First published in Pact's Point of View © 1995 Do not reprint without permission.

## Talking to Your Adopted Adolescent about Adoption

by Randolph W. Severson

When talking to a teenager about adoption, the most important fact to remember is that adoption belongs on the ordinary continuum of human experience. Adopted people and adoptive families are different, but they are not all that different; thus it errs to isolate the meaning of adoption to the extent that one assumes that solutions that work in similar contexts will not work when the issue is adoption.

In thinking about how to talk to teenagers about adoption, it is helpful to draw an analogy to sex. Just as it is never easy for parents to talk to their teen-aged son or daughter about sex, so it is never easy to talk about adoption. With both sex and adoption, parents' hope that they can schedule some "quality time" with their son, sitting across the kitchen table, sharing, reasoning in mutual understanding and love, is in most cases bound to be disappointing. Teenagers just aren't like that; the last people they want to hear from or are willing to listen to and take seriously are their parents. Sometimes such moments do occur, on a long drive, or late at night when a teenager has just got off work and perhaps feels a little vulnerable, but these moments are so unpredictable and so sporadic that parents shouldn't wait or rely on them to communicate an important message.

And just as sex is important — so very important that no responsible parent would ever stop talking, stop warning, cautioning, listening, and providing information — so adoption is important, and thus a responsible parent should never permit the subject to drift into the zone of "we just never talk about that much" "because he never brings it up" or because "he just doesn't seem that interested."

So how do you communicate and what do you say? First, parents should be prepared in principle (although one can never be psychologically prepared for events that are so unpredictable) to respond meaningfully when the rare moment does occur when their teenager "opens up," allowing a little heart and soul, fear and vulnerability shine through.

Second, parents should build from day one an "adoption library" which is easily and privately accessible to their son or daughter. And the "library" should not be limited to books whose views and messages about adoption's meaning

reflect only what the adoptive parents hope it will mean. Adoption can and will mean many things to an adopted person throughout his life, and sometimes the attendant emotions are dark and painful, full of rage and grief. Books that reflect these elements should not be banned from the library on the excuse that they are too angry or "biased" against adoption.

Third, parents should occasionally "think out loud" while with their adolescent, while driving to the store or working in the garage, watching TV or sharing a snack in the kitchen. An easy "entry" is to mention a TV show or article and then relate the ideas or emotions that were stirred or the memories evoked. In such "speeches," the object is not so much mutual conversation as it is to communicate information that teenagers may need or from which they might benefit.

In response to the question, "What do you say to an adopted teenager?" I have to say that in my view, the answer is everything. Adopted people deserve to hear all the facts, all the information that concerns their own lives, their own histories. In other words, an adopted person deserves to know his or her story. So if, for whatever reason, the full story has not yet been told during childhood, it should be told during adolescence. Fact is always better that fantasy because all a fact can ever do, even a disturbing one, is replace what may be an even more disturbing fantasy.

But facts alone are never enough. Facts alone do not add up to a story. A story includes emotions, visions, feelings so subtle and so shifting as to be ultimately as ungraspable as the mist. Further, the import of facts changes as they are experienced and contemplated differently according to the shifts of our own life drama and situation.

In my experience, the parts of their adoption story of greatest concern to adolescent adopted people are the parts about sex, appearance and relationships. They hope for an answer to two fundamental questions (which they rarely ask and often do not even completely admit to themselves).

The first essential question for the adopted adolescent is this: What does it say about their birth parents and therefore about "themselves" to know that their birth parents had premarital or "irresponsible" sex?

Second: What did their birth parents look like? Were they attractive and does the child look like them?

With respect to the first issue, when counseling adopted people I always try to find a way to incorporate my own view of why people, especially young people, sometimes engage in sex when the decision is not consistent with their own feelings and values. I say something to the effect that most young men and women who are sexually active in a way that they later regret are seeking self-affirmation. They want to believe they matter to someone else, that someone else cares. For women, it is often not the sex itself that gratifies but the intimacy, the tenderness, the sense of touching and being valued. Men offer express the same idea, while in addition men, especially young men, often find in sex a sense of conquest that is an entirely normal male ambition, although obviously immoral when sought through exploitation of another.

During this time when many cultural critics are busy laying every social problem at the door of "illegitimacy" and the unwed mother who "has babies to get more welfare," I think it is critical that adopted people hear a different message.

Thus, the question of "why my birth mother got pregnant and what does is say about me?" can be answered this way: it says that your birth parents were human and so are you; and that to be human is to be at times vulnerable, needy and impulsive; but to be human is always to be worthy of love and respect.

The second issue is looks. The development of body image and the successful assimilation of that body image into the psyche is an essential element of adolescent formation. The outcome of this process is pre-conscious comfort with the way one believes one's self appears to others.

What both smoothes and speeds this process in children raised by their biological parents is the knowledge that one looks at least in some sense like people (Mom, Dad, immediate relatives) who seemed (during the child's infancy and the early years of growing up) to be the most beautiful and wonderful people in the world, the shining centers of the cosmos. Even though a child's conscious opinion may become more realistic as the child matures, he or she will still unconsciously carry this belief.

For adopted people, the situation differs. Because they do not necessarily feel that they look like someone whom they admire and love, the process of body image development and assimilation sometimes miscarries.

If an adoption is open or at least when photographs of birth parents exist, an adoptive parent can "bless" and foster a positive body image by noting and commenting on the attractiveness of the birth parents and the resemblance between the adopted person and the birth parents. When the adoption is closed, adoptive parents can nonetheless comment favorably on the child's appearance while also suggesting that this probably means that the birth parents too share these features. Further, it is helpful to identify certain features — eyes, hair color, complexion, build, and so on — as especially attractive. I mean something such as "I always thought your birth mother had especially beautiful eyes and so do you"; or the obverse, in a closed adoption: "Your hair is really beautiful. I bet you got that from your birth mother."

The third issue, relationships, is somewhat different from the others, in that I don't think most adopted people either consciously or unconsciously ever wonder how their current relationships might reflect their feelings about birth parents. Yet the fact is that they sometimes do. A phenomena called "searching for their own kind" is familiar to therapists who work with adopted people in closed adoption. At some point in their lives, many adopted people develop an overwhelming attraction for "outlaw" relationships, persons, or peer groups. In family therapy, parents complain that "they don't know where these people came from" or they don't understand "what could possibly be the attraction." Again, this kind of fascination for the "outlaw" is a dimension of almost every adolescent experience at one time or another, but with adopted people it is often especially intense.

Thus, when counseling any adopted person, I explain a little about "transference" and relationships and inquire whether the person thinks that any particular relationship or crush might have anything to do with adoption or birth parents. The answer is almost always "No!" but the seed is planted, and further discussion ("What do you like in a boy/man or girl/woman?") can elicit further connections and insights.

Parents can do the same for their children, perhaps adding comments about "mother-figures" and "father-figures" and sharing elements of their own experience in relationships as well as insights about why certain relationships may or may not have worked out. The important thing 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 add and assimilate every new datum of information in its lifelong quest for truth.

These are just a few suggestions about how to talk to adopted adolescents about adoption. As I hope is clear, I do not think that talking about "adoption" is the chief issue; rather, I think that a young man or woman's adoptive status will at times give a particular twist to the normal range of teenage concerns. Awareness of this thematic concern, and attempts to address it in appropriate ways, is a gift beyond measure that adoptive parents can give to what an old Roman document calls "the child of my heart."

Randolph W. Severson, Ph.D., is a counselor and writer. His most recent books are Adoption: Philosophy and Experience and Adoption and Spirituality.