

## Helping Children Understand Adoption At Different Ages

### Preschool Years—Ages 3–5

Children at this age:

- are concrete
- learn through play
- are magical and egocentric thinkers (not logical)
- believe the world revolves around them

Tips for professionals and caregivers:

- Be concrete and simple. Use props such as dolls, simple drawings, and books.
- Stay relaxed and factual.
- Don't worry if children reject the explanation of being born to someone else for now.
- Begin talking about adoption right away, but remember to look for opportunities to talk about adoption in the future.
- Keep in mind that children usually feel good about being adopted at this age but will still have confusion.

### Elementary Years—Ages 6–10

Children at this age:

- face many challenges inside and outside the family
- learn motor skills
- acquire academic knowledge
- socialize with peers (primarily same sex)
- become more and more independent and competent
- experience ordinary conflicts with parents over TV privileges, chores, clothes, bedtimes, language, movies etc.

Tips for professionals:

- Respect the child's privacy in public.
- Notice and help kids with adopted-related teasing.
- Help kids deflect intrusive questions if they do not want to talk about adoption.
- Be proactive. Mention adoption and adoptive families regularly. Some children may volunteer to share about their adoption and their story. Be casual and encouraging.
- Support the idea that there are many kinds of families, including adoptive families.

Tips to pass on to caregivers:

- Take advantage of your child's growing maturity and relate more details of your child's history and early life.
- Help your child distinguish between what is public information and what is private. Help your children understand that details from their past can be kept private or shared only with those they choose to share them with.
- For newly arrived older children, help them rehearse simple answers to inevitable questions. Adopted children sometimes get asked insensitive questions that they shouldn't have to answer ("Why didn't your mom want you?") and can use help thinking of ways to deal with them.
- Respect your child's comfort level regarding public exposure of her adoption. Offer opportunities for your child to participate in celebrations, cultural fairs, and school presentations but don't insist.
- Bring up the subject of adoption casually but often.
- Help your child connect with other adopted kids and families.

### **Young Adolescent—Ages 11-15**

Children at this age:

- understand adoption and their personal story in a completely new way.
- are maturing and growing physically and emotionally at a rapid rate.
- are forming their identity and sense of self. What they will look like, whom they will be like, and whom they belong to are growing questions.
- are more strongly impacted by the facts of their adoption, as they are able to comprehend what it means.

Tips for professionals:

- Model the use of current adoption language. The children and families you work with may or may not use it. If they don't, help them to learn it.
- Avoid putting a child on the spot about being adopted or being knowledgeable about it.
- Mention adoption and adoptive families as one of many ways to build a family.
- If youth bring up adoption concerns, provide facts and encourage parental involvement.

Tips to pass on to caregivers:

- Take opportunities to clarify adoption information for your child.
- Expect that your child will have gaps in understanding or remembering the information you previously provided.
- Be particularly respectful when speaking of birth parents.
- Give as much specific information about your child's adoption as you can.

## Youth—Ages 16–22+

### Youth:

- try to find their place in the adult world
- are often overwhelmed as they search for their identity
- feel challenged as they explore school, work, and housing options

### Tips for professionals:

- Learn the Seven Core Issues in Adoption (see handout) and take them into consideration when working with adopted youth. (Remember life-changing experiences that occur throughout adulthood, such as moving, graduation, divorce, death, birth, college etc. can trigger unresolved issues of adoption.)
- Mention adoption and adoptive families in your practice or work.
- Treat the subject of personal or family history with sensitivity and offer alternative strategies for dealing with gaps in information.
- Listen and process with teens or young adults who bring up adoption issues.
- If a youth needs help, facilitate a referral to a counselor with parent permission.
- Remember a youth's desire to seek information about his birth family doesn't mean he doesn't love or need the support of his adopted family.
- Learn about the adoption support groups in your area and refer families to them.

### Tips to pass on to caregivers:

- Don't stop talking about adoption.
- Always refer to your child's birth parents with respect.
- Use news, movies, TV shows with adoption themes, school biology assignments, etc. to start a conversation about adoption.
- Be sure to listen when your teen is talking!
- Share everything you know about your child's story. It is hers to have.
- Join an adoption support group.
- Contact local or online support group or counseling for help when needed.

(Adapted from Minnesota Adoption Resource Network's (MARN) web site: [www.mnadopt.org](http://www.mnadopt.org))

