Finding the Missing Pieces

Helping Adopted Children Cope with Grief and Loss

Lesson Three: Loss and Grief as the Child Grows Up

Children may grieve the losses surrounding their adoption many times throughout their lives and they will grieve differently as they grow older. Young children cannot express their grief with words; instead they show their feelings in their behavior. Older children may also display non-verbal indicators of grief. At each stage of development the child's behavior and understanding of adoption will require a different response from the parent.

In this lesson we will provide a brief overview of the different stages in a child’s life, the types of grieving behaviors they may exhibit at that stage, and some ways you might help them cope with their grief.

Very young children cannot understand abstract concepts like adoption or loss, but that does not mean they cannot feel grief. Even very young children can feel grief for the loss of a birth parent or a caregiver if they have grown attached to that person. Adoptive parents may be reluctant to acknowledge the attachment that their child had with a birth parent or a previous caregiver, and may be slow to recognize the signs of grief.

Children at this stage will show signs of grief immediately or soon after coming to a new home. Parents who adopt children at this stage should be sensitive to indicators of grief, including changes in previous eating and sleeping patterns, lethargy, unexplainable crying, and separation anxiety. Children may also regress, and begin acting younger than they are, ceasing behaviors they have already mastered.

The best strategies for coping with a young child’s grief are patience, understanding and closeness, both physical and emotional. A young child needs to understand that you will be there to provide for her needs, and that you will not abandon her. It does no harm to allow the child to express her grief, as long as it is not disabling to either one of you. Let her cry, sleep longer, spend more time with you, eat foods that are comforting, and talk in baby talk, if that allows her to work through her grief. Reassure her by providing consistent schedules and routines, and by keeping major changes to a minimum, and in time she will overcome this stage of grief.

Preschoolers tend to be very literal and very self-absorbed. They are very interested to hear their own adoption story, but they often fail to understand what the words themselves mean. When explaining adoption children may be able to repeat the story word-for-word, but they may be confused about the actual facts. They may believe they came from an agency or an orphanage, and not from a person. Children at this age are also very sensitive to differences. Transracially adopted children may begin to ask questions about why their parents are a different color.

Preschoolers may not understand the losses surrounding adoption, but they are capable of feeling them and will express these feelings in their behavior. Children who have been told their adoption stories may engage in searching or pining behavior, asking strangers if they are their birth parents. This can be unnerving for parents, who may fear that the child is seeking to replace them.

Opposite reactions are also possible. Preschoolers may be fearful that a stranger will come and take them away from their parents. This can result in excessive clinging, and other signs of dependency such as needing to be physically close to parents, discomfort with strangers, and fear of separation.
The more a child knows about adoption, even at an early age, the better equipped they are to handle the issues that arise. Begin by telling the adoption story early, increasing the level of detail as your child’s comprehension increases. As you discuss painful information, reaffirm your closeness to your child by holding or touching her, but don’t force her to make eye contact until she is ready.

Preschoolers need to learn to recognize and label their feelings. Parents can help children by modeling appropriate ways of expressing feelings. Reading books about adoption and about emotions is one way to open a discussion. Another is to play games with dolls, allowing the characters to say things that the child might not be ready to say for herself.

The school years are a time when children adopted at birth or at a young age move from knowing the words of the adoption story to grasping its implications. Children at this age now understand the concept of “same” and “different”. They begin to understand that adoption is a “different” way to become a family and that adoption entails both gains and losses. This growing awareness may cause emotional conflicts and feelings of divided loyalties. Children begin to wonder about their birth parents but may refrain from sharing those thoughts for fear of hurting their adoptive parents. Many children also feel the loss of relationships with birth siblings and previous caregivers. Children, especially those adopted at an older age who remember their birth parents, may worry about their birth parents’ welfare.

At school, children discover that most children are raised by a birth parent. School assignments and the questions of classmates may heighten a child’s sense of difference and underscore feelings of loss. Some children resist any discussions about adoption, while others become excessively curious about their birth parents.

Grief may manifest itself in many different ways at this stage. Daydreaming may provide an opportunity for children to engage in fantasies about what the birth parents are like, about possible reunions, and how life would have been different with them. This may result in withdrawal from the family, or in obsessive questioning about the facts known to the adoptive parents.

Anger may be a symptom of grief in some children, particularly those who are placed at a later age or who have had troubled pasts. Anger can allow the child to distance themselves from the pain of loss, and the vulnerability that comes from closeness with another person. Parents are often surprised and troubled by the vehemence of their child’s emotions, particularly if they are uncertain of the cause. But a child who, in a moment of anger, says “You’re not my real mom!” is expressing her anger, not rejecting the adoptive parent.

Parents need to be alert to symptoms of grief, because the child may be unaware of what is causing her behavior. Children who engage in activities to excess - playing sports, watching television, eating too much - may be trying to fill an emptiness that they don’t know how to express.

The best thing parents can do for their grieving children is to give them permission to talk about what they are feeling. Children need to know that what they are feeling is not wrong, but that there are more and less acceptable ways to express these feelings. They may need to be gently reminded that you are there for them, and are willing to offer support and feedback.

One strategy is to “drop pebbles” occasionally, to let them know it is okay to talk about the birth parents. For example, if your child does particularly well at an activity, say, “You’re good at that. I wonder if you get that from one of your birth parents.” Or “Tomorrow’s your birthday. I bet your birth parents are thinking about you tonight.” Another strategy is to use a Lifebook or Grief Box to focus on specific aspects of the child's loss history. Examples of these strategies can be found in Lesson Five.
Adolescence brings numerous changes to all children, but may be even more complicated for children who are adopted. Adolescents are beginning to wonder, “Who am I?” and “What will I be like as an adult?” For adopted children, there may be additional questions, like, “Who am I like, my birth parents or my adoptive parents?” The goal of teens is to separate from their parents. As they work toward asserting their own identities, teens may find that being adopted makes them feel “different” from their peers, adding further conflict as they search for self identity. As teens think about leaving home, it may revive feelings of loss or abandonment by the birth family.

Adopted children’s feelings of grief continue to evolve as they grow older. Younger teens may project their anger about the birth parents onto the adoptive parents. They may try to provoke their parents by flouting parental rules, asserting that “You can’t tell me what to do, you’re not my real parents.” Older teens may become sexually active as a way of asserting their kinship to birth parents if the birth parents were teenagers when their child was conceived.

While some older teens will be rebellious and provocative, others may be prone to sullenness and depression. Parents should watch for signs of extreme depression, which may occur around events of loss, like the breakup of a relationship, or of separation, like high school graduation. If a teen shows signs of serious depression, like self-destructive behavior, thoughts of suicide, alcohol or drug abuse, or attempts to run away from home, you should seek professional help from a doctor or mental health provider.

A big part of helping teens cope with grief in the adolescent years is letting them find ways to express themselves in nondestructive ways. If they express anger or confusion about the past, encourage them to explore their feelings in a journal or in letters to the birth parents. The most important thing you can do is keep the channels of communication open, so that your child knows she can talk to you if she needs to. You can also acknowledge their sadness, curiosity or concern as normal and understandable reactions, and that you are there to listen and to support them. The most important thing you can do is keep the channels of communication open, so that your teen knows she can talk to you if she needs to.

When adolescents grow up and move away from home, they do not outgrow the issues that come with adoption. Children who have had no contact with birth parents growing up may begin searching for their birth parents and trying to reconnect with them. The reunion process brings up many conflicting feelings such as curiosity, anger, resentment, guilt, fear, and of course, grief. Many adults find feelings of loss also resurface when they have their own children. The opportunity to have a biological connection to a child reminds them of the relationship they never had with their own biological family.

Feelings of grief continue to evolve as children become adults and continue to evolve throughout life. Some adults have difficulty maintaining any sort of relationship as they struggle with intimacy in their personal relationships and find they have trouble maintaining jobs.

When adults start their own families, feelings of grief may rise to the surface. For women who have been adopted, postpartum depression may be a concern.
Your job as a parent doesn’t end when your child becomes an adult. Your child still needs your love and understanding. When adopted people begin searching for birth parents, they often feel guilty, as if they were betraying their adoptive family. You can help your child by letting him know that you support whatever decision he makes about his birth family. Share any information you have about the adoption, the agency, and the birth parents.

Adjustment to adoption is a lifelong process for both parents and children. At every stage children integrate their family relationships into their sense of self identity. With each stage comes greater awareness of what adoption means, and the gains and losses associated with it. But time and maturity are not the only factors that affect children’s perceptions of adoption. External events often cause children to begin thinking about adoption in ways they hadn’t before.

Before going on to Lesson Four, take a moment to enter your thoughts and ideas in your Notebook.