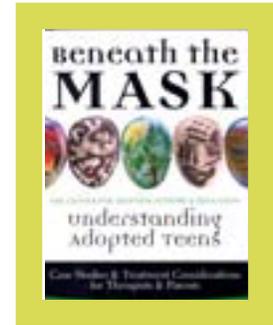


Book Review

Beneath the Mask

Understanding Adopted Teens

by Debbie Riley, MS with John Meeks, MD



The teen years in family life are a time when many teens and their families turn to therapists as they struggle with identity issues, but few therapists have had the opportunity to be educated about the issues of adoption and how they play out during the teen years. This book gives clinicians and therapists insight into adopted teens and is an important new contribution to the field of adoption. The authors begin with a discussion about the statistics that are oft quoted that adopted people make up a high percentage of those seeking therapy. They explain that those numbers are similar for non-adopted young children and adults. But it is the adopted teen population that is seeking help at a far higher rate than non-adopted teens, with adopted youth representing 5-17% of teen mental health services although only 2% of the teen population is adopted. This tells us that adopted teens are facing complex issues that require therapists and clinicians who are educated about their unique struggles. The authors of this book, clinicians themselves with years of therapeutic experience with triad members, have provided a good first offering in presenting the information professionals need.

The authors identify six adolescent "stuck spots" and discuss some of the ways that therapists and parents can help children process the issues when they arise.

Reason for Adoption: Adopted teens are often assaulted with myriad feelings of unresolved grief about why they were placed. Sometimes the most important message in therapy for teen adoptees, who are flooded by uncertainty and rejection, is helping them to see that not everyone will leave them.

Missing or Difficult Information: Teens are often looking for detailed facts about themselves and their birth family that may not be available or known. This brings up feelings about loss of control and pain, which cannot be taken away, but needs to be acknowledged and processed.

Difference: Feeling different from peers is the worst curse of adolescence and these feelings can affect a child's sense of self-worth and security. The authors also discuss racial and cultural differences when kids are adopted across racial lines

and some of the common struggles of teens who are working to find themselves and make peace with what often feel like conflicting identities.

Permanence: The authors see teens who, because they have already lost one set of parents, have anxiety reactions and behaviors relating to the possibility of losing their adoptive parents. This can result in kids who are afraid to leave the adoptive home because they might not be able to come back or children who don't try to retain relationships because they consider long-term security an impossible goal of which they are not worthy.

Identity: The questions of "Who am I?" and "Where did I come from?" are described as central to the adolescent adoptee. This often leads to increased interest in birth family search or connections.

Loyalty: Many adopted teens experience guilt about their interest in their birth parents, which they are afraid may hurt or upset their adoptive parents. Teens often need explicit permission from their adoptive parents to feel comfortable exploring feelings and connections to their birth family.

Riley and Meeks offer therapeutic interventions, specific case studies and a general understanding of the specific issues facing adopted teens and their families. Too often therapists who have no real training in adoption discount it as a causal issue when they are presented with troubled teens. Instead of being helpers, these therapists can become part of the problem as they inadvertently inflict more pain on the adopted youth because they don't understand the depth of grief and loss they are experiencing.

Beneath the Mask is targeted for the clinical audience. Some parents may find it useful as they seek to understand their teens and also as they seek professional help. The suggestions in the book will help families recognize therapists who will be useful and also those who will not. This book is long overdue and we hope it will become a resource on the shelf of every therapist who works with teens.