



Adoption and School Issues



Like all children, adopted children spend a good portion of their waking hours in school. Because school is such an important aspect of children's lives, adoptive parents, like all parents, want their child's school experience to be a positive one. When your child has a problem at school, you might find yourself wondering: Is this a problem related to adoption, or is it a "generic" develop-

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- Junior and senior high school
- Specific educational concerns
- Learning lag, learning problem, or learning disability?
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- Using positive adoption language



mental, educational, or school system problem common to all children?

This factsheet will look at three areas. The first is how adoption impacts a youngster in school. We will discuss if, when, how, and why to talk about adoption with school personnel. Second, we will examine some specific educational problems that are common to adopted children and how to advocate for the educational and support services that they might need. Third, we will suggest ways to help students, teachers, principals, and other school personnel to become more sensitive to adoption issues.

At the end of this factsheet there is an information sheet on positive adoption language that can be given to school personnel. For additional resources, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov.

How Adoption Impacts Children at School

Adoption can impact children at school in two ways: educationally and socially. If a child is grieving for or fantasizing about birth family to the extent that it affects his ability to concentrate and learn, that is an educational effect. If a child is teased on the playground by classmates who say that he must be bad because his “real” parents gave him away, that is a social effect. Yet the teasing can also affect self-esteem, which can affect school performance. Let’s look at both of these areas in three general time periods: preschool and kindergarten, elementary school, and junior-senior high school.

Preschool/Kindergarten

When children attend day care or nursery school, they are exposed to many new experiences beyond the protected world of their immediate family. Often it is the first time they interact socially with a group of children. They make new friends, learn to deal with a new authority figure (the teacher), master routines, sing songs, pet a guinea pig, and imitate adult roles in a housekeeping area just their size.

Educational goals for preschool children are normally low-key. Supporting the development of the child’s self-esteem and self-confidence in the world beyond the family is usually the priority. Social skills such as taking turns, sharing, and following directions are emphasized. Gross motor development and creative expression are encouraged. Activities may center around colors, shapes, number concepts, and letters, among other things, but formal drilling in reading readiness or arithmetic facts is usually not a part of the curriculum. Most preschools want to help children gain self-awareness and a love of learning that will be a good foundation for their elementary school experience.

Children who are 3 or 4 years old and were adopted as infants or toddlers rarely show any adoption-related adjustment problems. Since they do not fully understand reproduction yet, they cannot really understand what adoption means. They may blissfully tell and retell the story of their adoption to anyone who will listen. Preschool children do not have prejudices about skin color (unless they are actively taught to have

it by their parents or other adults) and are usually accepting of all children who behave in a friendly way towards them. Transracially and transculturally adopted children, therefore, probably won't experience prejudice during this time. However, children this age are aware of differences in physical features and may need some help to understand them.

Whether to tell the preschool staff that your child was adopted is a question with no absolute answer. If your child was transracially adopted, the topic will come up automatically. If there is a request to bring in a newborn photo for a bulletin board and you adopted your child at age 6 months, it will come up then as well. Claudia Jewett Jarratt, a Boston-area family therapist for 25 years and adoptive mother of seven children, suggests that telling or not telling the school about adoption is an individual matter. Says Jarratt, "You do what makes your child feel loved and affirmed in all areas of adoption." If you do tell, it is certainly not necessary to share all the details of the birth family's situation.

Since preschools and day care centers are often private and separate from the public school system, the preschool years are a good time for adoptive parents to practice interacting with school personnel about adoption issues without the fear that any labels will necessarily follow their child throughout his school career. Parents can start to get comfortable with the idea of sharing information about the child's adoption if they feel it is appropriate or that it can help the child's adjustment to school.

If the children and teachers in your child's class at preschool seem curious about adop-

tion, you might want to make a classroom presentation. If so, you should emphasize that adoption is one of the many ways that families are formed. Lois Melina, an Idaho-based adoptive parent and author of several books on adoption, says the following points are appropriate for the preschool years:

- There are different types of families.
- People who live together and care about each other are a family.
- Sometimes members of a family do not live together but they still care about each other.

Kindergartners have some understanding of reproduction, although Melina says they are probably more interested in how babies are born than in how they are conceived. A detailed discussion of reproduction would probably not be appropriate for a kindergarten class. However, you probably could say that every baby grows inside a woman and that after the baby is born, the child may live with the woman who gave birth to him, or he may live with other parents.

Elementary School

First grade is when "real school" begins. Six-year-olds have reached the age when they can be required to sit still, pay attention, maintain order in line, and learn to read and write. They gain a new sense of independence and assurance as they ride to school on the bus alone, negotiate the cafeteria, receive a report card, and perform in the school pageant. They also begin to participate in group activities outside of

school such as the soccer team, cub scouts, or ballet lessons—that help them to develop a variety of new skills.

At this age, adopted children begin to be able to grasp the fuller meaning of their adoption, including the loss and abandonment issues that may be associated with it. They may spend time fantasizing about their birthparents and wondering what they are like. They may feel that they were placed for adoption because they were not good, pretty, or smart enough to be kept. With mental energy tied up in these concerns, children can find it difficult to pay attention in class and to learn their lessons, even if they do not have learning disabilities. And because this is the first time that more intense educational demands are placed on the child, if a child does have a learning disability or a specific condition such as attention deficit disorder, this is when it may surface.

Children in elementary school are old enough to decide for themselves whether to tell their classmates about their adoption. They must be taught, however, that once they tell, they will not be able to “take it back.” Also, you need to help your child recognize that people have different reactions to this information. You must give him the tools to respond to these reactions, especially if they are negative (see the Information Gateway factsheet *Explaining Adoption to Your Children, Family and Friends*).

Your experience with preschool teachers may help you decide whether to share adoption information with gradeschool personnel. If you feel it is important to discuss adoption with your child’s teacher, tell your child exactly what you will be talking about

and why. Good opportunities for adoption discussions are at the very beginning of the school year, at parent-teacher conferences, and on back-to-school night.

Some professionals and adoptive parents think it is unwise to share adoption information with teachers because they fear teachers will single out their children, make them feel different, or cause them to be made fun of, called names, or given special treatment. Others say that parents cannot expect teachers to become more sensitive to adoption issues, use positive adoption language, and help adopted children feel more secure if parents are not willing to share openly and affirm their own positive feelings about adoption.

Linda Yellin, an adult adoptee, therapist, and consultant from the Detroit area who specializes in pre and post adoption services, believes in most cases it is useful to share information about certain aspects of adoption with appropriate school personnel. Regarding preschoolers and elementary school age children she states, “With the increase in openness in adoption practice, it is helpful for school personnel to understand that some adopted children continue to have contact with their siblings, former foster families, and in some cases, with birthparents and extended birth family members. If school personnel are aware and sensitive to these situations, they are more apt to respond appropriately.”

Children Adopted From the Foster Care System

A child who is newly adopted from the foster care system at age 6 will have some of the same school issues as a 6-year-old

adopted as an infant. He will be dealing with the grief and loss that all children living away from their birthparents deal with. He may also have some other difficulties. If he experienced abuse or neglect and more than one caretaker, he may not have received the emotional nurturing he required at a younger age. Interruptions in attachment, early deprivations, cultural differences, and moves can cause a child to act younger than he is. He may not be able to learn as fast as children his own age; and yet, if he is physically the same size as his classmates, he will be expected to perform at the same level as everyone else. These negative experiences may also cause a child to have low self-esteem, problems with authority, difficulties in getting along with other children, depression, or antisocial behavior, such as lying, stealing, or disrupting class.

A parent of a child adopted from the foster care system almost has to discuss the child's adoption with school personnel, so that they will understand these background factors and be able to plan useful interventions together with the adoptive family.

If your child has the potential to have some serious school problems because of his former birth family or foster care system experiences, you need to get school personnel to become a part of the problem-solving team with you, along with your child's social worker, former foster families, and other key players that you determine. To enlist their support, you should share relevant information about your child's background; however, you should be cautious in how much detail you provide, and to whom. There is no need to talk about the specifics of the abuse, for instance, or to reveal who the perpetrator was. The level of

detail provided to a therapist or counselor is different from that provided to a teacher. The teacher needs to know just enough history so that he or she can understand some of the reasons for the child's current functioning in the classroom.

When you share this information, you should tell the teacher that you expect the information to be treated as a professional confidence. It is not to be shared freely with anyone who does not have a need to know.

If you think your child will need services not normally provided in the regular classroom, you need to advocate for those services. Unlike past adults in his life who were not trustworthy and who did not work as a team on his behalf, you and school personnel must work together. Your child needs to get the message: "You are important. We can make this work."

It also might be necessary for your family to seek other postadoption services along with the school-provided educational services, such as psychotherapy or association with other adoptive families in an adoptive parent support group. For more information on this, see the Information Gateway factsheet on postadoption services at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_after/index.cfm.

School Assignments Related to Adoption

In many elementary schools, third or fourth graders are asked to make a family tree. You can help ease the possible uncomfortable feelings that your child might have about this assignment by talking with the teacher about the child's adoption ahead of time. If you have enough information about the birth family, perhaps your child's family

tree can include information about both the birth family and the adoptive family. Lois Melina, in “Making a Family Tree Helpful for Adopted Child,” points out the benefits to adopted children that such an assignment can provide. It is a natural opportunity to talk about adoption with your child.

In the 1990’s there are many varieties of families. Children nowadays can live with adoptive parents, foster parents, one parent, divorced parents with joint custody, stepparents, grandparents, or two parents of the same gender. Most teachers in this day and age are aware of these differences. Hopefully they will take the opportunity to point out that each type of family is a “real” family, and that no one type is better than the other. You might suggest to the teacher to emphasize to the children that while families may look different on the outside, on the inside they are all the same—they are made up of people who care for and love one another. If handled in this way, the assignment should be a self-esteem builder for your child and all the children in your child’s class.

Elementary school may also be the time when a teacher suggests what he or she thinks is an innocent-sounding science or social studies project for the class to undertake—adopt a whale, zoo animal, redwood tree or highway. While the intent is to impart positive messages about the need for all of us to take responsibility for saving endangered species and improving our environment, this kind of project can have negative effects on adopted children of this age.

These types of projects may lead school-age adopted children to conclude (because they

are still concrete and not abstract thinkers) that all you have to do to adopt is pay some money. Adoptions of whales and redwoods must be renewed every year. Do their parents have to pay more money every year to keep them? And if their parents do not pay the money, will they be thrown out? You might need to mention to your child’s teacher that the project is fine, but that the phrase “adopt-a-” is problematic. Such a project may require some sensitive explanation on the teacher’s part to a class containing adopted children.

If your child is comfortable with the idea, presentations on transculturally adopted children’s countries of origin are often well received by children of this age and their teachers. Slides, photographs, crafts, traditional clothes, and foods are particularly enjoyable. This type of presentation can sometimes be worked into social studies units, particularly in schools where there is already a multicultural population. Activities that are aimed at eliminating cultural stereotypes and getting children to see that we are a diverse global community where people have many differences as well as similarities are also useful.

Junior and Senior High School

Educational and social demands are much greater on youngsters in junior or senior high school. There are different teachers for each subject, rather than one dependable teacher to report to, and each one has different expectations. School assignments are longer and more complex, and exams are

harder. The school itself is much larger, and the number of kids can be overwhelming. There are lockers and gym class, clubs to join, and cliques to figure out. Messages and music from the popular culture and media bombard the youngster. And with all of this, hormones are raging and causing all kinds of bodily and emotional changes.

Since teenagers are more capable of abstract thinking, adoption discussions in school can be more sophisticated. Teenagers know how a girl gets pregnant, and can understand why someone might not be able to care for a baby after it is born. They can also understand the concepts of child abuse and neglect, and that society has an obligation to protect children and provide a safe and secure environment for them. All this being said, adopted teens still may not have worked through all their feelings about their adoption. Precisely because they have more understanding, and because this is a time when sexuality and identity issues surface, their adoptive status may cause them to feel even more embarrassed or rejected than when they were younger. Teenagers sometimes render harsh value judgments about themselves, seeing only the black and white and none of the grey areas. You may still need to help school personnel see that adoption affects adopted children's performance and adjustment at school even when they reach junior high or high school age.

Discussions about adoption at the junior high and high school level fit in well in a family life, health, home economics, or sex education class. Lois Melina suggests that a panel consisting of birthparents, adoptive parents, and adopted teens makes a good presentation for teens. The birthparents and adoptive parents talk about why they

decided on adoption and their feelings and experiences. The adopted teens talk about their feelings and experiences about being adopted, hopefully in a positive manner, while realistically discussing the special issues they have to deal with.

How do adopted kids in this age group do in school? Well, there is good news. According to a recent national survey conducted by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota, out of 4,600 adopted teenagers in the United States, 56 percent say they like school, and 20 percent "aren't sure." These percentages are not much different than those of nonadopted teens (54 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Two out of three adopted teens say they try as hard as they can to do their best in school, and three out of four say they plan to finish high school and go to college. Adoptive parents ask about homework and curriculum, help with homework, and attend meetings at school at the same rate as other parents. Thus, despite our worries, and even though some adopted teens struggle because of learning disabilities, school is a positive experience for most of them.

One cautionary note, however, is that this survey focused on teens who were adopted as infants or young children. If the survey included more young people adopted at a later age and as a result of birthparent abuse or neglect and placement in the foster care system, the results might be different. Just because one study finds that adopted kids do okay in high school does not mean that you can sit back and do nothing. The repercussions of adoption can last a long time, and as conscientious parents, you still need to stay involved.

Specific Educational Concerns

A number of articles have been written over the years saying that adopted children are more likely than nonadopted children to have learning disabilities, particularly attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity (see bibliography). It is not within the scope of this factsheet to try to help you diagnose whether your child has a learning disability. The subject is so complex, and there are many other resources available to inform you about them—your local school district, the State board of education, and national support groups on specific disabilities are a few. For the names and addresses of some support groups for parents of children having developmental and/or learning disabilities, read the Information Gateway's factsheet *Adopting Children With Developmental Disabilities*.

It is within the scope of this factsheet, however, to discuss why experts believe adopted children are diagnosed with learning disabilities at a higher rate than non-adopted children, in order to help you help your child if he is so diagnosed.

One theory explaining why adopted children are diagnosed with more learning disabilities is the genetic component, that is, people who choose adoption for their children or whose parental rights are terminated may themselves have learning problems. Another contributing factor may be the prenatal environment of the child. If a child's birthmother did not have adequate nutrition, or if she drank alcohol, took drugs, or smoked cigarettes during her

pregnancy, these environmental influences may have some effect. Abuse or neglect, if it caused physical injury, neurological damage, or emotional distress can also play a role in producing learning disabilities.

Another contributing factor may be that adoptive parents tend to be extremely watchful of their children. If a child shows the slightest sign of a problem, they tend to seek professional help; thus, adopted children may simply be diagnosed as having learning problems sooner than other children.

Learning Lag, Learning Problem, or Learning Disability?

For a child to have a "learning disability," specific criteria have to be met. Tests have to be administered and results examined to determine this. Not every learning problem or learning lag is a learning disability. It is important that a complete assessment, including a physical examination, be obtained to get an accurate diagnosis.

Poor school performance certainly is not always due to a learning disability. First, it is normal for children to have a bad day once in a while. Second, there could be many reasons for poor school performance. Maybe your child needs glasses and is not able to see the blackboard. Perhaps he is worrying about an adoption issue or a personal or family problem. In this case, psychotherapy with an adoption-knowledgeable therapist may help to resolve it in his mind so he can settle down to learn. Or your child

may have a true attention deficit disorder that can be treated with medication and helped with some extra structure that a knowledgeable teacher provides. Your child may be able to stay in a regular classroom but in a lower grade. “Special ed” is not always needed.

As parents, adoptive or biological, you also have to be realistic. Your child’s intellectual ability may simply not be at the level you expected. You may need to learn to accept your child as he is, and not expect a level of school performance that is unachievable. The most any parent can expect is for his/her child to perform at the highest level of which he is capable.

If your child does not qualify for special educational services, you may still want him placed in the setting most conducive to meeting his needs. The best setting may be a smaller class, a class where the teacher is more knowledgeable about your child’s particular needs, or a different school. A tutor may need to be involved, or a speech therapist, or a combination of helpers. The most important thing is to get everyone involved to work together to help the child succeed.

Your job as a conscientious parent is to know your child well enough to get a realistic picture of his potential, interests, and motivation for performing in school. You are the one most able to note patterns and changes in your child’s behavior. Then it is your responsibility to communicate with the school if you think some type of intervention may be necessary. Consult experts. Consult other parents. Ultimately, however, you must rely on your own instincts as to what is best for your child.

Remember that just because your child was adopted it does not mean that he will have problems at school. And if your child does have learning problems, they may have nothing to do with his being adopted. In either case, it helps to be informed and ready to act if problems do arise.

Increasing the Adoption Sensitivity of School Personnel

There are several ways that you can work to increase the sensitivity of school personnel to adoption issues. Maybe you will not be able to accomplish all of these, but hopefully you can achieve some.

Encourage principals, counselors, and teachers to use positive adoption language. To use it, they have to know it. Photocopy the information sheet on page 8 of this fact-sheet and give it to as many school personnel as you can.

Donate a book about adoption to your school’s library. If your child was adopted from another country, donate a book about the culture of that country. Round up other adoptive parents of children from other countries and have them do the same. Suggest other adoption-related titles for the school’s librarian to include in the next order of new books. Bibliographies on books about adoption for children of different ages are available from Information Gateway and a number of other national adoption organizations. The National Adoption Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Adoptive Families of America in St. Paul, Minnesota, and

the North American Council on Adoptable Children in St. Paul, Minnesota, are just a few organizations that can provide this kind of help.

Make a presentation about adoption to your child's class or to teachers at a faculty meeting, but think carefully about the messages you want to get across. Perhaps you will want to work in tandem with an experienced adoption worker from a local agency. If the principal wants to know why a presentation on adoption is relevant when only a few children in the school are adopted, point out the similarities between adoption issues and many other kinds of loss issues that children experience.

Provide school personnel with information about adoption conferences being held in your community that are open to the public. Or plan your own! Carol Dolber McMurray, a consultant in Richmond, Virginia (see "Resources" below), was able to develop a full-day workshop about adoption for a Virginia school system's staff development department that educated school personnel system-wide. She then developed a similar course for college students pursuing a degree in education. Imagine what an impact that is making!

Some schools already have support groups for children whose parents are divorced. Suggest the formation of a support group for adopted children and a person to facilitate it.

Volunteer for the family life education curriculum review committee. Make sure that positive adoption messages get into the curriculum.

The staff members at Information Gateway and other national adoption organizations

are prepared to help you by disseminating information on adoption to your school system upon request. Feel free to use all of us to help educate your child's educators.

Using Positive Adoption Language

The words we choose say a lot about how we really think. Using positive adoption language (PAL) means choosing words that show respect for birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. When we use PAL, we say that adoption is a valid way to form a family, just as birth is. Both are important, but one is not better than the other.

When Describing Family Relationships

Use terms such as:

"birthparent," "birthmother," and "birthfather" to describe the man and woman who conceived and gave birth to the child. All of us have birthparents, however, not all of us live in their custody.

"parent," "mother," "father," "mommy," "daddy," and "child" to describe the members of the adoptive family. It is not necessary to say "adopted child" or "adoptive parent" unless the situation specifically centers on adoption.

Avoid terms such as:

"real parent," "real mother," "real father," and "real family"—these terms imply that adoptive relationships are artificial and temporary.

“natural parent,” “natural child,” and “one of your own”—these terms imply that because they are not blood-related, the relationships in an adoptive family are not as strong or lasting as relationships by birth.

When Describing the Adoption Process

Use terms such as:

“make an adoption plan” or “choose adoption”—these terms acknowledge that the birthparents were responsible and in control of their decision.

“parent her child”—when a birthparent decides not to choose adoption.

Avoid terms such as:

“abandoned,” “surrendered,” “released,” “relinquished,” “gave up for adoption,” “adopted out,” or “put up for adoption.”

“keep her child”—this implies the child is a possession and ignores the responsibilities of parenting.

For more information on PAL, contact Adoptive Families of America, 2309 Como Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, 612.535.4829 or 800.372.3300; or Patricia Irwin Johnston at Perspectives Press, P.O. Box 90318, Indianapolis, IN 46290-0318, 317.872.3055. Ms. Johnston also has a free article about programs that use “adopt” in the title (such as “adopt a whale” or “adopt a highway”) called “Adopt-A-Confusion.”

Written by Debra G. Smith, National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 1993.