

Grief and Loss in Adopted Children

As adoptive parents, our children's adjustment and confidence in their world depends upon our ability to identify their grief, assist them through their grief issues, and help them grow from that grief. This parenting responsibility begins when we adopt, and continues as we guide our children into adulthood.

As parents, adoption agencies, and social workers, we view adoption as happy, joyful. A child without a family now has one. A family yearning to share its love can now open its heart.

The topic of grief is not a topic generally discussed when considering adoption. It's not a regular topic in adoptive parenting classes. And books and websites seldom discuss an adopted child's possible feelings of loss, trauma, and grief.

Intellectually, we understand that babies and children experience feelings of discomfort, loss, and confusion during the first weeks and months after being adopted. Practically, though, do we allow and even create opportunities for newly adopted children to grieve their losses and their past? And throughout our children's lives, do we acknowledge and assist them with their grief?

If we adopt babies, we may mistakenly assume that our child's life begins with us. If we adopt an older child, we may wrongly assume that their past is now their past. Adopted children, however, bring multiple issues of loss with them into their adopted families, no matter what age they were adopted.

Childhood grief is often based on different issues than those that impact adults. Donna O'Toole, grief counselor and author of *Helping Children Grieve and Grow*, writes, "Especially for children a loss may be based on safety, comfort, and familiarity, rather than on what adults speak of as love or affection."

Helping Children Grieve and Grow lists six categories of childhood loss: relationship loss (usually people and animals); loss of objects that give comfort (toys, blankets, clothing); loss of a secure, familiar environment; loss of self (ways of being and doing that define us uniquely); loss of skills, abilities, and competencies; and loss of familiar habits and routine.

Adopted and foster children, no matter what their age, embark upon their newly changed lives facing most of these categories of loss. They've lost their caregivers, their clothes and bedding, their familiar smells, tastes, and sounds; the way they do things; their ability to feel comfortable with their lives and language, and their daily routines.

Theresa Anderson, family counselor specializing in issues of adoption, attachment, and grief says, "Grief is THE core issue that adopted children deal with...grief and terror. Think about international adoption... You can't take a child from home, put them into an airplane, cross the world, surround them with 1000's of people at the airport, have them

met by strange people, smells, textures, foods, and voices, and not expect them to be traumatized."

As adoptive and foster parents, we cannot overlook our children's grief because it is not easily seen or identified. In *Helping Children Grieve and Grow* Ms. O'Toole writes, "Children usually don't tell you they are grieving. You can tell by what they say and do." Examples of possible reactions of grieving children include anger, sadness, hyperactivity, changes in appetite, hoarding food, inappropriate emotional response, headaches, difficulty making decisions, regressive behaviors, and clinginess.

Children's responses to grief, though, may not fall within a list of observable reactions. Ms. O'Toole writes, "When children feel overwhelmed by intense feelings they may naturally make their world safe by distancing themselves physically or emotionally, by pretending or by denying the reality of the loss."

Ms. Anderson comments that trauma and loss can, and often does, interfere with a child's general development. She adds, "Children often cover trauma and grief with being perfect, with controlling others, or with being mad."

In *Our Own: Adopting and Parenting the Older Child*, Ms. Maskew writes, "Experienced parents recommend that you take the initiative in talking with your child about losses and grief. You cannot go around the pain and loss, you must go through it." Also, she reminds parents of the need to teach children about emotion words and expressions. "Kids who have been traumatized or abused or who simply did not have a stable early life may never have learned how to identify their feelings and their effects."

Even if we acknowledge and assist our children with grief and loss in the early years they live with us, that doesn't mean their grieving is over and done. The issues of loss, grief, and trauma that our children face upon adoption, do not disappear once they have adjusted to their new lives. Adoption-related grief issues are re-visited throughout their lives. Ed Entmacher, a North Carolina psychiatrist who works with children and families says, "Grieving over adoption issues doesn't happen easily or neatly. It has to be revisited over and over into adolescence and adulthood."

As an adoptive parent, read about grief and loss in children. Help your child to accept and grow from their grief. It's part of being an adoptive family.

[Susan Ward, founder of Heritage Communications, maintains Older Child Adoption Online Magazine. This regularly updated website includes articles, personal insights, links, books and more. There are special sections on single parenting, reactive attachment disorder, and "Adopted Just Like Me for Kids.]