



Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child



School-age children—those between the ages of 6 and 12—are learning critical skills and gaining interests that will carry into adolescence and adulthood. Adoption can add layers of complexity to their developmental tasks. Adoptive parents can best support their children by learning as much as they can about child development and by being aware of how adoption may influence their child's emotional growth.

What's Inside:

- Understanding child development and the impact of adoption
- Communicating about adoption
- Disciplining effectively
- Improving your child's school experience
- Seeking help for mental health concerns
- Summary



This factsheet is designed to help you understand and respond to your adopted school-age child's developmental needs. It provides simple, practical strategies you can use to foster healthy development, including approaches for building attachment, talking honestly with your child about adoption, acknowledging his or her adoptive history, using appropriate discipline, and enhancing your child's school experience. Because some adoptive families will need extra help addressing their children's mental health needs, the factsheet also discusses when and how to seek help.

Understanding Child Development and the Impact of Adoption

School-aged children go through many significant developmental changes. It is important for parents to understand the typical tasks and needs of school-aged children as well as how adoption-related experiences may affect children. Knowing what to expect will help you meet your child's needs, strengthen your relationship, and identify and address important emotional or physical concerns.

The section below is an overview of growth and development patterns for school-age children; the sections that follow address issues related to adoption, their potential effects on child development and school experiences, and specific ways that you can help your child meet these challenges. It is important to remember that not all of

these issues apply to all adopted children; personal histories and experiences vary greatly from child to child.

Developmental Overview

Developmental changes common to 6- to 12-year-olds include:

- **Physical changes.** Children in this age group develop rapidly in their physical strength, skills, and coordination. Both the large muscles (legs, arms, and body trunk) and the small muscles of the hands and fingers are developing.
- **Ability to process information from the senses (sensory integration).** By grade school, most children are able to react appropriately to information they get from their five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch).
- **Enhanced thinking and language abilities.** Problem-solving skills improve and expand in this stage of development. Children ask more detailed questions and demand more thorough explanations. They create and understand increasingly complex sentences. In the later grade-school years, children start to think in abstract terms (e.g., understanding symbols and representations).
- **Social and emotional development.** School-age children learn to describe and control their feelings. As they mature, their relationships deepen. They discover empathy—the ability to consider others' feelings and points of view.
- **Greater sense of self.** In middle childhood, children develop an identity based on who they are in relation to their

family, classmates, ethnic group, and community members. This is a major developmental task, particularly in the upper age range of this group.

- **Growing independence.** School-age children become more independent and increase their activities and social contacts out of the home. Peer relationships become more important as they approach adolescence.

A child's history and adoptive experience can affect his or her development. When thinking about their child's progress, parents should consider factors around their child's adoption, such as its social and emotional impact; developmental delays; and effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol or other drugs, child abuse and neglect, or multiple moves.

Social and Emotional Impact of Adoption

School-age children form a stronger sense of who they are. Much of that identity comes from their family and the relationships with the people in their lives. For adopted children, developing an identity is more complicated. They must merge two separate families and histories as they explore how they fit in. In middle childhood, children adopted as infants or toddlers often start thinking about themselves and their pasts more carefully. They begin to sort through critically important questions about who they are. Those who felt "special" and "chosen" because they were adopted may begin to realize, at least subconsciously, that someone else "unchose" them. Many struggle with issues of self-worth, self-esteem, and being different. Newly adopted children may be grieving for previous

homes or caretakers. Some adopted children may have difficulty with social relationships outside the family. These emotional tasks can interfere with concentration and distract children from schoolwork.

Other social and emotional concerns that adoptive parents should be aware of are:

- Children who did not spend enough time with emotionally healthy adults may have difficulty identifying and controlling their emotions.
- Children from orphanages or group care settings may not have had many opportunities to see or practice healthy social interactions.
- Children who were maltreated may not have learned how to empathize with others, may have learned to relate to others in a violent way, or may reenact trauma they have experienced.
- Children who have been separated abruptly from previous caretakers or who have insecure attachment to their primary caregivers (see below) may be anxious when they are away from home.

What you can do:

- Using age-appropriate language, talk with your child about his or her relationships with others.
- Help your child remember the places where he or she has lived and the people who were in his or her life before coming to your home.
- Speak positively about birth family members and prior caretakers.

- Teach your child the words for various feelings.
- Explain to your child how to handle and express emotions.
- Be a positive example to your child as you express emotions. (“I feel so angry right now, I think I’ll take a walk until I cool down.”)
- Teach your child how to interact with others. Practice how to greet a playmate, how to ask for something, how to share.
- Coach your child on how to see things from another person’s point of view. (“I wonder how Sammy felt when no one chose him for their team.”) This helps children develop empathy.
- Make sure there is plenty of family time: routines, schedules, consistency, and a safe and secure environment.

The Importance of Attachment

Attachment refers to the emotional connection that develops between an infant and his/her primary caregiver. This process is very important to all aspects of a child’s later development. Attachment is the basis for trust, and it shapes how a child will relate to the world, learn, and form relationships throughout life.

Healthy attachment occurs when the infant experiences a primary caregiver as consistently providing emotional essentials such as touch, movement, eye contact, and smiles, in addition to the basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. A healthy primary attachment teaches young children that their needs will be met. This attachment frees them to explore, play, learn, and develop relationships.

If the attachment process is disrupted, the child may not develop the secure base necessary to support future healthy development. Factors which may impair healthy attachment include: spending early years in orphanages or large group homes, multiple moves from caregiver to caregiver, invasive or painful medical procedures, sudden or traumatic separation from the mother, hospitalization at critical developmental periods, neglect, sexual or physical abuse, prenatal alcohol or drug exposure, and neurological problems.

A child with insecure attachment might show traits of young child in the “oral stage,” with abnormal speech patterns and eating patterns. Children with insecure attachments may show developmental delays (see next section); however once these children are placed permanently in a family where there are stable parents and no substance abuse, they often make great strides.

If your child had inconsistent care in his or her early years, you can parent in ways that repair and develop healthy attachments. Think about the age of your child at the time he or she experienced trauma (such as being moved from one caregiver to another). In some ways, your child may be “stuck” at this stage of development. When you interact with your child according to his or her emotional and physical needs, you improve attachment. A skilled adoption counselor or professional can help you and your child strengthen your attachment to each other.

A word of caution: Avoid “attachment therapies” that use questionable techniques such as physically restraining, isolating, or

placing children in residential care away from their families. Attachment runs along a continuum; most children with insecure attachments do not have the most severe form of attachment disorder, called Reactive Attachment Disorder. Beware of therapists who are quick to use that terminology or diagnosis.

What you can do:

- Give your child the amount and type of structure, nurturing, attention, and supervision you would normally give a child several years younger.
- Establish consistent one-to-one parent/child time.
- Talk to and play with your child every day, even if only for a few minutes.
- Make eye contact and smile before you address your child.
- Offer gentle words of encouragement and praise often.
- Use “time in” rather than “time out” with children who have attachment issues.
- Find age-appropriate ways to have physical contact (hugs, combing hair, kneading dough together).
- Place notes with kind messages in lunch boxes and leave small surprises for after school.
- Engage your child in planning future events.
- Speak positively about birth parents and other caregivers from the child’s past.
- Fuss over your child at every opportunity.
- Nurture, nurture, nurture!

Developmental Delays

Some adopted children may have developmental delays. A developmental delay is defined as a *significant* lag in one or more skill areas. Delays can be caused by genetic factors (such as Down syndrome) or environmental factors (including exposure to alcohol or other drugs during pregnancy, trauma, neglect, or insecure attachment). In some cases it is difficult to know what caused a developmental delay.

Children learn skills and develop at different rates, so don’t worry if your child is slightly behind peers in one or two areas. Also, learning a second language or adjusting to a new culture may create *temporary* delays. While many children will catch up developmentally, others will not.

What you can do:

- Ask your school or doctor for a professional assessment if you notice:
 - Significant lags in many developmental areas
 - Loss of previous skills
 - Extreme behavior
 - Signs of sensory difficulties, such as extreme reactions to touch, light, sounds, or motion
- Access screening and other resources through Medicaid’s Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) service, if they are available to your family: www.cms.hhs.gov/MedicaidEarlyPeriodicScrn/

- If an assessment reveals that your child has a disability:
 - Focus on building and maintaining a strong foundation of attachment with your child (see previous section). Children with insecure attachment to primary caregivers may be cognitively younger than their actual age.
 - Advocate for school personnel to work with you to develop an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that will ensure special education services to address your child's needs.
 - Learn about your child's condition. For a list of organizations that provide information about children with special needs, see: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?subjID=3&rate_chno=11-11286
 - Join a support group, in person or online, for adoptive parents or other parents of children who have your child's specific disability.
- Inform your child's teacher about his or her condition. Provide specific information about how the delay or disability affects your child's ability to succeed in school. Ask the teacher to:
 - Give your child more time to complete tasks
 - Assign worksheets or tests with fewer problems per page
 - Provide him or her with extra classroom space or a quiet location to improve concentration
- Make sure your child's teacher is sensitive/informed about adoption issues.
 - Create a less distracting environment for homework. Provide homework assistance or tutoring if needed.
 - There are many resources to help teachers and parents explore additional strategies. For more information, see the Resources for Teachers section of the Information Gateway website: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/nam/teachers.cfm

Effects of Child Maltreatment and Trauma

Exposure to child maltreatment and trauma affect how children learn, think, feel, and interact, even after they join safe and stable adoptive homes. For example, maltreated children:

- May exhibit speech or other developmental delays
- May have experienced chaotic home conditions that lacked consistent schedules, consequences, and expectations
- May not have witnessed healthy relationships, had appropriate role models, or learned how to communicate with others
- May have not developed appropriate social skills or personal hygiene habits, due to a lack of consistent and appropriate parent-child interaction
- May not have attended school consistently, learned study habits, or had a stable home life that supported learning

In addition, children who were sexually abused may have sexual feelings, knowledge, and questions not common to children of the same age. They may need

loving guidance and redirection to learn how to deal with those memories and feelings in a socially acceptable manner. For more information, see *Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* on the Information Gateway website: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_abused/index.cfm

What you can do:

- Interact with your child according to his or her developmental needs instead of the child's chronological age.
- Teach your child acceptable patterns of interaction and communication for his or her age. Use simple explanations, examples, and practices.
- Give your child clear information about sexuality and sexual development.
- Teach your child about safety, privacy, and appropriate ways of showing affection.

Communicating About Adoption

Parents who feel good about adoption, are comfortable talking about it, and can openly acknowledge their child's feelings are best able to help their children do the same. Parents who tense up when the topic is raised or who keep it a secret may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. This section presents tips for communicating about adoption and recognizing your child's history in a positive way.

BASE INTERACTIONS ON DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS, NOT AGE

If your child came from an institution or an abusive family situation, he or she may have missed out on some important tasks, such as learning to communicate with others and express feelings appropriately. Playing with other children, taking turns, or just having fun may be new experiences. As a result, your child may need time to catch up to children in the same age group in some skills. If English is not the child's first language, he or she may have added delays and challenges.

You can help your child overcome such lags by using parenting strategies based on your child's developmental level, not just his or her age. For example, a 7-year-old child may need the bedtime routine of a 3-year-old. A 12-year-old may need to learn appropriate social interactions in groups of two or three friends before he or she is ready to join a larger group activity. Allow your child to learn at his or her own pace. Break tasks down into small, manageable steps, so that your child will feel a sense of success and accomplishment. Let progress be guided by your child's readiness to move on to the next developmental stage.

Choose Your Words Carefully

Talk openly and honestly with your school-age child about adoption. However, be aware of the words you use.

Consider the following word choices—

Use:	Instead of:
<i>Birth</i> or <i>first</i> mother, father, family	<i>Real</i> or <i>natural</i> mother, father, family
We could not have a child <i>born to us</i> .	We could not have <i>our own</i> child.
They were not able to take care of a <i>child</i> (or <i>any child</i>) at that time.	Your birth parents were not able to take care of <i>you</i> .
<i>Intercountry</i> adoption	<i>Foreign</i> adoption
Your birth family (or the judge) <i>made a plan</i> for you to be adopted.	They <i>gave you up</i> for adoption.

In communicating with your child:

- Think about how your words might be understood by your child. Many adoptive parents try to build their child’s self-esteem by saying things that may seem positive but that can be misinterpreted. For example:
 - “*Your birth mom gave you up for adoption because she loved you so much.*” A child may start to wonder if the adoptive parents also will send him or her away because of their love.
 - “*You are very lucky to be adopted.*” Adopted children should not be expected to be grateful to have a family or to be cared for. This can lead to a self-esteem issue (i.e., Why am I less deserving of a having a family than other children?)
 - “*We chose to adopt you—you are special.*” Adoptees may later realize the loss that is implied by being “chosen” (they first had to be “unchosen”).

- Do not sugarcoat the adoption experience. Doing so denies children the support they need as they grieve their unique adoption losses. For example, talking only about how wonderful it was for your child to be adopted ignores the fact that gaining your family also means losing the experience of being raised with the birth family. All adoption involves loss.
- Practice talking about adoption in an adoptive parent support group or with others in your support network, and let them give you feedback.

There are many books, articles, and online resources available to help you and your child learn more about how to communicate sensitively about adoption.

Handle Difficult Information Sensitively

Adoptive parents often try to protect their children from the more painful aspects of their histories. You may wonder what to tell and what to hold back from your child.

Here are some guidelines that can help you handle difficult information:

- Decide *how* and *when* to share difficult information, not if—not telling is not an option. Your child is likely to find out eventually and has a right to his or her own history. You are the best person to give your child the facts and to help him or her understand them.
- State the truth simply. Do not tell your child details that might be too complex for him or her to understand at this time. Give more information as your child develops and is able to handle more, using age appropriate language. A professional can guide you in this process.
- Present the facts about your child’s history or birth family without judgmental comments or criticism.
- Help your child understand that the choices and mistakes birth family members made have no bearing on the child’s value. Explain that the actions of that adult do not mean that they didn’t care for the child.
- Realize that all adoptive children “own” their birth parents. Criticism of a birth parent will at some point be reflected in how the child feels about him- or herself.

Use a Lifebook

A “lifebook” records your child’s personal history. It contains pictures, objects, news clippings, and other memorabilia that have a personal meaning. A lifebook is an excellent way to preserve information and help your child understand where he or she came from. Use the book to help your child

understand more about his or her history and to continue to process losses at each developmental stage. Your child should be involved in helping to create his or her lifebook. Creating this book together is a good way for you to build attachment with your child and demonstrate that you value your child’s important relationships from his or her past.

Here are some tips to help you and your child create a lifebook:

- Start at the beginning of your child’s story—with his or her birth, not with the adoption. (Some adopted children have thought they were never born.)
- Gather and preserve as much information as you can about your child’s birth circumstances and birth family, origins, and history.
- If you don’t have specific information about the birth family, you can still provide information about your child’s birth country, State, city, and/or neighborhood. Do not make up details you do not have.
- Present facts simply, in ways that the child can understand.
- Ask birth family members, former caregivers, orphanage staff, and previous caseworkers to gather photos and memorabilia for the book. You can ask the placing agency to help you make contacts.
- If your child was adopted in another country, include visuals from his or her native country, such as postcards, woven fabrics, popular folk images, native cartoon characters.

- Make copies of all pictures and protect the pages of the life story book.
- Allow your child to be involved in creating the book and deciding when and with whom to share it.
- Update the book together regularly.

Honor People in Your Child's Past

Find ways to acknowledge and show respect for your child's birth parents and birth family members:

- Take the initiative by talking about birth families and prior caregivers: "I bet your birth mother is thinking about you today," or "I wonder if you miss the people who took care of you before you came here."
- Speak kindly of people in your child's past. Children identify with their birth parents even if they have no contact with them or memory of them. As your child matures, he or she can understand more about his or her birth parents' weaknesses—the child will not need you to point these out.
- Resist the temptation to make up information or put a better spin on your child's history. Highlight the positive without denying reality.
- Offer an alternate viewpoint if your child criticizes his or her birth parents ("Your mom was a victim herself" or "Your dad was too young to make good judgments"). Your child's attachment to you is strengthened by your show of respect for the family he or she came from.

In an open adoption, there is some level of contact with birth family members or with previous foster parents or caregivers. Contact can vary, from exchanging letters and photos through a third party (often an agency), to face-to-face visits. Contact with the birth family or others from the past helps the adopted child understand his or her history. It promotes identity development, self-esteem, and attachment to the adoptive family. As with any extended family relationship, there may be inconveniences and challenges. Handle these with sensitivity and respect. Seeing that you value his or her birth relatives or previous caretakers will help your child feel better about him- or herself and closer to you.

For children with no birth family contacts, you can:

- Show your interest in finding as much information about your child's past as you can.
- For transracial or transcultural adoptions, help your child learn about his or her race or birth country—its culture, history, language, and current events. Attend adoption or culture camps, participate in events in your child's community of origin, and/or build relationships with adults from your child's racial or ethnic background.
- For intercountry adoptions, learn with your child about the food, history, and traditional dress of his or her country of origin. Find activities you can do together, such as making a flag from that country. If possible, plan a future family trip to the child's homeland. Many placing agencies and adoption organizations arrange homeland trips.

Incorporate Adoption Into Family Rituals

School-age children who have been adopted enjoy special family rituals to honor and remember their past and celebrate adoption. Creating your own adoption rituals can be a shared family activity. Here are some ideas:

- Adoptive families can honor birth parents and grandparents on Mother's Day and Father's Day with special prayers, cards, or candle-lighting ceremonies.
- Adoption anniversaries can be acknowledged with special meals or events.
- Holidays and significant events of a child's birthplace can be celebrated (for example, the date your child's country of origin recognizes its own independence day, thanksgiving, or the new year).

Help Your Child Cope With Loss and Trauma

You may need to help your child cope with adoption-related grief and loss or past trauma. Here are some ways you can promote communication and acknowledge your child's feelings:

- **Address the issue early.** Do not wait for your child to bring up the subject of adoption, express sadness about his or her family history, or start missing birth family members. Even if your child never mentions his or her birth parents, most adopted 6- to 12-year-olds have frequent thoughts about them. If you are open and matter-of-fact about the subject, it will help your child feel more comfortable, too.

- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** They are a normal part of coming to terms with adoption. Tell your child that it is natural for adopted children to think about their birth families and to feel sadness about the loss of family members or unknown family histories.
- **Resist the urge to rush in and cheer up a grieving child.** You cannot take away the losses of adoption. Just as children need the chance to learn and develop in their own ways, they need to work through grief and loss issues. You can help your child by being supportive. ("You seem sad. I wonder if you are thinking about your birth [or other] family.") Efforts to lessen their pain, on the other hand, can make children question the value of their feelings and reduce their confidence in their abilities to cope.
- **Interact with your child according to his or her emotional needs, not the child's age.** Help your child express sadness in the manner that best fits his or her stage of emotional development. A school-aged child may need to sob like a toddler and to be held and comforted like one.

It's also important to remember that not all issues and emotions will be related to adoption. Some will arise from your child's unique personality or developmental challenges.

Address Adoption-Related Fears and Fantasies

Children who have experienced the loss of a least one family or home may be fearful of

losing another. Fears may take the form of sleeping or eating difficulties, nightmares, separation difficulties, nervousness, and even increased allergies and illnesses. To lessen fears:

- Reassure your child that you intend to be his or her parent forever. Demonstrate this in both words and actions.
- Engage the child in planning future family events (e.g., “Next Thanksgiving, would you like to ... ?”).
- Purchase a photo album with spaces designated for school photos and memorabilia all the way through high school.

All children fantasize about an alternate family life—a “real” mother who never reprimands, a father who is a famous person. Sometimes adopted school-age children use fantasy to attempt to undo their losses. They may imagine their birth parent returning for them, or the adoption agency calling to report that they mistakenly placed the wrong child. To address fantasies:

- Encourage your child to talk about fantasies and express his or her feelings about adoption.
- Reassure your child that it is normal for adopted children to imagine what their lives might have been like had they not been adopted. Point out that everyone, adopted or not, does this occasionally. (“I wonder what would have happened if I had ... [gone to a different college, taken another job, been born into another family].”)

Disciplining Effectively

The purpose of discipline is to teach children acceptable behavior and how to develop their own internal controls. Discipline should take into account your child’s abilities, learning styles, and family history. Many resources are available for helping parents learn and use positive discipline. This section offers a few strategies that may be particularly useful for parents of adopted children.

Establish Routines and Rules

Consistent routines and rules are important for school-age children. They help children learn what to expect, which helps them to feel more secure and confident. Be patient when teaching family rules and routines to your adopted child. Children who were neglected, who had frequent changes in caretakers, or who lived in group settings may need extra time to understand healthy family structure and consistency. They may have to unlearn past patterns as they learn new ones.

Consider your child’s skills and previous experiences when you set rules or decide if a particular activity is allowed. A neglected child often needs more parental supervision than other children of the same age. You may need to protect and supervise as you would a younger child.

FORMING STRONG ATTACHMENTS

Parents must concentrate first on forming a positive relationship with their children before focusing on discipline. While some discipline will be needed from the beginning, these efforts will be more effective after a strong attachment is established between you and your child. Likewise, children with serious attachment problems may not respond to discipline in the same way as children who have a healthy, secure attachment with their parents. Children who have been abused should not be subjected to corporal punishment; other methods should be used. For more information on attachment and attachment issues, see the following sections of the Information Gateway website:

- Attachment:
www.childwelfare.gov/can/impact/development/attachment.cfm
- Nurturing and Attachment:
www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/promoting/protectfactors/nurture_attach.cfm
- Understanding Attachment:
www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/resourcefam/fosteradopt/attachment.cfm
- Attachment Difficulties:
www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/families/chall_attachment.cfm

Use Rewards and Consequences

Make every effort to recognize and reward good behavior. Praise can go a long way in encouraging your child's positive behavior. Be sure to praise *specific* behavior ("Great job cleaning your room," "I appreciate how nicely you shared with your little sister!") rather than say something general ("You're a good girl").

Also help your child understand the consequences of his or her negative behavior. Imposing a consequence or taking away a privilege (not going to the playground or less time for video games) is more effective in teaching better behavior when the child can see a logical connection to his or her actions. If, for example, your child rides his bicycle on a busy street where he has been told not to ride, then a fitting consequence might be no after-school bike riding for the next 3 days.

Neglected children and children with learning delays or prenatal substance abuse effects may need help understanding cause and effect. In some cases, children suffering from prenatal effects may never be able to make a connection between behavior and rewards or consequences.

Consider *Time In* Rather Than *Time Out*

Many parents like to use *time out*—placing a child in a safe place to think things over or cool down alone. This *time out* method, however, is not always appropriate for children who have been maltreated, who have attachment issues, or who were raised in orphanages. The first goal in parenting these children is to help them form healthy attachments. In these cases, it is better to

have the child remain close to you until he or she regains enough control to return to the previous activity (*time in*). This is useful because it avoids isolating children from their parents, playmates, and the rest of the family.

Improving Your Child's School Experience

Being adopted can affect your child's school experience. Peers may pose innocent questions that cause hurt feelings, or they may tease an adopted child about being adopted. Some classroom assignments may create tension, self-consciousness, or sadness. Children with learning disabilities may struggle to complete assignments, while children with emotional or behavioral problems may find it challenging to succeed socially or academically in school.

While you cannot protect your child from all of these possibilities, you can take a proactive approach to ensure that adoption is taught and respected as a valid way to create a family. Following are some actions you can take to improve your child's school experience.

Note: This section focuses specifically on adoption and school. Other delays and disabilities that may affect adopted children are not covered here, although they may also affect your child's school experience. These might include sensory integration difficulties, lack of trust, difficulty with transitions, and issues with self-esteem. For more information on other issues that

may affect children who have been abused or neglected, see the following areas of the Information Gateway website:

- Impact of Neglect:
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/neglect/chapterthree.cfm
- What Are the Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect?:
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/foundation/foundationf.cfm
- Treatment Issues for Abused and Neglected Children and Specialized Interventions:
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/treatment/treatmentf.cfm

Another resource you may find helpful: 7 Core Issues in Adoption (Kaplan-Rozia and Silverstein):
www.adoptionssupport.org/res/7core.php

Talk to Teachers About Adoption

Raise the topic of adoption at school:

- Ask your child's teacher(s) to include adoption in lessons on family diversity and nontraditional families.
- Offer to make a presentation about adoption to the school staff or to your child's class (but only with your child's input and approval).
- Encourage school personnel to use positive adoption language. (See "Choose Your Words Carefully" on page 7.)
- Donate books and materials about adoption to the school library.

In deciding how much information to share with school personnel about your child's history, follow the "need to know" rule. Share only the information needed to ease your child's adjustment and ensure his or her needs are met.

Advocate for Adoption-Sensitive and -Inclusive Assignments

Common grade-school assignments about families can raise concerns for adopted children as well as for other children in the class who lack access to family history or early family photos. Family tree or family history assignments are challenging to children who may feel they must choose between birth and adoptive families. Assignments about life histories can leave adoptive children feeling left out, as they may not have access to the information or photos requested. Ask your child's teacher to make simple adjustments to these assignments that will offer other ways for children to complete a project without changing the goals and objectives of the curriculum, such as:

- Instead of asking children to bring in a baby photo, ask them to bring in a photo of themselves when they were *younger* or to draw what they liked to do when they were younger.
- Instead of requiring children to draw a traditional family tree with all family members, provide an option to show roots and branches, allow children to create two or more trees, or replace the tree with a more flexible structure altogether (such as houses and rooms) for those who know little about their "roots" or birth family history.

In any case, request that the teacher discuss with the whole class any options for children who are adopted or who have other family structures.

Prepare Your Child to Handle Adoption Questions or Comments

Help your child decide how to talk about adoption with classmates and others:

- Ask your child to think in advance about how he or she wants to respond to questions about adoption.
- Offer "What if ... ?" scenarios and practice responses with your child.
- Teach your child that that it is up to him or her to decide how much personal information to share.
- Help your child understand the possible results of what he or she tells others.
- Coach your child in using phrases such as "That's private," or "I don't want to talk about that."
- Work with your child to master some general statements about adoption that can be used to educate peers.

Seeking Help for Mental Health Concerns

Adoptive families, like other families, sometimes need help to address mental health concerns. Sadness, anger, and behavior challenges are normal as children in grade school learn more about their family histories and come to terms with

adoption. Some children may need a professional to help them grieve and move on. This need for extra assistance may occur even in children who previously adjusted well, as they grapple with developmentally appropriate issues such as identity formation. Do not allow difficulties with peers to go unaddressed. A child with poor interpersonal skills may be picked on or excluded, leading to more social and emotional problems down the road.

Signs and Symptoms

It is a good idea to seek professional help if your child or other family members show any of the following signs:

- Extreme emotions and behaviors. The child:
 - Is sad, angry, or depressed much of the time
 - Shows rapid changes in behaviors or moods
 - Is withdrawn, apathetic, extremely fearful, or has a poor appetite
 - Is prone to screaming or other aggressive behaviors
 - Starts to challenge authority at school
- A difficult family relationship. The child or other family members:
 - Interact poorly and are stressful or angry
 - Avoid each other while at home
 - Feel unsafe while at home
 - Threaten to run away
- Difficult peer relationships. The child:
 - Shows extreme anger or aggression with peers
 - Has no friends (is a “loner”)
 - Is bullied at school
 - Starts avoiding social activities and school events
- Substance abuse. The child:
 - Shows sudden and unexplained changes in physical appearance (red or watery eyes, change in weight)
 - Experiences unexplained physical symptoms (changes in appetite, vomiting, tremors)
 - Has unexplained changes in behavior, mood, attitude, or personality traits
 - Loses interest in hobbies or friends he or she once enjoyed
 - Shows unexplained changes in school performance

Finding the Person Who Can Help

Postadoption programs, adoption support groups, and other adoptive parents are good sources of information about adoption-competent mental health professionals. Look for a therapist or counselor who:

- Has experience working with children and families
- Knows about adoption
- Includes the entire family in at least some of the therapy sessions
- Makes clear to the child that he or she is not the problem

Find more information and resources about connecting with adoption-competent providers on the Information Gateway website:

www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/families/counseling.cfm

Summary

Parenting an adopted child during the elementary school years, as he or she ventures further into the outside world, is both challenging and enriching. Chances are that you will learn as much from your child as he or she will learn from you. With sensitivity to adoption issues, honest communication, and effective discipline, parents can support their child's healthy development during these exciting years.