Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

FACTSHEET FOR FAMILIES

October 2009

Parenting Your Adopted Teenager

During the teenage years, youth form an identity that is separate from their parents. They also learn and practice adult life skills. Adoption adds complexity to the normal developmental tasks of teenagers, even for those who were adopted as newborns. Adopted teens have varying degrees of knowledge about and contact with birth family members. These factors, as well as their perception and understanding of their adoptive

What's Inside:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau

Child Welfare Information Gateway
Children's Bureau/ACYF
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
www.childwelfare.gov

history, influence their development and experiences. Adoptive parents can best help their teens by understanding these issues and being aware of how adoption and related experiences might affect their youth.

This factsheet is designed to help you, the adoptive parent, understand your adopted teenager's needs, so you can respond with practical strategies that foster healthy development. It presents tips for talking about adoption with your teenager and for helping your teenager talk about adoption with his or her peers. It also offers strategies for providing your teen with guidance, appropriate discipline, and opportunities to master adult tasks as he or she takes on greater independence. Finally, because some adoptive families will need additional help addressing their adolescent's mental health needs, the factsheet discusses when and how to seek that help.

Understanding Teenage Development and the Impact of Adoption

Thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds experience rapid physical and hormonal growth. In later grade school years, girls may develop breasts and get their periods; boys may grow facial hair and have their voices deepen. By the mid-teen years many adolescents look like young adults. Do not let their physical stature and sexual development fool you! Teenagers are still primarily children. They need continued parental supervision, emotional support, guidance, and interaction with caring, grounded adults.

Adolescence is a time of significant brain development. In addition, the social and emotional development of a teenager occurs in three critical areas—identity formation, independence, and intimacy—all of which are affected by adoption.

Brain development

Because 95 percent of the brain is formed by age 5 or 6, experts once believed that brain development peaked in early childhood. We now know that significant brain growth occurs during the teen years.

In particular, teenagers experience rapid growth and change in the section of the brain that governs their abilities to:

- Reason
- Control impulses
- Regulate moods
- Empathize with others
- Limit inappropriate behavior
- Set priorities
- Make sound judgments

This development is not complete until the mid-20s. The frontal lobe of the brain, which is involved in higher thought—critical thinking, math, philosophy—also develops at this age. Teen brains are less efficient at cause-and-effect thinking; teens need guidance from adults and to be allowed to learn from mistakes.

To become more efficient, the brain goes through a "use it or lose it" process. Put simply, the brain builds strength in the areas

where teens focus their energy and may lose capacity in other areas. As explained in the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's *The Adolescent Brain: A Work in Progress:* "If a teen is doing music, sports, or academics, those are the connections that will be hard-wired. If they're lying on the couch or playing video games, those are the cells and connections that are going to survive."[1]

While adoption itself may not significantly affect brain development, early life experiences do. Prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, early childhood neglect, or trauma can damage the brain or influence the way it develops.

What you can do:

- Expose your teenager to healthy academic, social, and cultural activities. Set reasonable limits on isolated or passive activities. Teens adopted from neglectful situations, in particular, need more time interacting with others in person and less time in front of a TV or computer screen. All recently adopted children need to spend a lot of quality time with parents to build their attachment and security in the family. Parents can foster attachment and set a good example for their teens by participating with them in social and community activities.
- Ask for a learning disability assessment if your child struggles in school. Even teens who do not qualify for special educational services can be assisted by simple changes in the classroom. Work with teachers, counselors, and, most importantly, your son or daughter to discover helpful strategies.

Identity formation

All teenagers struggle with the questions, "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" They must define their own values, beliefs, career and educational paths, and expectations of self. They must figure out how they are similar to, and different from, their parents, other family members, and their community. They develop a sense of themselves that is separate from and independent of their parents. Younger teens start to define a sense of self by "trying on" various roles. They start to identify more with peers and less with family. They often express their individuality through clothing, hair, music, and body décor (piercings, tattoos, etc.). They must be allowed some leeway to express how they are "different" from their parents.

Adopted teens may question who they are more deeply than nonadopted peers, as the questions they face are more complex. Although both biology and environment shape all of us, forming an identity is complicated for adopted teens because they have two sets of parents/families. They must consider birth family members as they figure out who they are like and who they are different from. Adopted teens may feel that parts of their identity are missing. Unknown or missing information may prevent them from knowing where certain characteristics, abilities, or talents come from. They may worry that they will take on undesirable characteristics or repeat behaviors, tendencies, or mistakes of

[1] 1 D. Wienberger, B. Elevag, and J. Giedd. (2005). The adolescent brain: A work in progress. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Available: www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/BRAIN.pdf

a birth parent. Teens whose race or ethnic background is unknown (completely or to some degree) or whose race or ethnicity is different from their adoptive parents may feel that they do not fully belong in their family or community. They may have a strong interest in meeting or spending time with birth family members or others of a similar race or ethnic background.

What you can do:

- Give your teenager the facts about how and why they were placed for adoption. Help them find missing information. As their logical thinking skills and abilities develop, adopted teenagers need more details. If information cannot be found, explore with them what *might* have occurred. (For example: If your child was adopted internationally, what was the situation in their country of origin at the time of their birth? Could a single mother have provided for a baby at that time in that place?) See the section on creating a lifebook on page 8.
- Give them all the information you have about their birth parents. Help them learn more if they do not have an open relationship with birth family members. Include information about their birth family's cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. Adopted teens long to know all they can about their birth parents and other birth family members. Teens in transracial or transcultural adoptions especially need this kind of information as they work to form their identities. Share photos if available. All adopted persons share normal curiosity about whether they look like someone in their family, be it their birth parent, grandparents, siblings, etc.
- Help your teenager develop a balanced view of his or her birth parents. Limited or one-sided information (such as early pregnancy or lack of ability to parent) does not allow teens to consider *all* of their parents' experiences and characteristics in developing their own identities. Talk about birth parents as complex people with both strengths and faults.
- Avoid agreeing or participating when your teen criticizes the birth parent. Because their critical thinking skills are still developing, teenagers can be extremely judgmental of others. Adopted teens may be angry at birth parents without yet having developed empathy regarding their difficult situations. Parents can help by offering a balanced perspective. Remember that all adoptees "own" their birth parents to some degree and will internalize criticism of the birth parent.
- Provide contacts with other adopted teens and young adults. This normalizes the adoptive experience. Look for an adoption support group or mentorship program that includes members with the same racial, cultural, or national background as your son or daughter. Adopted teens find peer support especially helpful in forming their own identities.
- Point out the similarities between yourself and your adopted children. Feeling that they are like their adoptive parents in some ways helps strengthen teens' attachment to their families. A strong attachment helps them to feel safe as they enter the adult world.

Independence

All teenagers must separate emotionally from their families. They go back and forth between wanting more freedom and wanting the protection of family. Younger teens start separating without leaving home (e.g., spending more time alone in a bedroom). Teens may seem embarrassed by or not want to be seen with their parents ("Please drop me off at the corner, Mom!").

Adopted teens, especially those adopted as older children, may fear leaving the security of the home and family. Some may adapt by acting more mature, more independent, or "tougher" than they feel to cope with fears and intimacy issues. Again, this is not unlike typical adolescent behavior but may be more evident in adopted teens. Adopted children who experienced previous neglect or abuse often need extra time and practice to learn life skills. Newly adopted adolescents face the task of establishing themselves into the family at a time when normal development would have them pushing away from family.

What you can do:

- Decrease parental control very gradually as your teenager shows signs of readiness. Remember that teens who were adopted from neglectful situations, who have been exposed to trauma, or who have attachment issues may not be ready for the responsibilities at the same time as other teens their age. Recently adopted teens need to spend a lot of quality time with parents to build their attachment and security in the family.
- Give your teen a voice in decisions. If developmentally appropriate, ask your child if he or she feels ready for particular responsibilities and privileges. This is especially important for teens who came from situations where they felt powerless. Teenagers who feel heard and respected are more likely to cooperate with family rules.

Intimacy

Most teenagers deepen their friendships with peers and start to explore romantic relationships. Younger teens think about their ability to attract other youth but do not usually engage in romantic relationships. Mid-teens date and pair up, but usually these relationships are short term. Older teens start to move beyond mere physical attraction to form more intimate emotional relationships. Those who are also struggling with questions of sexual orientation may experience additional difficulties.

Adopted teens may think a lot about their birth parents as they begin to explore romantic relationships, although some of this may be at a subconscious level. While some adopted teens may have a relationship with their birth family, many lack information about birth parents, which can complicate the identity formation process. For example, if all they know about a birth parent is that she was sexually active, faced early pregnancy, or drank, then they may become sexually active or drink (or engage in other risky behavior) as a way to identify with the birth parent. If their past relationships were inconsistent or abusive, some adolescents (whether adopted or not) will have difficulty trusting others. Some will use sexual activity to ease painful memories or to fill feelings of emptiness.

Adolescents who have been sexually abused may engage in sexual activity as a means to feel mastery and control over their bodies, or they may be somewhat more likely to become victims of additional sexual abuse. Many adopted teens may date outside their race due to deep-seated fears that dating within their own race could result in them becoming involved with a biological sibling or relative. (This, too, may be subconscious.)

What you can do:

- Talk openly about sexuality with your teenager. Communicate your values on dating, sex, and relationships. Educate youth about abstinence, safe sex, and birth control.
- Express compassion for your teenager's birth parents' situation. Tell your children that they can make choices for themselves and that they do not have to follow the same path as their birth parents, while continuing to provide as much positive information as possible about the birth family's history.
- Clearly state your values regarding alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors. If your teen came from a birth family where alcoholism or substance abuse was a problem, explain that he or she may be genetically at greater risk for addictions. A teen who previously lived in a substance-abusing home may need extra education and guidance in this area.
- All teens do better in homes with consistent, clear boundaries and expectations, flexible and compassionate parenting, and a nurturing and guiding atmosphere that allows them to incrementally develop and work through their normal adolescent developmental stages.

Communicating With Your Teenager About Adoption

Adopted teenagers wonder about their birth families and think about adoption more than most parents realize. They need parents who are comfortable talking about adoption, who aren't threatened or hurt by the discussion, and who can help answer their questions and discover information about their pasts.

Children are best served by parents who talk about adoption from the youngest ages with openness and in a matter-of-fact way. Teens should not be "surprised" with new information about their adoption. Keeping secrets generally implies something is wrong and often has more to do with the adoptive parents' own losses, fears, and comfort than with the child's needs. Do not wait for your teen to raise the topics of adoption and their birth family. Let your child know that it is okay to talk with you about adoption issues, and make sure that it is. Some children never raise the subject, for fear of offending their adoptive parents. Others act disinterested, when in reality they yearn for more information or for a safe place to express their feelings about adoption.

Learn about the seven core issues in adoption for adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents on the Center for Adoption Support and Education website: www.adoptionsupport.org/res/7core.php

Use teachable moments

Find appropriate times and ways to talk about adoption. Rather than trying to force adoption discussions, parents of teens may have more success by using "teachable moments." Look for events that naturally lend themselves to the topic of adoption. The arrival of a newborn in the neighborhood can lead to discussions of pregnancy, birth, and adoption. Mother's Day or Father's Day are logical times to offer help in researching additional information about birth family members and roots, if little is known. Take advantage of an international news special to talk about your child's homeland. Articles about foster care can spur discussions of child protective services and your child's experience, if relevant.

With teenagers, less is more. Avoid lengthy one-sided lectures. Instead, offer short, non-judgmental, open-ended statements that invite conversation. For example: "I can imagine a boy your age might be curious about his birth father"; "I wonder if you think about your birth mother when you see China in the news"; or "It must be hard sometimes to have parents of a different race."

Provide opportunities for your adopted teen to talk to others about adoption without you around. An adoptive teen group (meeting in person or online), other adoptive families with teens, or an adoption mentor (an older adopted person) can provide a safe outlet for expressing confusion, anger, or sadness.

Provide full disclosure

Teenagers need more detailed information about their past than they could understand at younger ages. This information should now include all that you know or can discover about their genetic histories and their birth and adoption circumstances—including information that may be upsetting or difficult to share.

Adoptive parents often struggle with sharing negative information about their child's birth circumstances, such as if the child was abandoned or if the birth parent had a criminal history. When their adoptive parents are not straightforward in sharing full information, however, teenagers often imagine something even worse than what really happened. Youth placed at older ages may have inaccurate memories of the experience. Further, some teens may become resentful if the truth is revealed later. Withholding information that they have a right to know can be harmful to building a trusting relationship with your teen.

As teenagers develop, they increase their ability to understand and consider situations from many viewpoints. This is an ideal time for adoptive parents to help their sons and daughters make sense of their histories, to come to terms with what happened, and to think of their birth families with compassion.

A NOTE ABOUT CASE RECORDS

Experts advise adoptive parents to question case records and to learn more fully what the words used might indicate. For example, in intercountry adoption, "abandoning" a baby by leaving him or her at an orphanage or in a public place might be the only way to ensure the baby will survive and be cared for. A birth mother may say she doesn't know who the birth father is rather than reveal his identity. Help your teen think about what the case records may actually mean. Often the information that social workers are legally required to collect is not as important to adoptees as birth parents' hobbies, interests, skills, and other descriptive information.

If your child was adopted from the foster care system, case records may be incomplete; they may be dominated by negative information such as criminal records, or some information may not have been known or even asked about. Offer to support your teen in searching for more information or connecting with people from his or her past who might be able to help, either now or in the future.

Develop a lifebook

Information about our origins and histories contributes to the development of our identities and our understanding of how we are influenced by our pasts. Some sort of permanent document can help us remember our life journeys. For adopted persons, such a document should include information about the time before they were adopted, photos and reminders of birth family members, and information about their genetic and cultural roots.

If your teenage son or daughter does not have a lifebook or similar tool that records personal history, now is the time to help create one. Adopted teens have created photo-essays, videos, and blogs or Facebook pages to tell and preserve their stories. Adoptive parents can help by teaching teens about Internet safety, making backup copies of all documents and photos, and keeping these valuable records in a safe place.

Offer to help your teen find people from his or her past who might provide photos, information, and even alternate viewpoints about the family's circumstances and the need for adoption. You may need to do a bit of detective work, especially if the adoption occurred years ago. If your child was adopted from another country, help research the economic, political, and social situation at that place and time to shed light on possible birth and adoption situations. Your teen might want to interview a representative from the placing agency or orphanage to gather more information.

If your teen is not interested in gathering this information, keep the door open. Remind your teen that you are available to help whenever he or she is ready. You might even proceed on your own. The longer from the adoption date you wait, the more difficult it is to make contacts with people who can provide information. Preserve the information, photos, and memorabilia until your son or daughter is ready for it. For some adopted persons, this interest or curiosity does not arise until they become

parents themselves. Then, they truly appreciate their parents' efforts to preserve their histories.

Prepare for search and/or reunion

We all have a need to know who we are and where we come from. Many adopted adults want to know of and make contact with birth family members or others who share their ethnicity, race, or country of origin. An adoptive child's adolescence is a good time for parents to prepare themselves emotionally for future searches for birth family members and possible reunions.

Remember that "search" and "reunion" do not have to go together. Many adopted persons want only to search for the identities of birth relatives. Not all want to take the next step of contacting and meeting those family members. Many need time to think and process information before taking that next step. The interest in doing so may be episodic, with more interest around birthdays or holidays, other significant dates, or special life milestones such as graduations or marriages.

When searching, teens must be prepared for a range of reactions if there has not been ongoing contact with the birth family. As the adoptive parent, you can assist by preparing your child and ensuring that any contact is appropriate. Often it is a matter of clear role definition for all parties. Professional social workers or therapists who know about adoption may be able to provide assistance.

Adoptive parent support groups and parent mentors can be helpful resources during this process. A professional counselor or therapist who knows about adoption issues can help you identify and address your feelings, fears, and grief, so that you can maintain an open and honest relationship with your child. Adopted persons may be terrified of hurting their parents when they search for their birth family. Your unconditional love and support will be very important if and when your son or daughter is ready to take this step.

Start preparing now by gathering information about how an adoption search is conducted in the State where your child's adoption occurred. Private placing agencies may have their own resources and methods for assisting adopted persons in locating birth family. Professional search groups, registries, and the Internet can be helpful. International adoption agencies can help with communications and search services in other countries. Many State agencies maintain postadoption services, an adoption registry, or offer a confidential intermediary (someone who acts as a go-between) to help adopted persons, birth parents, and siblings who want information or to locate each other. The age requirement to participate in these services is usually 18 or 21.

For more information, visit the Search and Reunion section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search

Helping Your Teenager Communicate with Others About Adoption

Being adopted can affect peer interactions. Teens are capable of more sophisticated

understanding and discussions about adoption, but they can be quite narrow in their judgments. It is common for teens to believe that "giving up" a baby for adoption is wrong, for example. Similarly, people who have no personal experience with adoption can at times make unintentionally hurtful comments. A teen whose adoptive status is obvious due to being of a different race or ethnicity from his or her family may encounter innocent questions or even judgmental comments from peers.

Adoption issues may also arise in the context of school, where the majority of many teens' peer relationships occur. Parents have less involvement in their children's schools in the later grades than they did early on. It becomes the responsibility of the teens to decide if they want to bring up the subject of adoption in their classes. They may even ask their teachers to include adoption in the academic curriculum (for example, in biology, genetics, or family life classes). The parents' role is to raise the topic and ask if their teens want coaching on how to advocate for themselves with school personnel.

What you can do:

- Help prepare your teen for these issues to arise. If your son or daughter is newly adopted, classmates will want to know about those circumstances. Help teens anticipate potential questions and practice how they could respond.
- Help your teen understand that personal family information does not have to be shared with schoolmates. He or she should decide in advance what and how much to tell. Having a prepared "cover story" (a version of his or her story that is true but very limited in detail, to use when your teen does not choose to share more personal information) is not dishonest; it is learning to set healthy boundaries about how much and with whom to share. For example, "My first parents couldn't take care of me, so now I live with my new parents."
- Help your child avoid being a "spokesperson" for adoption, unless he or she wants and is prepared for that role. Some adopted students have taken great pride in researching many aspects of adoption, writing in-depth papers, or making class presentations. Your teen should feel free to say, "I don't know about that" or "I'm not an adoption expert," when asked general questions about adoption.
- You may find additional ideas and support by participating in an adoptive parent group—particularly one for parents of teens. Find an adoption support group near you by searching the National Foster Care and Adoption Directory: www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad

Disciplining Effectively

As teenagers assert their emerging identities and independence, while also navigating peer pressures, they frequently will test the boundaries of family rules. Be clear and consistent about your expectations and set reasonable limits (e.g., curfews). At the same time, allow your teenager to make choices and to see the natural consequences of his or her actions. Seek out additional resources

on positive discipline approaches for teenagers, if needed.

For discipline to be effective with adopted teens, these requirements should be met:

- **Focus on attachment and relationship building first, especially for children who have been maltreated or were recently adopted.** Parents should work hard to create avenues of open communication that build a strong relationship and attachment with their teens.
- **Discipline should respect the youth's previous experiences.** Some parents use removal of privileges as a consequence for a misbehavior or for poor grades. Adopted teenagers who experienced previous neglect and deprivation, however, may not respond well to the removal of privileges or possessions. Similarly, for children who have been neglected or who have some degree of attachment issues, requiring a teen to spend some quiet time near you at home may be a better option than isolating the youth in his or her room. If your child struggles with peer relationships or low self-esteem, do not remove an activity (such as a youth group or sport) that provides an opportunity for growth in these areas.
- **Discipline should match the teen's abilities.** Use of logical consequences is a fine way to encourage good behaviors and discourage undesirable ones. (For example, "If you drive irresponsibly, you will lose your driving privileges.") But this technique will work only if the teen can understand the relationship between the behavior and the consequence. If a teen cannot clearly see the connection between actions and consequences, then this approach is not a good match for his or her abilities.

As you explore various discipline techniques, ask yourself if they are appropriate for your child and fit with his or her developmental level. Don't hesitate to ask your child for help! (For example: "What can we do to help you remember to clean up the kitchen after you have used it?") Being invited into the problem-solving process shows your respect for your teen's abilities and motivates him or her to be part of the solution. As with all parenting, flexibility and a sense of humor go a very long way in helping both you and your teen navigate the adolescent years!

Preparing Your Teenager for Adulthood

An important part of parenting teenagers is creating the conditions in which they can master adult tasks and take on greater independence.

Mastering adult tasks

Teenagers need time to gradually learn and practice adult life skills, such as finding a job, managing finances, doing laundry, preparing meals, driving a car, and arranging medical appointments. Some adopted teens need extra time, attention, and encouragement to learn adult tasks. They may not be ready for adult responsibilities at the same age as their peers. Help your child learn to be comfortable with his or her own situation and abilities.

Teens who experienced unstable living situations may not be ready to live away from their families until well past the teen years, even if they are developmentally able. Some may choose to live at home and attend a local community college rather than go to a university where they would need to live on campus. Some adopted teens have even experienced sudden drops in their grades as graduation approached, due to fears about having to leave home before they feel ready.

Teens with learning delays or disabilities will require extra time and effort to learn adult life skills. They may need to experiment with alternatives and adjustments for skills—such as driving—that are not within their reach.

What you can do:

- Teach and re-teach your teens adult life skills (balancing a checkbook, paying off a credit card balance, cooking, laundry, car maintenance, making doctor appointments, etc.). Provide abundant opportunities for supervised practice.
- If you adopted your child as a teen, check to see if they are eligible for any of the State's Independent Living services.
- Check with your teen's school about any transition services the district may provide.
- Explore substitutes or assistance for skills that are not manageable. Your family is the best judge of when your teenager is ready to partially or fully manage adult tasks.

Leaving home: Independent versus interdependent living

Very few young adults are ready for full "independent" living. We all need ongoing support and encouragement from family as we learn to negotiate the adult world. Launching adopted children from the family home brings some unique challenges. "Interdependence" rather than "independence" is a more fitting goal for young adults as they venture into the world.

What you can do:

Explain how you will help your teen move into adult life. Teenagers need to know how long they can live at home and whether or not their parents will help them with their first apartment rental, pay college tuition, keep them on the family health insurance, etc.

Base your support and expectations on your child's abilities, level of emotional security, and history—and not on their chronological age or what their peers are doing.

Provide ongoing emotional and tangible support even after your young adult moves out of your home. Parents who visit frequently, assist with household management, help to fill out tax forms, and so on help young adults not feel too overwhelmed as they adjust to life away from the family.

Special considerations for youth with disabilities

Under Federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, by the time a special education student reaches age 16, the school is to provide a plan that may

include help obtaining further education, getting a job, or living independently. Parents need to advocate for these services. Communicate respectfully, clearly, and often with your school's "transition coordinator" about your child's transition plan.

Seeking Help for Mental Health Concerns

For many adopted persons, growing up in an adoptive family involves some additional complications and challenges. Adoption issues may come up episodically throughout an adoptee's life, as well as throughout the lives of the birth parents and adoptive parents. (See the box about core issues in adoption, on page 6.) An occasional session with a counselor or therapist who is skilled with adolescents and knowledgeable about adoption issues, when needed, may be helpful. However, unless there is an urgent need for professional attention, having an adopted peer, a mentor, or a teen adoption support group can also be effective at addressing issues as they arise.

Adolescence is a time when mental health conditions may surface, including some with genetic links. Having a birth parent with a mental illness, such as depression or bipolar disorder, does not mean that your son or daughter will develop this condition, but he or she may be at greater risk.

Signs and symptoms

Adoptive parents should learn the signs that can indicate when to seek a professional opinion (medical or psychiatric). These include:

- Extreme moods or emotions. The teenager is:
  - Angry, sad, or depressed much of the time
  - Extremely fearful or anxious
  - Withdrawn or apathetic
- Risky or out of control behaviors, including:
  - Self injury
  - Harmful sexual activity
  - Eating disorders
- Substance abuse. The teenager:
  - Shows sudden and unexplained changes in physical appearance (such as red watery eyes, rapid change in weight)
  - Experiences physical symptoms (changes in appetite, vomiting, tremors)
  - Has unexplained changes in behavior, mood, attitude, or personality traits
  - Loses interest in hobbies or friends once enjoyed
  - Shows unexplained changes in school performance
- Anger management or relationship problems. The teenager:
  - Shows extreme anger or aggression with peers
  - Finds family interactions stressful

- Avoids family members and friends
- Has inappropriate peer relationships
- Has no friends (is a "loner")

Risky behaviors might be an acting-out of inner turmoil. Adopted teens may be at increased risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as for eating disorders, due to previous abuse or neglect. Depression, anxiety, or relationship problems might indicate posttraumatic stress syndrome due to earlier maltreatment. Childhood trauma does not resolve itself; it needs to be treated by a qualified mental health provider.

Finding the right person to help

Postadoption programs, adoption support groups, and other adoptive parents can be good resources for information about local mental health professionals. Look for a therapist or counselor who:

- Has experience working with youth and families
- Is knowledgeable about adoption
- Understands any special needs your teen might have (attachment issues, medical conditions, learning disabilities, etc.)
- Includes the entire family in at least some of the therapy sessions
- Makes clear to the child that he or she is not "the problem"

For more information about life after adoption, visit the Help for Families (Postadoption Services) section of the Information Gateway website:

www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/postadoption/families

Summary

Despite the challenges, raising adopted teenagers can be very rewarding. With clear communication, supervision, guidance, and support, parents can help their teenagers prepare for healthy, happy, and productive adulthoods. Parents who respect their teens' histories and birth families will foster strong and lasting relationships with their young adult sons and daughters.