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# Adoption and the Stages of Development What Parents Can Expect at Different Ages

## by Beth Hall

**Attachment and Separation: The First Year**
Many experts view early childhood as a series of alternating attachment and separation phases that establish the child as an independent person who can relate happily to family members and friends, and be capable of having intimate relationships with others. A baby's primary task is to develop a sense of trust in the world and come to view it as a place that is predictable and reliable. Infants accomplish this task through attachment to their caretakers. After birth, an infant must reach a new physiological balance as a result of being outside rather than inside the body he shared for nine months. In adoption, he must also make a change to a new set of parents. Birth in itself is exhausting. Learning how to adapt to the world without the comfort of familiarity takes longer. No matter how warm the reception by new parents, extra stress on baby must be anticipated. Although baby doesn't understand these changes, he senses changes in sounds, smells, stress, and rhythms. His world is upset. He experiences a loss and reacts. Responses may include crying, difficulty sucking, bowel or bladder disturbances, or withdrawal. Usually such changes are temporary and reverse as he adjusts. Humans have an enormous capacity to recover.

**Attachment and Separation: The Second Year**
Toddlers are faced with an internal conflict between wishing for autonomy and anxiety about separating from the primary caregiver. During this stage, when you must guide and protect your child, you become the embodiment of "no." Not surprisingly, your child becomes frustrated, demonstrating this frustration in behavior ranging from crying to throwing, hitting, biting, pinching and temper tantrums. For adoptive parents, who sometimes worry that this frustrated behavior has something to do with the child being adopted, it helps to know that this kind of behavior is typical of toddlers. Children who are adopted sometime after infancy usually follow the same attachment and separation paths as other children, but possibly in a different time sequence.

**Identity, Feelings and Fears: Age Two to Six**
Language skills allow children to explore the world in a new way. Parents need to view their children's questions as an opportunity to talk about feelings and experience, not to worry about having "right" answers. Children in this stage engage in fantasy and "magical" thinking. They are trying to develop a reliable sense of what is happening in their world. During these years, their world is expanding enormously; thus, so is the necessary repertoire of responses. There can be a great deal in their expanded world which threatens their sense of security. Two- to five-year-olds often have anxiety and fears, especially about being abandoned, getting lost, or being no longer being loved by their parents. Children must work out their awareness of their smallness compared to their parents and their urges toward autonomy and independence. They want to be big but also want the benefits of infancy. Sometimes, competitive feelings towards a parent become a way of expressing individuation.

Between ages three and six, children begin to wonder where they came from and how they got here. There is some question about whether a child under six can understand the meaning of adoption. At this stage, children are working very hard to understand relationships, and their family relationships are the first to be scrutinized and explored. It is important for children to be helped to understand that they are both born AND adopted, not one or the other. It takes years of periodic returns to the subject of adoption before children will fully grasp its meaning. At least two studies suggest that adopted adolescents were better adjusted if they came from families in which all emotional issues –including, but not limited to, adoption—were discussed among family members, beginning in early childhood. Children who learn early that it is all right to ask questions and be curious usually carry this behavior over and develop a sense of mastery over their lives. Both attachment and separation behaviors should be encouraged and endured by parents. Both are necessary for children to create their identity and to develop and sustain intimate relationships.

**Further Steps in Separation and Identity Formation: Age Seven to Eleven**
The chief task of elementary-school-aged children is to master all of the facts, ideas, and skills that will equip them to progress toward adolescence and independent life. During this time, children are supposed to consolidate their identification with parents and cement their sense of belonging to their family. Children have a strong inner life during this stage, as indicated by their dreams and fantasies; they are more attuned to the world inside their heads. Loss is one of the issues with which adopted children will continue to grapple throughout their lives. The full emotional impact of loss comes to children during this stage. Knowing that birth parents made an adoption plan for them often makes adopted children feel devalued and affects their self-esteem. They may feel their status is society is ambiguous. Your willingness to "connect" with your children about their adoption, instead of denying the differences between entering a family through adoption rather

than through birth, can help them grieve this important loss. If facts and feelings about adoption are not discussed at all, children's fantasies about their backgrounds may be acted out unconsciously, expressing an unconscious self-identification as an unworthy person.

It's important to remember that all adopted children have feelings about their adoption, and that throughout their development they will struggle in various ways to understand why their birth parents made an adoption plan for them. You can help your children in this task by letting them know that they are not alone in these feelings and that it is all right with you if they express them and try to get explanations for what puzzles or troubles them. The more open family discussions have been from the beginning of verbal communication, the more likely it is that communication will continue, no matter how intense or complex the subject becomes.

**Who Am I? Where Am I Going?: Adolescence**

Adolescents' behavior is in transition rather than not fixed; their feelings about the world and their place in it are tentative and changeable. Physical growth changes the body from child to adult, in preparation for procreation, but mental and emotional development may take years to catch up with the body. The adolescent's primary task is to establish a secure sense of identity. Being able to live and work on one's own, to maintain a comfortable position in one's family, and to become a contributing citizen in one's community are the goals. 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."

If normal adolescence involves a crisis in identity, it stands to reason that adopted teenagers will face additional complications. Adolescents often express their reactions to loss by rebelling against parental standards. Knowing that they have a different origin contributes to their need to define themselves autonomously. Sexual identity is an issue to all adolescents. Adopted children often have conflicting views of parenthood and sexuality. On the one hand, there is the perhaps infertile adoptive parent; and on the other hand, there is the fact of the birth parents' fertility and decision—whether voluntary or otherwise—not to parent the baby. By conforming to others' behavior, beliefs, or expectation, adopted adolescents may be inhibiting a part of themselves for the sake of basic security or out of a sense of guilt or responsibility