

"Adaptive Grieving"

Natural for Adopted Child

Adopted children increase their understanding of the adoption process during the elementary school years by going through a period of "adaptive grieving", says a Rutgers University child psychologist.

"Sometime around 8 to 10 years of age, children begin to understand what relinquishment means," says Dr. David M. Brodzinsky of the State University of New Jersey, who since 1978 has headed a study of what youngsters of different ages understand about adoption.

"In middle childhood, reflection begins on the adoption process itself," Brodzinsky says. "This is a normal part of coping with adoption. Children wonder, "Why was I given up?"

"I think questions like that are healthy. You have to liken adoption in some respects to any process where there is a loss. There is loss in adoption and during this period children come to recognize it. Working through these feelings of sadness produces growth."

Brodzinsky and his assistants have interviewed about 250 adopted children between the ages of 4 and 13. They have also interviewed about 180 non-adopted youngsters, as well as adoptive parents and teachers of adopted children.

They have worked with non-related adoptions, in which the child has no blood relationship to the adoptive parents. About 750,000 children, or 1 percent of all children in this country, are estimated to be non-related adoptees.

Between 8 and 11 years, children begin to appreciate the many complications adoption can entail, notes the psychologist.

"With increasing knowledge comes increasing uncertainty," he says. "The adoptive family relationship may suddenly seem tenuous to children who previously seemed quite confident about its permanency."

"Frequently we find the adopted child's fantasy life at this time is centered on the biological parents' potential for reclaiming the child, and on the potential disruption of adoptive family life."

Toward the end of this middle childhood period, however, most children regain their certainty about the permanence of the adoptive family, he says.

Not all adopted children experience a significant amount of grief or confusion, Brodzinsky stresses, but many do.

"Sometimes there are sad feelings, sometimes it's just confusion and uncertainty," he says. "Wouldn't you feel sad if you knew that you were once given up: maybe it can happen again."

"One can think about some of the feelings of the adopted child as reflecting a grief and bereavement process – an adaptive one. "What's going on is that the child's intellectual ability to understand his adoption experience is temporarily outpacing his emotional ability to handle it."

It's important for adoptive parents, Brodzinsky says, to recognize these are real feelings the child has.

"Too often, the parent will say, 'There's no reason to feel sad, you're with us, we love you, no one's

ever going to come and take you away, and we're not going to give up," says Brodzinsky, who is often a guest speaker at meetings of adoptive parents "By telling the child he shouldn't feel sad, parents deny those feelings in the child."

He advises parents to acknowledge the child's feelings, to let the child know they understand and can accept the fact that he is feeling sad. Parents should also reassure the child they will help him with this difficult period.

"Let the child know that it is something he will get through and it's not abnormal, but something that probably most kids who are adopted go through," says Brodzinsky. "It might be helpful to point out that many people who have lost something, whether it's a pet or a person, go through similar kinds of initial confusion and uncertainty and sadness."

Unfortunately, parents often interpret the child's sad feelings as an indication that they are doing something wrong. "It really is not a limitation on the part of the parents, unless they are not providing the atmosphere to allow the child to engage in adaptive grieving," says Brodzinsky.

"Long-range problems are more apt to occur," he says, "when parents create an 'atmosphere of silence' around adoption-related issues.

"Parents need to acknowledge there is a difference between adopted and non-adopted children," he says. "Differences are only important in so far as we misrepresent them as deficits. Actually, differences are an inherent part of being human. Use differences constructively to create an atmosphere of openness, trust and honesty."

Brodzinsky's research indicated that while adopted children experience a higher incidence of emotional and academic problems than non-adopted children, the majority of adopted children appear to be very well adjusted.

His studies have also documented that very few children under the age of five understand what it means to be adopted, even though parents often begin telling the "basic facts" to adopted children when they are two or three years old.

"A child may say, 'I'm adopted,' but that doesn't mean he understands the meaning of the term, notes Brodzinsky, who says parents are often misled by a child's 'working adoption vocabulary.'"

The most basic understanding of adoption requires that the child recognize he is being raised by parents who did not give birth to him—yet most children under five understand very little about birth.

Brodzinsky does not oppose early telling, but does caution parents to recognize that children do not understand the world in the same way adults do, and that any attempt at explaining must take this fact into account.

Brodzinsky has carried out his research under grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and Rutgers University. He will soon begin a study of the development of Identity in adolescents and young adults, and he also hopes to study the transition to adoptive parenthood.

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