



Ages and Stages in Adoption:
Implications for Parenting and Family
Talking Points
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Adopted children and adoptive parents both experience intense emotions when they talk about adoption. While the focus in the adoption literature is usually on the child's feelings and helping the child to deal with their adoption issues, the adoptive parents probably have as many issues with adoption as their children do.

How the parents experience their own infertility and adoption issues has major impact on how they will communicate with their children about adoption. Unless more attention is given to the issues that the adoptive parents have, their capacities to understand and to validate their children experiences will be compromised. In order to illustrate the parents' issues in adoption, I have developed a point/counterpoint construct playing off Sherrie Eldridge's explication of the child's issues in adoption.

In black you will read 20 Things Adopted Children wish their Adoptive Parents Knew from the book of that title by Sherrie Eldridge. These 20 things articulate the inner experience of an adopted individual.

In green you will read the 20 things Adoptive Parents often Feel and Think about Adoption written here by Joni Mantell, LCSW, Director of Infertility and Adoption Counseling Center. These 20 things reflect some of the inner experiences of an adoptive parent.

I am not suggesting that the parents and the children feel the same issues at the same time, but I am pointing out that parents have almost as many issues and sometimes very similar issues about adoption as their children have. I am suggesting that we give equal emphasis to the feelings of both the child and the parent, if we really want to guide parents to more effectively help their children with adoption issues during the life cycle.

The child's inner experience is in black. The parents' experience is in green

"I suffered a profound loss before I was adopted. You are not responsible."
I suffered a loss before you were adopted. You are not responsible.

"I need to be taught that I have special needs arising from adoption loss, of which I need not be ashamed."
I need to be taught that I have special needs arising from my infertility loss, of which I need not be ashamed.

"I need your help in grieving my loss. Teach me how to get in touch with my feelings about adoption and then validate them."
I need to grieve my infertility losses. I may need some help and validation to get in touch with my feelings about infertility and adoption.

"If I don't grieve my loss, my ability to love you and others will be hindered."
If I don't grieve my loss, my ability to love and parent my real child will be hindered.

"My unresolved grief may surface in anger toward you."
My unresolved grief may surface in conflicted feelings toward you.

"Just because I don't talk about my birth family doesn't mean I don't think about them."
Just because I don't talk about your birth family doesn't mean I don't think about them.

"I want you to take the initiative in opening conversations about my birth family."
I want to take the initiative in opening conversations about your birth family but I also have mixed feelings about this. I may feel insecure at times and fear being compared, rejected or even abandoned.

"I am afraid you will abandon me."
I am afraid you will abandon me especially if you find your birth family.

"I need to know the truth about my conception, birth and family history no matter how painful the details may be."
I need to process my feelings about your history before I can help you to do that. I will belie my judgments if I do not think about your birth parents and find a way to make sense of some upsetting information I may have.

"I am afraid I was given away by my birth family because I was a bad baby. I need you to help me dump my toxic shame."
I am left with some feelings of shame and/or guilt about my infertility. My unresolved feelings may surface in my oversensitivity to outsider and family comments. I need to work through my feelings of shame.

"I may appear more whole than I actually am. I need your help to uncover the parts of myself that I keep hidden so I can integrate all the elements of my identity."
I try to present myself as more whole than I actually am. I need some time and understanding to work through some of the parts of my self that I keep hidden so I can integrate all of the elements of my identity including my experiences of loss.

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"I am afraid I may be too much for you to handle."

I will try to stay centered so that I can help you with your more difficult feelings and issues. I will get help if I need it.

"When I act out my fears in obnoxious ways please hang in there with me and respond wisely."

I need to stay centered as a parent no matter how insecure I feel. I need to be secure enough to be the beacon of sanity during emotional times and the anchor of this relationship because I am the parent.

"Let me be my own person but don't let me cut myself off from you."

I am aware that you will test the bonds of our relationship in some of the same ways that all children test their parents' acceptance of their individual identity and in some different ways related to the fact of your adoption. I will work to keep us connected during difficult times.

"Please don't say I look or act just like you. I need you to acknowledge and celebrate our differences."

It is difficult for me when you say or act like we have nothing in common. I need you to acknowledge some of our similarities. I need to feel that nurture matters and I need to find a way to feel some reassurance about this.

"I need to gain a sense of personal power."

I may need to re-gain a sense of personal power.

"Birthdays may be difficult for me."

Birthdays may be difficult for me. I also have memories that are bittersweet.

"Please respect my privacy regarding my adoption. Don't tell other people without my consent."

I will try to strike a balance between emphasis on adoption as a difference and denial of adoption as a reality in our talks with each other and in public. It can be hard to strike the right balance.

"Not knowing my full medical history can be distressing at times."

Not knowing my child's full medical history can be distressing at times. I get anxious about this.

"Even if I decide to search for my birth family I will always want you to be my parents."

Even if you decide to search for his or her birth family, I will always us to be his/her parent.

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