

# The Impact of Adoption

Although adoption is often a joyful and exciting occasion, it can also give rise to lifelong challenges for members of the adoption constellation—adoptees, birth parents and their extended family members, and adoptive parents and their extended family members. How and when you are affected by both the positive elements and challenging issues of adoption depend on many factors, including your personality, family dynamics, and what might be happening in the world around you.

Members of the adoption constellation may experience any number of the following seven core issues related to adoption:

1. Loss
2. Rejection
3. Shame and guilt
4. Grief
5. Identity
6. Intimacy
7. Mastery and control

Awareness of these issues can help families better understand each other and the personal effects of the adoption experience. This factsheet provides an overview of the seven core issues in adoption and how they may affect the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of children and adults who have been adopted, birth parents, and adoptive parents—also known as the "adoption triad." Other members of the adoption constellation, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles, may also relate to some of the core issues discussed in this factsheet. Links to additional resources are also provided.

## WHAT'S INSIDE

Seven core issues in adoption

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## SEVEN CORE ISSUES IN ADOPTION

The core issues listed above were first introduced in a 1982 article by Silverstein and Kaplan titled *Seven Core Issues in Adoption*. A 2019 update (Roszia & Maxon) called *Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency: A Comprehensive Guide to Promoting Understanding and Healing in Adoption, Foster Care, Kinship Families and Third Party Reproduction* expands on these seven core issues, broadens the description of who may encounter them to include people who have experienced adoption and all forms of permanency, and draws on the perspectives and experiences of diverse groups of people who have been affected by adoption. Every person affected by adoption may not experience all seven issues or encounter them in the order in which they are described here. Experiences can manifest differently depending on a person's age and developmental stage, the situation in which they were adopted, and their personal history or life situation. Regardless of your adoption experience—whether you were adopted; whether you adopted an infant, child, or young person through an agency, the foster care system, or another country; or whether the adoption was voluntary or involuntary—these lifelong challenges will likely affect you at some point.

To read more about the content in the 2019 update, visit <https://www.nacac.org/resource/seven-core-issues-in-adoption-and-permanency/>.

## LOSS

Loss is the central issue faced by those involved with adoption (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). For birth parents, people who were adopted, and adoptive parents, involvement with adoption is typically associated with an initial loss that continues to affect them throughout their lives.

For birth parents, adoption means the loss of a child whom they may never see again and the loss of a parenting role. People who were adopted may lose their birth families, including siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. They may lose a cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial/transcultural adoption). If they were adopted as older children, they may also lose friends, foster families, pets, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings. Adoptive parents may have experienced loss associated with incomplete pregnancies, failed fertility treatments, and dreams of raising a child with whom they are genetically connected.

Adoption-related loss may be vague and difficult to understand, especially for birth parents and adoptees. Adoption-related loss is described as a feeling of distress and confusion about people who are physically absent but psychologically present in your life (sometimes called "ambiguous loss") (FosterParentCollege.com, 2016). With ambiguous loss, you may think often about the person or people you miss and wonder whether they are alive, if you will see them again, and if they think about you. What makes this type of loss difficult is that it's not

well recognized by the larger society (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). The uncertainty of adoption-related loss makes it difficult for birth parents and people who were adopted to grieve and delays the grieving process.

Support groups can help create a sense of community and shared experience, and they may provide a good outlet for coping with residual feelings related to an adoption, such as loss or grief. If you are interested in finding a support group, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>).

## REJECTION

The loss experienced in adoption is often heightened by feelings of rejection, particularly for those who have been adopted. People who were adopted commonly feel rejected by their birth parents, even if they were adopted as infants. If you were adopted, that sense of rejection may lead to challenges with self-esteem and a sense of belonging, as well as a tendency to avoid certain situations or relationships for fear of being hurt.

Feelings of rejection are normal and common for members of the adoption triad. If you're an adoptive parent, you may wonder if you were meant to be a parent and may watch for signs of rejection from your child. Some children or young people, particularly those adopted from foster care, may unintentionally project their feelings of rejection, anger, and abandonment onto their adoptive parents. This experience can be painful for the parents. It is wise for adoptive parents to prepare for this possibility, to recognize the behavior as

a sign of trust and valuable communication, and to model compassion and acceptance. To learn more, refer to Information Gateway's *Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-transition/>).

## Search and Reunion

Thanks to advances in technology, specifically the internet—including social media—and more accessible DNA testing, birth families and people who were adopted are more easily able to research family contact information and establish connections than in the past. Since search and reunion can be emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss, adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before conducting search and reunion efforts. It helps to think through expectations and prepare for a range of potential outcomes and reactions, including rejection, from the other party. For more information, see the Information Gateway publication, *Searching for Birth Relatives* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-search/>).

## SHAME AND GUILT

Shame and guilt about adoption or being adopted may worsen feelings of grief. The shame of being involved in adoption may be subconscious. Shame and guilt associated with adoption may affect your self-esteem,

discourage you from thinking positively about yourself, and limit you from loving and receiving love from others (Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

For example, an adoptive parent may feel ashamed for being unable to have a biological child. If you were adopted, you may feel ashamed because your birth parents were unable to raise you themselves. A birth parent may feel guilty and ashamed for having an unplanned pregnancy and admitting the situation to parents, friends, coworkers, and others. After the birth, the decision to choose adoption for the child may prompt new feelings of guilt about “rejecting” the child, no matter how thoughtful the decision or difficult the circumstances of the adoption.

For more information about shame in adoption, visit the Pact website (<http://www.pactadopt.org/resources/shame-and-secrecy-in-adoption.html>).

## **GRIEF**

Grief is the pain that stems from loss and the recognition of the family or life that was lost through adoption. It is natural and often occurs throughout the lifelong journey of adoption. Birth parents tend to experience intense grief at the time of the adoption, and that grief may reemerge periodically, including at milestones such as the child's birthday or when he or she is old enough to start school. During adolescence, people who were adopted may feel intense grief as they become more aware of the separation from their birth families and further develop their identities (Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

Adoption-related grief isn't widely known or understood by society at large. We lack formal rituals or ceremonies to mark the loss caused by adoption and the resulting grief. If you are a member of the triad, you may not be aware that you are grieving. Because our culture considers people who were adopted “lucky” to have been chosen by another family, you may not feel like you should be grieving, and many of your friends may not recognize or understand your grief.

Unattended grief may manifest itself in destructive behaviors, self-medication, anger, or denial. Children and young people, especially those in foster care, need help labeling their feelings and understanding when their struggles are expressions of grief. Even experienced child welfare workers and therapists who do not specialize in adoption may not understand the relationship between loss and grief that is experienced by members of the triad. To assist children and adults who are dealing with adoption-related grief, the importance of knowledgeable caseworkers and adoption-competent therapists cannot be overstated.

For information to help your child deal with grief and loss, visit Information Gateway's Helping Adopted Children Cope With Grief and Loss webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/helping/>).

To read about adoptive parents' experiences helping their children heal from grief, visit the North American Council on Adoptable Children website (<https://www.nacac.org/resource/helping-children-recover-from-grief/>).

To cope with grief, help is available through professional therapists who have significant experience with adoption and bereavement. These professionals understand that adoption-related grief looks and behaves differently from other kinds of grief. Referrals for therapists may come from friends, support groups, or the adoption agency or attorney who helped with your adoption. For more information, refer to Information Gateway's *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>).

## IDENTITY

As a life-altering event, adoption affects the identities of all those involved. If you were adopted, you may have experienced adoption-related identity issues throughout your life, especially around milestones such as birthdays, holidays, births, and deaths. You may see your identity as incomplete, unsteady, or contradictory. Your birth parents are your parents, but they aren't parenting you. You were born into one family and adopted into another.

If you were adopted and lack genetic, medical, religious, and other historical information about your birth family, you may want answers to questions that would help form your identity, such as why your birth parents placed you for adoption, what became of those parents, whether you have siblings, and whether you resemble your birth parents or extended family of origin in appearance or in other characteristics. You may struggle to find answers to these questions and may feel out of place or as if you don't belong in your

adoptive family. Having access to genetic and health information is critically important in terms of wellness.

Adoptive parents and birth parents may be uncertain about their identities and roles in a child's life. Adoptive parents may not feel like "real" parents or like they are entitled to be parents, and birth parents may be unsure of their role in their child's life since they are not actively parenting that child. These identity issues may change over time due to various factors, such as formal changes to the level of ongoing contact between adoptive and birth families or the wishes of the child who was adopted. These feelings can also come up during the search and reunion process. For more information, visit Information Gateway's Ongoing Contact With Birth Families in Adoption webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/before-adoption/openness/>).

"Lifebooks" can help children and young people who were adopted better understand themselves and their identity within their adoptive family. For more on these books, visit Information Gateway's Lifebooks webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks/>).

Due to adoption-related identity issues, it may be hard for parents and people who were adopted to talk about adoption with others, including their own families.

Identity formation begins in childhood and becomes more important during the teenage years. Gaps in identity and lack of access to individuals and information may be more pronounced when a child starts school or has a family-oriented classroom assignment (e.g., creating a family tree). For more information and resources, visit the following Information Gateway webpages:

- Talking About Adoption  
(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/talking/>)
- Adoption and School  
(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/school/>)

For more information about identity issues, including support for those who were adopted and education for adoptive parents, visit the Pact website (<http://www.pactadopt.org/resources/identity-issues.html>).

## **INTIMACY**

People who were adopted may be challenged by intimacy or becoming close to others due to losses resulting from adoption. They may subconsciously try to avoid experiencing a new loss by keeping an emotional distance from or not committing to someone else. Intimacy or attachment may be difficult for members of the triad due to related feelings of rejection, shame, grief, and uncertainty about identity. Attachment issues can occur when a secure, emotional bond formed between a child and a parent is disrupted. Involvement with adoption may affect your ability to form healthy attachments, making it more difficult to trust and to form meaningful relationships throughout life.

Adoptive and birth parents may also experience intimacy-related difficulties. If you are a birth parent, sex, pregnancy, and closeness to others may be emotionally painful. Birth parents may be especially reluctant to form relationships with family or children who later come into their lives.

The intimate relationship of the adoptive parents may have been hurt by the inability to conceive. This may shape the couple's relationship and affect the family dynamic into which they bring an adopted child. If you are an adoptive parent, you may struggle to help your child who is also experiencing attachment issues. Attachment challenges range from difficulties relating to others to severe social-functioning disorders. Appropriate treatments can help parents nurture secure attachments and cope with behaviors that may result from earlier attachment disruptions.

For more information about helping children form attachments, visit the AdoptUSKids website (<https://www.adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/receiving-a-placement/forming-attachments>).

## **MASTERY AND CONTROL**

Adoption requires birth parents, adoptive parents, and people who were adopted to give up some sense of control. For birth parents who experience an unplanned pregnancy or become unable to care for their child, neglect or abuse may result, and a dire situation may be resolved through adoption. Relinquishing your parental rights or having your child enter foster care can lead to feelings of victimization and powerlessness that may continue to affect your life and identity.

If you were adopted, you may have not been involved in the decisions that led to adoption, especially if the adoption occurred when you were an infant or young child. Adults made life-altering choices for you that were out of your control. These decisions may have hindered your growth toward self-actualization and self-control and led to a lowered sense of self-responsibility. Teens and older youth who were adopted frequently engage in power struggles with adoptive parents and other authority figures (e.g., teachers, coaches, counselors). Such behavior may be an attempt to regain the loss of control experienced in adoption.

For an adoptive parent, the adoption process can be cumbersome and may lead to feelings of helplessness. You may view yourself as powerless or unworthy of being a parent, which can lead to a less engaged parenting style. Conversely, you may try to regain the control lost by becoming strict, overprotective, and domineering. This can cause the relationship with your child to become inflexible and result in additional tension. For information on this topic, refer to Information Gateway's *Parenting Your Adopted Teenager* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-teenager/>).

Refer to the following Information Gateway resources for additional information on adoption support and parenting your adopted child:

- *Accessing Adoption Support and Preservation Services* [factsheet] (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-postadoption/>)

- *Parenting After Adoption* [webpage] (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/>)

### **Building Resilience to Regain a Sense of Control**

Resilience can help all members of the adoption triad regain a sense of control. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), resilience is the ability to adapt or cope in a positive way to adversity, including trauma, tragedy, threats, and significant stress. If you were adopted, resilience can help you thrive despite the accompanying grief, rejection, guilt, and shame you may have experienced or will experience at different times in your life. Resilience involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned over time and nurtured through positive and healthy relationships with other adults, parents, or caregivers. For general information on resilience, including ways to build it, visit the APA website (<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>).

For adoptive parents, building your resilience can help support your child's resilience and improve your family's long-term well-being. For ways to help children build resilience, refer to Information Gateway's *Building Resilience in Children and Teens* ([https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/resilience\\_ts\\_2019.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/resilience_ts_2019.pdf)) or visit the APA website (<https://www.apa.org/topics/parenting/resilience-tip-tool>).

## CONCLUSION

Adoption often marks the joyous beginning of a new family embarking on a rich journey together. Adoption often marks an ending, as well, and the separation of children from their parents and families of origin. Even in the most ideal circumstances where some level of ongoing contact continues with extended family members, adoption-related issues will likely arise at different points in the lives of people who were adopted and their birth or adoptive parents. A willingness to learn about these issues and seek support if necessary can help ensure that parents and those who were adopted experience happy and healthy family lives.

## RESOURCES

**Child Welfare Information Gateway.** This service of the Children's Bureau provides information and publications on a wide range of adoption topics.

- Adoption Materials for Specific Audiences (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/adoption-materials/>)
- *Adoption Options: Where Do I Start?* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-adoptoption/>)
- For Adopted People (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/>)
- For Expectant Parents Considering Adoption and Birth Parents (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/>)
- *Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-maintainrelationships/>)

- Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents and Relatives (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/working-parents-families/impacts/>)
- Lifelong Impact of Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/impact/>)
- Maintaining Connections After Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/connections/>)
- *Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/preschool/>)
- *Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-school-age/>)
- Understanding the Emotional Impact of Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/emotional-impact/>)

**Adoption Exchange.** The Adoption Exchange provides expertise and support before, during, and after the adoption process. It also provides educational support nationally to adoptive families. (<http://www.adoptex.org>)

**AdoptUSKids.** This national project of the Children's Bureau provides information on subsidies, services, and training to help parents and children or youth throughout the adoption process. It also features adoption stories from families that describe the challenges and lessons they have learned. (<https://www.adoptuskids.org/>)

**American Adoption Congress.** This nonprofit membership organization provides education, advocacy, and support for all families touched by adoption. (<http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/>)

**Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.).** The C.A.S.E. website includes information on adoption-competent therapy, adoption training, and community education. It also offers publications, including the *W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook*, which empowers adopted children to answer questions about adoption if, when, and how they choose. (<http://adoptionsupport.org/>)

**Families Adopting in Response (FAIR).** FAIR is an all-volunteer organization that offers information, education, support, and fellowship to adoptive and preadoptive families. Members include families who have adopted children through public and private agencies from the United States and from many other countries. (<http://www.fairfamilies.org>)

**Institute for Human Services.** The Institute for Human Services provides child welfare training and offers a number of resources to support parents who foster and adopt children from the child welfare system. (<http://www.ihs-trainet.com/>)

**North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC).** NACAC, founded by adoptive parents, supports, educates, and empowers adoptive parents and children or youth who were adopted. It also provides training for parents and youth to create, develop, and enhance support networks. (<https://www.nacac.org/>)

**Pact, an Adoption Alliance.** Pact offers a comprehensive site addressing issues for adopted children of color, offering informative articles on related topics as well as family profiles, links to other resources, and a reference guide with a searchable database. (<http://www.pactadopt.org/>)

## REFERENCES

- FosterParentCollege.com. (2016). *Understanding ambiguous loss*. Retrieved from <http://azfamilyresources.org/pdf/UnderstandingAmbiguousLoss.pdf>
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## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). *The impact of adoption*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Administration on Children, Youth and Families Children's Bureau



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