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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 2

## CHILDREN AND ADOPTION THE SCHOOL AGE YEARS (6-11)

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

**WHY WAS I ADOPTED?** This Fact Sheet generally addresses children who have minimal or no contact with birth family. A word about children in open adoption is addressed at the end.

The age at which a child can begin to fully understand what it means to be adopted may vary. Generally speaking, however, it is during the school-age years that children come to grips with the fact that, in order to become part of their adoptive family, they had to first “lose” significant people in their lives – namely, their birth parents and family. The feelings of loss that surround such a profound realization is experienced in a variety of ways, depending on unique personalities, personal history, age at placement, and the nature of contact with birth families, etc. The central challenge is to make sense of adoption while trying to answer (a very complex question: Why were the people who gave birth to me unable to “keep” me and raise me? Feelings will vary in intensity and may manifest themselves in a variety of behaviors.

The school-age years mark the time when all children reach new levels of thinking, wondering, questioning and learning. Consequently, children in adoptive families are likely to also be impacted (for the first time) by the questions and comments of friends and classmates who are also able to consider adoptive families in new ways and who also want to try and understand the subject.

### THE GRIEF REACTION IS A NORMAL AND ADAPTIVE RESPONSE

Loss in adoption can encompass much more than birth family members. It can involve loss of: race, country, culture, and other significant people: foster parents, orphanage staff, other caregivers, teachers, friends, etc. In response to their sense of loss, children often experience some kind of “grief reaction.” Although it can be difficult for parents, it is normal and adaptive. The intensity may vary from child to child, but, typically, the grief reaction may manifest in the form of:

- \* Withdrawal
- \* Angry outbursts or acting out behavior
- \* Daydreaming or pining behavior
- \* Difficulty concentrating in school
- \* Falling school grades

### MAKING SENSE OF ADOPTION

Children in this age group tend to view themselves as being in the center of the world; consequently, their ability to understand and explain complex adult decisions – such as choosing NOT to parent – is extremely limited. As children work to understand the reasons why they were relinquished, they may formulate explanations, reasons (and solutions) that make little sense to their parents. For example, they may think: *“This happened because I was a bad. I cried too much, misbehaved, soiled my diaper.”* (I am to blame) *“My birth parents were irresponsible and selfish. They should have married (if they placed me because they didn’t feel they could raise a child as a single person). They should have gotten a job (if financial challenges were the reason for placement).”* (Birth parents are to blame.) *“What if I was kidnapped by my adoptive parents?”* (Adoptive parents are to blame.)



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#### COMMON FEELINGS

Children of this age often struggle with a variety of feelings, relating to their adoption story, up to and including concerns about their permanence in their adoptive families – despite reassurance from their parents. They may express fears of being returned to the birth parents or of somehow losing their adoptive families. Children in this age group may ask many questions as they attempt to gather information. The fact that sufficient information is not always available can leave some children feeling frustrated and confused.

Fantasies about what birth parents are like and how life might be different with birth parents are also common. Known as the romance fantasy, this kind of thinking is common to ALL school-aged children, but especially to children who were adopted. Children may also experience great pain over feeling different from their adoptive families, especially if they are of a different race. Feeling different from their peers can be especially challenging because they are part of an adoptive family, a transracial adoptive family, a single-parent family, an LGBT family, etc. The opportunity to relate to a diverse group of families, including families similar to their own is critically important.

Because of the complexity of feelings, adopted children experience “double-dip” feelings. (Double Dip Feelings by Barbara Cain.) They learn early the concept of ambivalence, and that you can have two opposing feelings about something at the same time. So while they love their adoptive families and are “happy” to be part of their family, they may also feel “sad” and “angry” that they are not with their birth family, not in their birth country, not being raised with people of their racial/ethnic/cultural heritage.

Children who were adopted at older ages may face additional challenges. While many children demonstrate remarkable resiliency in response to their difficult early life experiences prior to placement (e.g., orphanage, foster care, trauma including abuse/neglect, health problems, etc.), these children may struggle with challenges including: anxiety, depression, undefined guilt, an exaggerated sense of feeling different, anger or mistrust of adults, hyper or lack of intimacy with others, attachment issues/difficulty forming relationships, uncertainty about the future, confusing memories or fears, and behavior problems at school. Parents raising children with challenges need support and education to be “healing parents.”

Children in open adoptions may still grieve for the loss of being raised by/part of their birth family, and if their birth family is very different ( socio/economic, racial, country, working vs. middle class, etc.) from their adoptive family, they may face challenges around making sense of those differences. In addition, the belief of course is that intense feelings of rejection, abandonment more typical in closed adoption are mitigated by the opportunity to have connection with birth family. However, relationships are not without challenges of course. A child can still be hurt by a birth parent who cancels a visit or can't be as involved if they are raising other children.



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#### RESOURCES

There is no substitute for a sensitive, caring parent who is willing to talk about adoption. Parents can increase their understanding of the school age child by accessing local adoptive parent educational programs, and workshops and webinars like those offered by the Center for Adoption Support and Education.

In addition to local adoptive parent support groups, there are excellent books which include information on this turning point for children: *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Henig; *The Family of Adoption* by Joyce Maguire Pavao; *Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting an Adopted Child* by Holly Van Gulden., *Making Sense of Adoption* by Lois Melina.

For parents raising children adopted at older ages: *Parenting the Hurt Child* by Gregory Keck, *Nurturing Adoption* by Deborah Gray, *Wounded Children Healing Homes* by Jayne Schooler, *The Connected Child* by Karen Purvis, *Parenting Your Internationally Adopted Child* by Patty Cogen.

These books contain many suggestions for opening communication about adoption. In particular, Van Gulden suggests that parents deliberately make brief comments about adoption that will indicate their willingness to talk more.

For families in open adoption: *Making Room in Our Hearts* by Micky Duxbury and *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption* by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass

The [W.I.S.E. UP!™ Powerbook](#) created by the Center for Adoption Support and Education is also an excellent tool for opening communication between parents about how and when to address the questions and comments of others about adoption. Parents can also help by connecting their children to other adopted children through support groups, cultural events, or camps. This can be purchased on the C.A.S.E. store at [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org)

[52 Ways to Talk About Adoption](#) is a unique card game created by C.A.S.E. to promote family communication about adoption in a fun and interesting way. These can be purchased on the C.A.S.E. store at [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org)