



Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler



Parenting an adopted preschooler is very similar to parenting any preschooler. As parents, you should not ignore the fact that your child is adopted or their experiences prior to the adoption. But you need not worry unnecessarily about these issues, either.

Children ages 3 to 5 are limited in how much they can understand about adoption. Like all children of this age, adopted children are naturally curious

What's Inside:

- Adoption and child development
- Communicating about adoption
- Discipline considerations



and may ask many questions. They are also growing and changing rapidly. As their abilities develop, so will their understanding of their place in their families and communities. These early years are a good time for you to start practicing how to talk about adoption in a positive and relaxed manner. This will set the stage for open communication as your child grows.

This factsheet is designed to help you understand your preschooler's developmental needs. It also provides practical strategies to promote a warm and loving relationship with your child based on honesty and trust.

Adoption and Child Development

It is important to understand the typical developmental tasks and needs of preschoolers, as well as how adoption-related experiences may affect your child. This knowledge will help you better meet his or her needs, build a close relationship with your child, and promptly identify and address any delays.

Preschooler Development

Preschoolers don't need special classes or expensive toys to learn and grow. Simple everyday interactions such as singing, talking, touching, rocking, and reading can help create a bond with your child and support healthy growth. The following are common characteristics and needs of preschoolers:

What preschoolers are learning:

- How to jump, hop, climb, ride a tricycle, throw a ball (large muscle development)
- How to color, draw, cut with scissors, brush teeth, use forks and spoons (fine muscle skills)
- How to put words and short phrases together
- How to concentrate on a task
- How to recognize family members and friends
- How to name simple emotions such as happy, angry, sad, or scared (children this age will also begin to show more complex emotions such as jealousy or empathy, although they won't understand the names for them until much later)
- How to express emotions and interact with others appropriately

How preschoolers think:

- They believe in magic and imaginary characters such as fairies, elves, and monsters.
- They believe that they cause life-changing events and that everything revolves around them.
- Their thoughts are often occupied by fantasies and fears.

How parents can help:

- Provide space, activities, and playthings to stimulate both large and small muscle groups.

- Provide chances to play and talk with others.
- Teach appropriate social skills through words and by example.
- Model and talk about healthy ways to cope with emotions.
- Calm their fears. (“See, there are no monsters hiding under your bed.”)
- Help them understand cause and effect. (“You went into foster care because your parents had grown-up problems that kept them from being able to take care of you, not because of anything you did.”)
- If possible, when transitioning a preschooler into your family, use familiar foods, clothing, and blankets—little things that will help them feel comfortable and ease the transition.

Adoption Considerations

It is important for adoptive parents to understand how their child’s prior experiences, as well as their individual mental and physical capacity, might affect their development. Many children will catch up developmentally; some children will always have challenges. The following experiences sometimes contribute to delays or disabilities, but they do not affect all children in the same way:

Poor prenatal care. Poor prenatal care or nutrition can harm a child’s physical or mental development. Prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs may damage a child’s

developing brain or lead to specific disabilities.

Child abuse or neglect. Early neglect or abuse may limit a child’s physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Often, the longer a child has experienced abuse or neglect, the greater the impact on development. Children whose early lives are harsh and/or unpredictable may not be able to develop the trust needed for healthy emotions. Sexual abuse can have an especially negative impact on young children by altering a child’s understanding of appropriate roles and relationships. Physical abuse and harsh physical punishment may affect how a child responds to discipline.

Institutionalization or multiple moves. Young children in institutional care (e.g., orphanages) are at risk for delays in mental, social, and physical growth. They also may have challenges processing sensory information or challenges with balance and movement. Institutionalization or multiple moves from family to family may limit a young child’s ability to form a healthy attachment to a primary caregiver. This can delay emotional and social development.

Grief and loss. Children who experience separation from their birth parents may feel an unresolved sense of grief or guilt. Even children adopted as infants will experience grief about the loss of their birth parents and a potential life with them. These feelings may recur over their lifetime, even when their adoption is a positive experience. Unresolved grief can affect a child’s emotional and mental development.

Addressing Children's Developmental Gaps

If your child spent a lot of time living in an institution or was in an abusive family situation, he or she may not have been taught or shown how to communicate or regulate feelings. He or she may not have had chances to learn to play with other children, take turns, or just have fun. Developmentally and experientially, your child may be much younger than his or her chronological age, and it may be helpful to think of the child in that way. As a result, your child may need time to “catch up” to children in the same age group in some skills. If English is not your child's first language and he or she was placed after beginning to understand language, there may be additional delays and challenges.

You can help your child overcome these developmental gaps by adjusting the way you interact with your child to his or her developmental needs, rather than his or her age. Allow your child to learn at his or her own pace. Break tasks down into smaller, doable steps so that the child can feel a sense of mastery and accomplishment.

The following are some examples:

- **Teach your child new ways to interact and communicate.** Use both actions and words. (“I am waiting for my turn to throw the Frisbee.” “John showed his anger with words, not fists.”)
- **Teach your child about safety, privacy, and healthy family relationships.** Demonstrate appropriate behavior and explain. (“In this home we go to the bathroom one at a time,” or “We do not keep secrets.”)
- **Use simple games and activities that help your child develop and coordinate all five senses.** Finger-paint in the bathtub with colored shaving cream, practice writing with foam rubber letters, play dress-up with multifabric clothing and accessories, identify toys and point out their different characteristics (red, yellow, smooth, soft, big, small). Allow your child to play with “baby toys” designed for much younger children. A child cannot catch up without experiencing earlier developmental steps.

Parenting to Build Attachment

You can also use knowledge of your child's developmental needs to help enhance your child's attachment to you. Offer your child the kind of attention, nurturing, and physical closeness that he or she may have missed during early months and years.

Here are some things you can do to build attachment with your preschooler:

- Smile at your child often, make loving eye contact, and use frequent praise.
- Increase your physical contact (hug, hold hands, let your child sit on your lap). Be careful to use “safe touch” with children who may have been sexually abused. (For more information, see the Information Gateway factsheet, *Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused*.)
- Spend as much time with your child as possible. Consider reducing your work hours or taking a leave of absence during the child's initial placement, if you are able.
- Allow your child to go back to an earlier developmental stage, such as rocking

on your lap cuddled in a blanket. Play baby games like peek-a-boo, feeding each other, and pat-a-cake.

- Show your child how to play, how to have fun, and how to be silly.
- Establish regular routines, guidelines, family activities, and traditions.
- Plan future events to reassure your child that he or she will always be part of your family. Show your child where he or she will go to grade school, middle school, and high school. Talk about the future in your conversations (e.g., next Thanksgiving, next summer, on your sixth birthday).
- Help your child grieve losses. Talk about former caregivers, and look at their photos together, if available.
- Help your child remember his or her past.

When to Seek Help

Children learn skills (talking, walking, kicking a ball, recognizing letters) at their own pace. Don't become alarmed if your child is slightly behind others his or her age in one, two, or more areas.

However, any child, adopted or not, may have a developmental delay or disability. This is defined as a *significant* delay in one or more skill areas. Some delays are present at birth while others become more evident as the child grows. You should be prepared to nurture and assist your child if you discover a developmental delay. This is the role of all parents, adoptive or not. Joining a support group or parent group, particularly with other adoptive families, may help your family cope with these issues.

If you notice significant delays, loss of previous skills, or extreme behavior, contact your child's doctor. You should also report if your child has excessive reactions to touch, light, sounds, and motion. A professional can help assess your child's development and determine if serious delays exist. Often it is fairly easy to address developmental issues, and interventions may have more impact if the child is very young.

There are many things you can do if you feel that your child's birth family history or early experiences may put him or her at risk for developmental delays or disabilities:

- Talk to your child's doctor about the possibility of a developmental delay or disability. Choose a doctor who has experience with children who have been adopted or those in placement, if possible.
- Contact your State's postadoption resource center or adoptive parent association. See the Postadoption Services section of the Information Gateway website for more information: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption
- Seek support and advice from experienced adoptive parents of children similar to yours. Join an adoptive parent support group.
- Ask for a professional assessment. Under Federal law, a young child who might have a physical, sensory, mental, or emotional disability is guaranteed the right to an assessment. If your child receives Medicaid, screening is free through the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT)

program. For more information see:
www.hrsa.gov/epsdt/family.htm

- Attend ongoing training on adoption and special needs.

If your child is found to have a disability, he or she might be eligible for Early Childhood Special Education. This can include speech therapy, occupational or physical therapy, and counseling. Some services can be provided at home, while others may be offered at a child development center.

As always, it is important that you maintain a positive attitude and establish a tone of loving support and encouragement by showing you are willing to meet the child where he or she is developmentally. Recent research shows that nurturing environments and loving relationships can build resilience in children.

Communicating About Adoption

Parents who project an attitude of acceptance and comfort with adoption are better able to help their children explore their own feelings and fears. With young children, how you say something is more important than what you say. Stay relaxed and matter of fact. Your tone of voice is important. Parents who grimace or tense up when the topic of adoption is raised may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. Similarly, keeping information “secret” implies that adoption is negative, bad, or scary. This section provides strategies to help you communicate effectively with your preschooler.

Talk Openly About Adoption

Preschoolers love stories and will want to hear their own adoption story again and again. These years are a great time to practice approaching the topic comfortably and honestly. Preschoolers are limited in how much they can understand about adoption, so simple explanations will work best. Be concrete and use props such as dolls, simple drawings, and story books. Don't feel you have to cover everything at once; you and your child will have many chances to talk about adoption.

Preschoolers generally feel good about having been adopted but may still have questions. At this age, they are beginning to notice pregnant women and wonder where babies come from. The most important idea for the preschooler to grasp is that he or she was born to another set of parents and now lives with your family. (Some adopted preschoolers have thought that they were not born.) You can help your child understand this idea using clear and simple explanations. (“Babies grow in a special safe place inside their birth mothers' bodies.”) Don't worry if they initially reject the explanation.

Children this age are also self-centered and concrete in their thinking. They often blame themselves for life events. Language is an important consideration whenever discussing adoption, both with your child and in responses to other people's questions when your child is present. Tell the adoption story in words that will help him or her build a positive identity, calm fears, and understand his or her personal story.

Consider the following word choices:

Instead of:	Say:
“Real” mother/father OR “Natural” mother/father	Birth mother/father OR First mother/father
We could not have <i>our own</i> baby	We could not have a baby <i>born to us</i>
Your birth parents were not able to take care of <i>you</i> .	Your birth parents had grown-up problems, so they could not take care of a child.
They <i>gave you up</i> for adoption.	They <i>made a plan</i> for you to be adopted.

Use a Lifebook

A “lifebook” contains the background and story of your child’s life. It is a sort of personal history book, where your child can collect pictures of important people, places, and events, as well as objects and other memorabilia that have a personal meaning.

Here are some tips to help you create this book with your child:

- Start at the beginning of your child’s story—with his or her birth, not with the adoption.
- Present facts simply, in ways that the child can understand.
- Maintain contacts with birth family members, orphanage staff, and previous caseworkers and caregivers to gather photos and memorabilia for the book.
- If your child was adopted internationally, include visuals from his or her native country (postcards, woven fabrics, popular folk images, native cartoon characters).
- Allow your child to decide when and with whom to share this valuable book.

- If necessary, put aside sensitive information until the child is old enough to understand it.
- See the Lifebooks for Children section of the Information Gateway website for more resources: www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/resourcefam/foster/lifebooks.cfm

Support Birth Family Relationships

“Open adoption” refers to maintaining contact between the child (adoptee) and his or her birth parents or other birth relatives. Like not keeping adoption a secret, an open adoption can have great benefits for the adoptee as well as the adoptive parents and birth families. Many adoptive families choose to maintain some level of contact with their child’s birth family members, although the degree of openness varies.

Families can select an arrangement that best suits their child’s needs. In some adoptions, adoptive family and birth family members contact each other directly. In others, information is shared through an agency, caseworker, or lawyer. Some families

choose to share only medical histories and other background information without identifying information such as last names or addresses. Families should learn more about the benefits of open adoption by working with their adoption agency and by reading and educating themselves about adoption issues.

Adoptive parents sometimes worry about relationships with the birth family. Sometimes their initial reaction to the idea of openness and contact is one of fear. (Will their child prefer the birth parent? Will the child reject the adoptive family? Can the child become confused about having two families?) Because of these fears, adoptive parents may want to refuse any contact. Adoption experts note that contact with birth family members generally has a positive effect on children. Contact with the birth family helps a child develop his or her identity, build self-esteem, and feel more—not less—attached to the adoptive family. Like all relationships, these types of relationships may feel awkward at first. Sometimes an outside adoption expert, such as a counselor or agency social worker, can help everyone define and feel comfortable with their respective roles. Early meetings may need to take place at a neutral location, or initial contact may be by letter, email, or phone.

Preschool-age children have limited understanding of their relationship to their birth parents. (One little boy said, “Susan is my *birthday mother* because she comes to my birthday parties.”) Help your preschooler see that these other “parents” or relatives are important. Speak of them respectfully and comment on their positive qualities. Seeing that you value his or her birth relatives or

previous caretakers will help your child feel better and closer to you.

Families may look quite different from one another. In today’s families, it is not unusual for a child to have both a dad and a stepdad or multiple grandparents. This variety in families may make it easier for you to talk to your child about his or her birth family. It may also help your child to have separate labels for each family member (Grandpa, Pappy, Grandfather; Mommy, Birth Mother).

For internationally adopted children with no birth family member contacts, show your interest in finding as much information as you can. Help your child learn about his or her country of origin—its culture, history, language, native foods and manner of dress, and current events. Talk about the possibility of a future family trip there, if financially possible.

Help Children Cope With Adoption-Related Losses

Children adopted as preschoolers often feel sad or angry about their separation from the people they remember. These may include birth family members, foster parents, and orphanage “brothers and sisters.” Some preschoolers adopted as babies show sadness when they begin to grasp the concept of adoption and the people they have lost, even if they have no conscious memory of them.

Young children, like all people, experience grief and need to mourn and work through loss. You can help them by answering their questions honestly, accepting their feelings, and helping them remember important people in their past. Learning to be comfortable with your own feelings about

adoption, why you choose to adopt (e.g., infertility), or missing out on your child's earlier experiences creates a positive and significant bond with your adopted child. Acknowledge their feelings without trying to sweep them away or clear them up. You may also acknowledge your own sadness by saying something like, "I'm sad too that I didn't get to be with you when you were just a little baby, but I'm happy that your birth mother (and father) had you and that you came to live with me."

Accept sadness as a normal part of a child's coming to terms with adoption. Don't deny your child this feeling or rush him or her through it. Even children adopted as infants, with no memory of their birth parents, will experience these losses, issues, and feelings. This is a part of adoption, not only for the adoptee, but also for the birth parents and adoptive parents who grieve what might have been. Your own understanding of adoption issues will better prepare you to respond to your child's questions and feelings. However, if your preschooler seems sad or angry much of the time, seek help. Extreme behaviors or moods (control issues, withdrawal, apathy, extreme fearfulness, poor appetite, aggressiveness) may result from unresolved grief. If your child shows these behaviors, look for a therapist or counselor who specializes in young children and truly understands adoption. Ask other adoptive parents for recommendations whenever possible.

Address Adoption Fears and Fantasies

Young children who have already lost one home might be very fearful of losing another. This may lead to increased

insecurity. Fears may take the form of sleeping or eating difficulties, nightmares, separation difficulties, nervousness, or increased allergies and illnesses. Here are some things you can do to build your child's physical comfort level and emotional security:

Build a safe environment. Install nightlights, buy soft cuddly clothing, prepare favorite foods, and give your child extra attention. Whenever possible, keep important toys, clothes, and other objects from your child's past. Establishing consistent routines and rules will also help your child feel safe and secure.

Let your child know that you will always be there. Reassure your child that your family and home are permanent. If your child was adopted past infancy, he or she may experience separation anxieties. When you leave the house, make sure to point out that your departure is temporary. Ease the child into visiting a new location or getting to know a new caregiver. Talk in advance about where he will go, what he will do, and when you will come to get him. Visit the site together if possible. Help your child select a comfort item from home to bring along or to play with together later at home. Always pick him or her up on time.

Acknowledge fantasies. Many children fantasize about an alternate family life. Some children dream of a "real" mother who never reprimands or a father who serves ice cream for dinner. The fantasies of an adopted child may be more frequent or intense because another set of parents really exists. Accept your child's pretending or wishing without defensiveness.

Give your child permission to talk about birth family members and/or wonder about family they have not met. You can even take the lead by saying, “I bet your birth mom thinks about you,” or “I wonder if your birth dad had such clear blue eyes like yours.” Teach your preschooler that it is okay to care about both adopted parents and birth parents.

Incorporate Adoption Into Family Traditions/Rituals

The preschool years are a wonderful time to start family rituals that celebrate your child’s cultural heritage. They are also a good time to celebrate the role of adoption in forming your family. Birth parents and grandparents can be remembered on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day by special cards, prayers, or candle lightings. International adoptive families can celebrate significant events of their children’s countries of origin, such as the 15th of September (Guatemalan independence) or the Chinese New Year. In addition to a birthday celebration, your family can develop a special way to acknowledge the child’s “adoption day.”

Be Sensitive to Daycare/Preschool Concerns

Parents often wonder whether they should talk to their child’s teacher about adoption or the child’s past. A good rule to follow is to share only the information needed to ease the child’s adjustment and to keep your child and his or her classmates safe. Ask that adoption be included in materials and discussions. Consider donating appropriate picture books about adoption. Help teachers use positive adoption language and be aware of situations that may be hard for

adopted children (for example, assignments involving bringing in baby pictures, creating family trees, or discussing family histories).

The preschool years are when children become aware of physical and cultural differences. They can also learn some basics about the different ways families are formed. Ask the school to include books, dolls, and playthings to represent cultural, ethnic, and family diversity.

Discipline Considerations

The purpose of discipline is to teach, re-teach, and assist children in developing their own internal controls. Discipline should take into account your child’s abilities, learning styles, and family history. There are many resources available to help parents learn and use positive discipline. This section provides information about a few specific strategies that may be particularly useful for parents of adopted children.

Note that parents need to be especially careful with children who have been abused or neglected. Physical punishment and threats of physical punishment should not be used as forms of discipline.

Establish Routines and Rules

Young children thrive on consistency and routine. Routines and rules help children begin to organize their worlds and regulate their own emotions; they can be especially helpful for children whose worlds previously felt chaotic. Children are generally more

cooperative and secure when they know what to expect.

Preschool children need just a few simple rules to promote child safety and family harmony. From the moment your child joins your family, establish the household routines that will ease everyday life. Routines for meals and bedtime are especially important. Children who were placed in institutions or who had chaotic pasts may take a while to become comfortable with family routines. Children who have been placed in several foster or relative homes will have experienced different rules and expectations in each setting. Be patient when explaining and demonstrating your rules and routines. Be cautious about varying the routines until you are sure your child is used to them and feels secure.

Use Developmentally Appropriate Rewards and Consequences

Children respond better to praise and positive rewards than to scolding or correcting. Preschoolers love being told that they have done something well. Praise reinforces positive behaviors.

Be sure to notice and praise *specific* behavior. For example: “You did a great job waiting your turn” is more effective than “You’re a good girl.” In fact, nonspecific labels such as “good girl” may backfire with adopted children who were neglected or abused. Their self-esteem may be so low that they cannot believe they are good or worthy.

As preschoolers mature, they begin to see the connection between cause and effect. With this ability, they are ready to learn through both *natural* and *logical*

consequences. Natural consequences occur without parental intervention. The natural consequence of leaving a toy outside overnight might be that it gets rusty or stolen. Logical consequences are determined by the parent. For example, a logical consequence of running into the street may be to come inside for the rest of the afternoon.

When using logical consequences, it is important to be extra sensitive to a child who has experienced poverty or neglect. For such a child, the loss of a toy might seem so tragic that it interferes with the lesson to be learned. Coach, explain, and give second chances.

Natural and logical consequences work only if your child can understand the connection between actions and consequences.

Adjust your discipline strategy to fit your child’s abilities and developmental stage. If your child was prenatally exposed to alcohol, he or she may have extra difficulty understanding the connections between actions and consequences. Work with a knowledgeable therapist or parent coach to develop an appropriate discipline strategy.

Use Time In Instead of Time Out

Many parents and teachers of preschoolers like to use a brief period of isolation to help a child regain self-control. This is known as *time out*. For children who have developed a secure attachment to others, a few minutes of *time out* are often effective. These kids don’t like to be alone, and they will improve their behavior quickly so that they can rejoin the group. If you use *time out* for your 3- to 5-year-old, keep it short, and remain in sight of your child.

However, the *time out* method is not the best approach for children who have been neglected, abused, or institutionalized. The main challenge in parenting these children is to help them form healthy attachments. In these cases, use the *time in* method. *Time in* is useful because it avoids distancing kids from parents, playmates, and the rest of the family. When your preschooler's behavior indicates out-of-control emotions, take him or her aside and say: "Time in. You need to stay right here with me until you are ready to join the group." Keep the child physically close to you until he or she is calmer. If the child is extremely agitated, you may need to sit him or her securely on your lap. This will send a message of support without the need for a temporary separation. Attending

parenting classes or reading parenting books specific to adoption, attachment, or children exposed to trauma also will be helpful.

Summary

The preschool years are the perfect time for adoptive parents to increase their comfort with and sensitivity to adoption issues. These years also play an important part in creating a bond between parent and child based on honesty and trust. With a few adjustments, these early years can provide the foundation for healthy development and a warm and loving parent-child relationship.

Acknowledgment: This bulletin was developed by Child Welfare Information Gateway, in partnership with Claudia Hutchison, private adoption consultant and former program manager of the Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center. This document is made possible by the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The conclusions discussed here are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not represent the official views or policies of the funding agency.

Suggested Citation: Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2009). *Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.