

# Director's Corner

## Adolescence

### Who Am I? Where Am I Going?

*"The important thing in putting talk into the air is not whether the teenager responds or agrees, but that he or she hears the talk. The psyche is such an extraordinary 'continuous learner' that it cannot help but assimilate every new datum of information in its lifelong quest for truth."*

—Randolph W. Severson

A teen's job is to figure out who he or she is in the world. The teen years, which can start as young as ten or eleven (and continue through age forty-seven) have often been compared with the preschool years because of the myriad of changes that occur. On the physical level, your child's body and general look may be so transformed that people perceive of her as an adult—not your baby. Teens develop a new ability to be introspective and analytical, which plays out in new views of the world that may be challenging to you. Emotionally their job is to separate from the family and begin to find ways to function independently, as responsible adults. For our adopted kids, this evolution is likely to make them experience and feel adoption and genetic/racial/heritage issues perhaps on a deeper level than has ever been possible before. Thunder is common – perhaps more so for adopted kids who may have repressed concerns about where they belong and if they belong in the life they find themselves living. Some adolescents need to take their independence rather than to be given it. A parent's most difficult task is to create a delicate balance of "to love and let go."

The concept of development is essentially optimistic, suggesting that children (and adults) will grow and change, usually in healthy ways, if they are not actively prevented from doing so. Nothing could be more pertinent to parenting teens. How do parents get out of

the way and let teens experiment? Can parents do this while keeping their kids safe and saving themselves from cardiac arrest? The science of child development is based on the ability to observe an individual child clearly, setting aside as much as possible our personal needs and preconceptions. The careful practice of observation can be extremely valuable in parenting teens because it allows parents look at the world through our children's eyes.

How easily would you deal with a social hierarchy that has rigid boundaries of popularity, jocks, freaks and Goths? Teens are still children in adult bodies trying to figure out a world that is ever more complex and challenging. If we reject their world – or dismiss their concerns as trivial – we are relegating them to negotiate it on their own. We can either be there for our kids, or leave them to fend for themselves. For adopted kids in particular, with their extreme sensitivity to rejection, it is critical that we make the choice to hang in with them even when it's really hard. This means letting go of our own first judgments and finding ways to be empathetic with our child's predicaments. If we listen and watch instead of lecture and judge, we will learn and be given many more opportunities to weigh in with guidance and help when needed.

If normal adolescence involves a crisis in identity, it stands to reason that adopted teenagers will face additional complications. Adopted teens have two sets of parents and two cultures against which to measure samenesses and differences. If they have no way of knowing their past or the characteristics they may pass on to the next generation, they may experience "genealogical bewilderment" — the sense that they have lost not only their history and birth parents but also a part of themselves. In the absence of biological relatives who can provide insight to future physical

and personal development the growth spurts, mood swings, and hormonal changes of the teen years can increase self-consciousness and worry. As the clearest points of distinction between adoptive and birth parents may be based on race, culture, or class differences, it seems natural for teens to focus their movement toward independence in these areas, moving to explore what they believe is the world of their birth heritage.

Adoptive parents also have to guard against resisting their adolescent's separation process because of their own sensitivity to issues of attachment and loss. Adoptive parents should set aside their own fears and learn what teens are searching for in exploring that "unknown" world. Parents can serve as a reality check, helping their teens examine assumptions they're making about their birth parents and their own lives.

What does it say about adopted teens that their birth parents had "irresponsible" sex? Most young people who are sexually active want to believe that they matter to someone else, that someone else cares. Sex can feel like caring even when it is only an event. Let your child hear you say, "Your birth parents were human and so are you; to be human is to be at times vulnerable, needy, impulsive; but to be human is always to be worthy of love and respect." Let them also hear that sexuality and sex itself are wonderful and exciting experiences, not something bad or scary. Choices around when, how and with who are what matters. It's all about conversations and choices – not lines in the sand, which too often result in power struggles of the worst degree.

Who's in charge? Who should be? These are huge questions in any teen's world. To have been moved from one family to another without any say in the matter can increase sensitivity to issues of control and difficulties with transitions. Added to that legacy is the adopted child's experience of feeling different from family and community, an experience that tends to create individuals with a heightened need to find ways to fit in. It's logical to imagine that adopted teens will face extra challenges in the adolescent quest for adult autonomy and identity.

Given the challenges of our current culture for all families, the issues of safety and how to make choices that keep your teen alive and healthy loom large. A couple of generations ago staying out all night or experimenting with substances might have looked like the girls at the slumber party talking through the window to the boys on the grass while sipping cough medicine containing alcohol. Today this same scenario can include oral sex and highly addictive drugs. Don't simply hope your child doesn't have to deal with these issues. Talk with them about what is happening in their world even when you find it personally shocking.

Disrespect and rebellion are normal. Tantrums, verbal abuse and testing limits often come with the territory.

Even some adults throw things through closed windows or swear at their partners when they find out that they've been transferred at work or that their favorite clothes shrank in the dryer or that the toilet has overflowed. Parents who can patiently confront the challenge of metamorphosis will be in a better position to offer compassion and to respond with humor and good nature. No matter what your kid yells, don't yell back. When the puppy piddles on the floor, after all, all you have to do is firmly and gently put him back on the newspaper, even if he nips at you. You don't give up because you know that—eventually—he'll get it. So will your kid.

Keep the boundaries in place, but understand that your adolescent needs to keep more things to himself in his effort to learn how to meet his challenges on his own. Be open to conversations about important issues related to adoption, birth parents and other potentially volatile subjects, even initiate them at times, but always be ready to defer to your teen's need to begin making decisions about how to handle his or her feelings and choices independently. Instead of trying to control his life, take control of your need to know and to fix everything. Parents who are able to understand their kids' needs to fit in, make choices and become him or her self may avoid getting into power struggles over things like hair styles, clothes, loud music or slang, and be able to create a more peaceful family life than those parents who are intent on making their children conform to their limited sense of the acceptable.

In the end, it is all about connection. Staying close to your child, letting him know that you can talk any time, about anything, but letting him solve his own problems and learn from his own mistakes. Helping her build feelings of competence by trying on adult roles, whether that be by taking on an after-school job, survival training, joining a team, or taking a trip by herself. Asking questions like, "what is it like to deal with that?," or "what choices do you feel you have?," instead of lecturing your child about what you want them to do, keeps your relationship supportive. Remember no one grows up without making some mistakes, your child will too. Help them know that no mistake is unsurvivable so long as they remain alive. Knowing that you will be there for the long haul, no matter what they do or who they become, is the most important way to support teens in their journey of becoming themselves.

*Beth and Gail are the co-founding directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, as well as adoptive parents to children of different races and ethnicities. Their book, Inside Transracial Adoption, is filled with personal stories, practical suggestions and theory combined in an encouraging and supportive style that reinforces the message that race matters, racism is alive, and families built transracially can develop strong and binding ties. Filled with warmth and humor, this book has already been hailed as a classic.*