

# Post-Adoption: A New Relationship



*As everyone who's been through it knows, the adoption process can be a long, difficult and sometimes costly one. But once the adoption is final, the entire family breathes a collective sigh of relief: it's over! The reality, however, is that a finalized adoption is just the beginning of a new, lifelong relationship. When any child comes into a home, a new family is born. So it's a relationship which will bring its own joys, surprises and challenges—in this case, challenges which are unique to adoptions in general, and to each child's individual situation. But help is out there. More and more proactive parents today are increasing their awareness and taking advantage of a wide range of Post-Adoption Services.*

## **Looking Ahead After Adoption**

It doesn't matter whether children are adopted as infants or when they're older, if they're healthy or have psychological or physical problems, adoption will factor into a child's development. The impact doesn't have to be negative, but the adoptive family does have a sensitive dynamic. You as parents can help yourselves by looking at what experiences might lie ahead, understanding the issues involved, and being willing to talk openly about whatever comes up.

**The Need for Attachment**—The first two years are undoubtedly important in a child's life. This is when children learn to bond and trust, and then to feel safe separating from their parents. The good news is that if secure attachment can't happen during these years, the time can often be "made up" later. Adoptive parents should realize that older babies and children probably have a history of broken attachments from foster families or caretakers, and you may need to work a little harder to let your child know you're not going anywhere. Resources are available to help with serious attachment disorders.

**When to Talk About Adoption**—While many experts say it can't hurt to consciously include the words "adoption" and "adopted" in conversations from the get-go, know that a 2-year-old really has no understanding of the concepts. Some specialists recommend waiting to discuss adoption until a child is 6 or 8 and feels completely part of the family. Perhaps the best guide for adoptive parents is to offer a positive but realistic explanation as early as is comfortable, perhaps by age 4 or 5—even earlier if

the child is of a different race or ethnicity from the parents. Then, be ready to go over the explanation again (and again) on cue as your child grows and matures, and is able to process the information in different ways and ask different sorts of questions.

**Feelings of Loss**—Adoption does, by its nature, involve loss. Children start to really understand this between the ages of 7 and 12. The "sad part" of adoption can affect a child's moods and self-esteem, but parents can help by raising the topic and having honest family discussions. Questions may come up about birthparents, reasons for the adoption and the possibility of contacting a birth family. It's important for adoptive parents not to become defensive, or feel threatened. Even in cases of open adoption where the birth mother is known or involved in the child's life, these issues need to be addressed; you as adoptive parents should be the ones to take charge.

**Identity Conflicts**—After entering school, adopted children are often confronted with being "different," especially when working on projects involving family trees and genealogy. And every kid who's adopted is going to hear "Your mom gave you away!" at least once. Parents should stress that children cannot be given away or discarded. Instead, deliver the message that adoption was a decision, one which formed your family. Your child will naturally identify with your family's characteristics and values while growing up, and this plays as strong a role as genetics. However, adoptive parents should be prepared for adolescence, when the "Who am I?" issues any teenager faces can become particularly tricky.

(Continued on next page)

# Post-Adoption: A New Relationship

(Continued)

**Special Cases, Special Problems**—No, it's not fair. But the fact remains that the older the child, the greater the risk of ongoing problems and adoption disruption. Older children may have had more exposure to maltreatment, more disruptions in foster care, and sometimes damaging ties to biological families. And emotional problems—including those caused by sexual or physical abuse—often lead to chronic negative behaviors. In addition, many children with histories of trauma and deprivation have problems which aren't immediately evident, but come into play as children develop—sometimes in the form of Post Traumatic Stress around age 12. The thing to remember is that most adoptive parents feel positive about the experience, even in the most difficult cases, and dissolutions are extremely rare.

As in all families, adoptive parents also need to pay attention to themselves, as partners. To be the best parent possible, place a high priority on nurturing, respecting and taking time for your own relationship.

## Post-Adoption Services Available

Adoption advocates stress that Post-Adoption Services are beneficial to variety of adoptive families, only not those who went through the public foster care system, where these services are most often mandated. Services—and subsidies—vary from state to state, and by county. Check with your local agencies; recent federal initiatives have expanded funding for Post-Adoption Services, which can take many forms.

**Information Services**—In many states, agencies can provide a parent with a child's complete social, genetic and medical history. In-depth screening and assessments may also be available, incorporating case records and an evaluation of the current family situation. Providers may have specialized literature, seminars and workshops, including parent training classes.

**Clinical Services**—Counseling is often available for children, parents and other family members. Therapists may be able to make in-home visits, providing families with a range of approaches. Most agencies also offer case management and crisis intervention. In extreme need, psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment centers can be arranged.

**Funding & Subsidies**—Subsidies for medical care, special needs expenses and other financial burdens are often arranged through agencies providing Post-Adoption Services. Funds are available for children with learning and physical disabilities. Also, workers may be able to facilitate applications for upgraded local and federal subsidies.

**Respite Care**—Getting someone else to temporarily carry the load can be a lifesaver for a new parent. Especially when adopting special needs children, the daily demands can become overwhelming. Post-Adoption Services can provide access to drop-in centers, child care facilities and in-home providers.

**Support Networks**—One of the ways agencies can be of most help is connecting adoptive families to community-based support groups. Local groups may sponsor special events and recreational activities for children, or match inexperienced parents with adoptive parent mentors. Many workers are able to act as advocates, providing emotional, social and educational assistance, as well as facilitating contact with birthparents.

A final reminder to adoptive parents: most Post-Adoption Services were designed to help alleviate stress and ensure your child's well-being *before* a crisis occurs. So don't wait until you're at the end of your rope. Taking the time now to investigate the options around you will be to everyone's advantage as your family grows, and learns, together.