books available, written by those who were adopted and writing about their experiences that provide lots of information about the issues experienced by these people. In addition, a Google search of the internet will yield lots of research studies done on this very issue.

Issues faced by adopted persons:

1. It is very common for those who were adopted to feel rejected and abandoned by their birth parents. This is accompanied by feelings of grief and loss. There is no set time or age when these feelings surface but, sooner or later, they do.

2. Feelings of loss and rejection are often accompanied by a damaged sense of self esteem. There is an understandable tendency to think that "something must be wrong with me for my birth parents to have give me away." It must be understood that these feelings and thoughts are unrelated to the amount of love and support received from the adoptive parents and family.

3. Guilt accompanies loss and grief because the adopted individual believes that they are being disloyal to the people who adopted, loved and raised them. They do not want to hurt or betray their adoptive mother or father. Feelings of guilt and fears of being disloyal were what prevented the girl in case "C" from asking the obvious question, "why am I in your wedding pictures if I was not born yet?"

4. In cases B and D there is a disconnect with the original heritage of the birth parents. For the Asian young woman, raised in a large family with many siblings, the obvious racial differences did come to "haunt her" later on. While she wished to visit the Asian nation of her birth, she was so totally identified with being American, and even "while" that she feared stirring up her past. She, too, did not want to cause any hurt to her adoptive parents. However, it must be said for them, that they encouraged and offered to help her in her search. Despite this encouragement, she was not ready to do any search. Long discussions in therapy never revealed what she feared.

5. According to the great psychologist, Eric Erikson, adolescence involves a search for self identity. While this search is difficult for most teenagers, it presents special problems for adoptee. Assuming they never met their natural parents and family and have no idea of their genetic background, they are left with a gigantic gap in their search to answer the age old question, "Who am I." Of course, the more information available to young people, the less of a gap there is in the information they need to formulate a real sense of themselves. In all of the cases above, a huge gap existed in this information. Except for the Asian young woman, all were denied any information, mostly because the adoptive families, either wittingly or unwittingly, did not provide necessary facts.

6. Missing genetic information is important for obvious medical reasons. It is important for everyone to have knowledge of the medical history because it can provide clues to genetic diseases. For example, in case D, the patient entered psychotherapy unaware that he had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. His family was unaware of this as well. If more had been known about the birth parents, it might have been possible to predict his childhood problems at home and at school. It was only after entering psychotherapy that he was evaluated and diagnosed with ADHD and appropriately treated for this. The information was relieving to both him and his adoptive parents because everyone now knew that he was never "bad" or "dumb" but afflicted with this disorder of the brain.

7. Many adults who were adopted struggle with fears that they will be disloyal to their adoptive parents if they search for their natural parents. In my experience, the only real exception to this is when adoptive parents make the very deliberate and conscious effort to inform and encourage their child to do a search and to let them know how important that is. Unfortunately, as illustrated in cases A and C, there are people who discourage such a search and even lie to their adopted child about their origins. In the end, lies and distortions never succeed and often result in feelings of anger at the adoptive parent, sometimes causing a breach in the relationship.

Why do a few adoptive parents hide the truth?

There are cases where the adopting family lives in a state of fear that, somehow and someday, they will lose their child. This fear of loss, often irrational, is a powerful motivation to keep the adopted child as close as possible.

The truth is that, adopted children who search for their natural parents, have no reason for shifting their loyalties and feelings. They set out on the search because there is a deep-seated need for most of us to know as much as possible about our history, both racial, cultural, personal and genetic.

Adoption Today:

Much has been learned by past adoption experiences that now make some of the helps ease the way for families and adoptees:

1. Triad adoption: In this situation, the birth mother and adoptive parents legally agree to have the birth mother involved in the development of the child. This may take the form of monthly visits all the way to weekly and even daily visits, according to what feels acceptable to all parties.
2. People adopting children from other cultures or racial groups agree to raise the child with knowledge and experience in the background of the adopted child. I know of cases where adoptive parents see to it that their child is raised knowing and practicing both the language, customs and religious rituals of their birth parent.
3. Enlightened adoption agencies now keep all records on file of the children put up for adoption and make those records readily available when and if the adopted person wants to learn of their background. They will even arrange meetings with the birth parents.

Today, adoption is common place and no longer carries with it the dark features of shame that colored it dating back to the 19th century and earlier. This is a positive change in making it possible for everyone to feel more open and assured about the adoption process.

Were you adopted and are you struggling with some or all of these issues? Here are some suggestions that might help:

1. There are many support groups for those who were adopted and need help in coping with their feelings, fears and frustrations. An Internet search can lead you to these types of groups.
2. Psychotherapy is extremely helpful in reducing guilt, anxiety, depression and fear about being adopted. It can also remove some of the internal stumbling blocks to doing a search, if you wish.
3. Read as much as possible about adopted children, families and their experiences.

It does take a certain amount of courage but, go on that search and see what you can learn. Be open about it with your family of adoption. You are not being disloyal or unappreciative by doing that search.