



Parenting Your Adopted Teenager

During the teenage years, youth form an identity that is separate from their parents and begin to learn adult life skills. Adoption adds complexity to the normal developmental tasks of teenagers, regardless of the age they were adopted. This factsheet is designed to help you, the adoptive parent, understand your adopted teenager's experiences and needs so you can respond with practical strategies that foster healthy development. These strategies include approaches that acknowledge trauma and loss, support effective communication, promote a teen's independence, and address behavioral and mental health concerns.

WHAT'S INSIDE

The impact of adoption on teenage development

Communicating with your teenager about adoption

Communicating and building relationships with birth family members

Helping your teenager communicate with others about adoption

Effective discipline

Preparing your teen for adulthood

Seeking help for behavioral and mental health concerns

Summary

The Impact of Adoption on Teenage Development

As your adopted teenager goes through a period of dramatic change and development, he or she will need parental guidance and support as much as ever, but also may resist it more than ever. Thirteen- to 19-year-olds experience rapid physical and hormonal growth, and many adolescents may look like young adults in their mid-teen years; however, teenagers still need continued parental supervision, emotional support, and interaction with caring adults.

Adolescence is a time of significant brain development, as well as social and emotional development in the formation of identity and independence—both of which may be affected by adoption and/or early childhood trauma.

Brain Development

Experts once believed that brain development peaked in early childhood; we now know that significant brain growth occurs during the teen years. This growth spurt provides important opportunities for shaping healthy development.

Teenagers experience gradual changes in the section of the brain (prefrontal cortex) that manages their abilities to reason, control impulses, limit inappropriate behaviors, and make good judgments. This development is not complete until the midtwenties. In addition, the parts of the brain that involve critical thinking, understanding social cues, and empathizing with others (relating to other people's perspectives and showing compassion) are also developing.

Chemical changes in the teenage brain (shifting levels of dopamine) encourage youth to seek risks and new challenges. This occurs at a time when the youth's brain is less effective at thinking through consequences and controlling impulses. As such, teens need guidance from adults, opportunities for healthy risk-taking activities, and chances to learn from experience.

Another important change in the adolescent brain relates to the strengthening of the connections between cells (synapses). To become more efficient, the brain builds

strength in the areas where teens focus their energy and may lose capacity in areas used less often (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011). As such, how your teen spends his or her time now can have long-term effects.¹

While adoption itself may not significantly affect brain development, early life experiences do. Prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, early childhood neglect, and trauma can slow or change the way the brain develops. For example, the brain of a teen who has experienced trauma may become "wired" to expect a lack of support, threats to safety, and sudden changes. Yet, research tells us that the brain can be "rewired" and that ongoing relationships with supportive, caring adults can be powerful forces in helping the brain readjust (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011).

What you can do:

- **Expose your teenager to healthy physical, social, and cultural activities.** Set reasonable limits on isolated or passive activities, including time in front of a screen or on a digital device.
- **Help youth take positive risks.** Encourage youth to explore interests and try new things—for example, playing an instrument, trying out for a sports team, or visiting new places.
- **Engage and guide teenagers in planning and decision-making.** Allow youth to make decisions, set priorities, manage tasks, and have some control over their lives. Guide them in problem solving and help them understand the consequences of their decisions and actions.
- **If you notice developmental delays or your child struggles in school, ask your school or doctor for a professional assessment.** If an assessment reveals that your child has a disability, talk with school personnel about developing an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that will ensure services to address your child's needs. This is important for the

¹ For more information on adolescent brain development and what you can do to help the brain grow, see Chamberlain, L. B. (2009). *The Amazing Teen Brain: What Parents Need to Know*. Institute for Safe Families, Multiplying Connections, and Advocates for Youth. Available from <http://www.instituteforsafefamilies.org/materials/amazing-brain>

child to feel successful and helps prevent difficult behavior at school. Even teens who do not qualify for special educational services can be assisted by simple changes in the classroom.

Effects of Trauma

Many adopted teenagers have experienced some degree of trauma. Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes harm. Potentially traumatic events include neglect, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), unpredictable parental behavior, and separation from a parent or other important relationships.

Trauma can affect how children and youth think, feel, learn, develop, and interact with others. Untreated trauma can interfere with physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health and development. Even after youth join safe and stable adoptive homes, their earlier world views can continue to influence how they think and behave. For example, they may have trouble trusting, overreact to certain situations, act aggressively, or seem to “shut down.” Sometimes, the effects of trauma don’t show up until adolescence; other times, the effects that previously seemed lessened may reappear. (For more information, see *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Trauma* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/child-trauma/>.)

What you can do:

- **Be available and predictable.** Build trust by being physically and emotionally available, even if the youth tries to keep you at a distance. Spend time together in the home. Set consistent routines with your teen’s input and discuss expectations.
- **Identify trauma triggers.** Certain noises, smells, actions, etc., may serve as reminders of traumatic events. Try to notice what makes your youth anxious, and work with him or her to recognize triggers and learn how to manage them.
- **Let your youth express emotions without being judged.** Remember that emotional outbursts and certain behaviors may be a natural and protective response given past experiences. Try to remain calm and reassuring.

- **Seek professional support, if needed.** A trauma-informed therapist can help with the healing process. (See the section on Seeking Help for Behavioral and Mental Health Concerns.)

Identity Formation

Many teenagers struggle with the questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” They must figure out how they are similar to, and different from, their parents, other family members, and their community. Ultimately, they must define their own values, beliefs, educational and career paths, and expectations of self. Younger teens may start to define a sense of self by “trying on” various roles. They often express their individuality through clothing, hair, music, and body décor (piercings, tattoos, etc.). Expressing how they are “different” from their parents can be a healthy part of growing up.

Teens may start to identify more with peers and less with family, often deepening their friendships with peers and starting to explore romantic relationships. Some teens may be struggling with questions of sexual orientation and gender identity and may experience additional stressors related to acceptance and disclosure of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

Adopted teens may question who they are more deeply than their nonadopted peers. Forming an identity is more complicated for adopted teens because they have two sets of parents/families (even if they haven’t met them) and must consider their birth family members as they figure out who they resemble and how they are different. Adopted teens may feel that parts of their identity are missing and may want to know more about their birth family. Unknown or missing information may prevent them from knowing the source of certain characteristics or abilities. They may worry that they will take on certain characteristics or repeat behaviors of a birth parent. Teens whose race or ethnic background is unknown, or whose race or ethnicity is different from their adoptive parents, may feel they do not fully belong in their family or community. They may have a particularly strong interest in meeting or spending time with birth family members or others of a similar race or ethnic background.

On top of the challenges and issues of identity formation in relation to their adoption, adopted teens are also going through the normal physical changes and challenges of adolescent sexual development and sexual identity formation. During adolescence, youth are often concerned with how their bodies are changing and how they will look in the future (Smith, Howard, & Monroe, 2000), and adopted teens must consider birth family members as they figure out who they resemble and how they are different. Questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity can add an extra layer of confusion for adopted teens working through identity issues.

What you can do:

- **Talk to your teenager about his or her birth parents.** Be open and willing to explain what you know about his or her birth family. This can help keep teens from forming unrealistic fantasies, lessen anxiety about their history, and build trust with you (Keefer & Schooler, 2000); however, be aware of your child's individual circumstances, developmental level, and ability to take in the information. If your teen does not have an open relationship with birth family members, help him or her learn more. (See the section on Communicating and Building Relationships With Birth Family Members.) Provide information about the birth family's cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. Share photos, if available.
- **Develop a lifebook.** If your son or daughter does not already have a lifebook or similar tool that records personal history, key events, and important people in his or her life, now is the time to help create one. Some adopted teens make creative photo-essays, videos, or blogs to tell their stories. (For more information on lifebooks, visit <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks/>.)²
- **Support youth in building a deeper understanding of their heritage.** Connect youth to cultural, ethnic, and spiritual activities. (For resources related to transracial or transcultural parenting, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/adoption-by-family-type/transracial/>.)

www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/adoption-by-family-type/transracial/)

- **Provide opportunities to interact with other adopted teens and young adults.** This helps make the adoptive experience and identity seem more normal. 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. (To find support groups for adoptive youth, check with your adoption agency or search the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>.)
- **Point out the similarities between yourself and your adopted children.** Feeling that they are like their adoptive parents in some ways may help strengthen teens' attachment to their families. A strong attachment can help them to feel safe as they enter the adult world. Find activities and interests to share together in order to bond and reinforce ways in which you're alike.
- **Talk openly about intimacy and sexuality with your teenager.** Communicate your values on dating, sex, and relationships. Talk about what it takes to develop and maintain healthy relationships. Educate youth about abstinence, safe sex, and birth control. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' website offers information on talking to your teens about sex and healthy relationships at <http://www.healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/parenting/healthy-communication-and-relationships/talk-to-your-kids-about-sex> and <http://www.healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/parenting/healthy-communication-and-relationships/talk-with-your-teen-about-healthy-relationships>.
- **Support and affirm LGBTQ youth in expressing who they are.** Promote healthy development and self-esteem. For information and resources, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/diverse-populations/lgbtq/>.

² Two lifebooks designed especially for teens and with teen input are Build Your Own Roots and Records Book (at http://www.ilrinc.com/products/secure_store_item/build_your_own_roots_and_records_1_-_19_copies/) and A Teen Foster Adoption Lifebook: For When I'm Famous (at <http://www.amazon.com/Teen-Foster-Adoption-Lifebook-Famous/dp/0970183291>).

Independence

All teenagers must separate emotionally from their families. This can be both exciting and scary. Teens often go back and forth between wanting more freedom and wanting the safety and protection offered by their family.

Adopted teens, especially those adopted as older children, may fear leaving the security of the home and family. As they prepare to leave for college or live on their own, they may question their place in the family. Separation may feel like abandonment and trigger emotions associated with the loss of birth parents. Some teens may adapt by acting more mature, more independent, or “tougher” than they feel to cope with fears. Some may become less interested in being away from home, even for short periods of time.

Teens with different histories may have different needs. Adopted children who have experienced previous neglect or abuse often need extra time and practice to adapt to independence and learn life skills. Newly adopted adolescents face the task of establishing themselves in the family at a time when normal development would have them pushing away. These teens may need to spend more quality time with parents to build their attachment and security in the family.

What you can do:

- **Set consistent, clear limits and boundaries while allowing some independence.** Let teens work through their normal adolescent developmental stages and assert some independence within a nurturing and guiding environment. For example, look for opportunities to show acceptance for how they dress and their choice in music.
- **Allow for a gradual increase in your teen’s independence as he or she shows signs of readiness.** Ask your youth if he or she feels ready for specific responsibilities or privileges. Remember that teens who have experienced trauma and/or who have attachment issues may not be ready for responsibilities at the same time as other teens their age. If your teen is not yet ready for certain responsibilities, make it a goal to work toward them.
- **Give your teen a voice in decisions.** Teenagers who feel heard and respected are more likely to cooperate with family rules. This is particularly important for teens who may have come from situations where they felt powerless.
- **Clearly state your values regarding alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors, and emphasize healthy lifestyle choices.** If your teen came from a birth family where substance abuse was a problem, be aware that he or she may be at greater risk for experiencing a variety of negative outcomes. (To learn more, see *Parental Substance Use and the Child Welfare System* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parentalsubabuse/>.)
- **Reaffirm a young adult’s place in your family.** As adopted youth get ready to leave for college or move out on their own, reach out and let them know that you will be expecting them at the holidays and family gatherings. Stay in touch through texts, phone calls, or email to remind them that even while they are living apart, they are still a central part of your family.

Communicating With Your Teenager About Adoption

Many adopted teenagers wonder about their birth families and think about adoption more than most parents realize. Parents who are truly comfortable talking about adoption can help answer questions and discover information about their teen’s past. Children are best served by parents who talk about adoption from the youngest ages with openness and in a matter-of-fact way. Don’t wait for your teen to raise the topics of adoption and his or her birth family. Some children never raise the subject for fear of offending their adoptive parents, even though they would like to talk about it. Others may act disinterested, when in reality they want more information.

Adoptive parents often struggle with sharing difficult 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, teenagers may imagine something even worse than what really happened. If information is kept secret, then teens may

think it's shameful. They also may become resentful. Withholding information about your teen's history that he or she has a right to know can be harmful to building a trusting relationship between the two of you.

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.

Seven Core Issues in Adoption

Since the early 1980s, adoption experts have recognized seven lifelong issues experienced by adopted children (as well as birth and adoptive parents). These include loss, rejection, guilt and shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and mastery/control. Be mindful of these issues as you communicate with your teenager. Find more information at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/issues/>.

What you can do:

- **Send clear messages that you're willing to talk about adoption and your teen's related feelings.** Many adopted youth feel guilty or disloyal for talking about their birth parents. If your teen has recently received information or developed questions, but is not ready to talk right away, make an "appointment" to talk and set the date on the calendar.
- **Provide full disclosure.** As their logical thinking skills develop, adopted teens need more details than when they were younger. Let teenagers know what you know or can discover about their histories and their birth and adoption circumstances. Include information that may be upsetting or difficult to share, but be sure to help teens learn to cope with the painful aspects.
- **Help your teenager develop a balanced view of his or her birth parents.** Limited or one-sided information (such as an inability to parent) does not allow teens to consider a full picture of their parents'

characteristics and experiences. Talk about birth parents as complex people with both strengths and challenges. If your teenager criticizes a birth parent, avoid agreeing, but rather try to offer a more balanced perspective.

- **Use "teachable moments" as opportunities to start discussions.** The arrival of a newborn in the neighborhood, news about your child's homeland, or even a television show can be the starting point to ask your teen about his or her thoughts and feelings.
- **Be patient.** Communication may be difficult. Teens are often known for their one-syllable responses (or nonresponses). Not talking may be a part of their efforts to separate and gain independence. Avoid lengthy, one-sided lectures, and continue to invite conversation. It's often easier for teens to open up while engaged in an activity with the parent, even something as simple as driving together in the car. If parents appear to be calm, relaxed, and open, teens are more likely to open up.
- **Provide opportunities for your 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.

Communicating and Building Relationships With Birth Family Members

We all have a need to know who we are and where we come from. Many adopted teens want to know about and make contact with birth family members or others who share their ethnicity, race, or country of origin. An adoptive child's teenage years are a good time for parents to prepare themselves and their youth for future searches for birth family members and possible reunions, if the youth is not already in an open adoption relationship.

Open Adoption

In recent years, open adoption has become increasingly common. These are adoptions in which there is some

level of contact between an adoptive family, including the adopted person, and his or her birth family members. Contact may vary from exchanging letters, emails, and photos to face-to-face visits, and the type and frequency of contact may change over time.

Trends toward increased openness reflect an increased recognition of its benefits for an adopted child or youth. Relationships with birth family members help youth to develop a deeper understanding of his or her identity, establish a sense of “wholeness,” and gain access to important genetic and medical information.³ (For more information, see *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-openadopt/>.)

The Internet and the explosion of social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) have dramatically increased the potential for open adoptions. It is now easier for youth to have contact with their birth families. In addition, in cases where open relationships were not previously established, adopted teens and their birth parents are finding each other with amazing speed through social networking sites. While connections are being made with relative ease, they also may happen without the teen being prepared emotionally or having support systems in place, and sometimes without the knowledge of the adoptive parents.⁴

What you can do:

- **If your youth has an open adoption, build healthy relationships with your youth’s birth family.** Show respect for the family members and maintain a genuine commitment to staying connected. For a variety of reasons, you may prefer to keep some distance from birth family members; however, it is important to stay focused on what’s in the best interest of your child.

³ Siegel, D., & Smith, S. (2012). *Openness in adoption: From secrecy and stigma to knowledge and connections*. New York, NY: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Available from <http://adoptioninstitute.org/publications/openness-in-adoption-from-secrecy-and-stigma-to-knowledge-and-connections/>

⁴ Howard, J. (2012). *Untangling the web: The Internet’s transformative impact on adoption*. New York, NY: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Available from <http://adoptioninstitute.org/publications/untangling-the-web-the-internets-transformative-impact-on-adoption/>

- **If your youth does not have an open adoption or wants to find additional family members, talk about options for learning more.** Ask your teen about his or her feelings about potential contact with birth relatives. This can be a very emotional process. Emphasize the importance of being prepared and having support in place before starting a search. (See more on Search and/or Reunion below.)
- **Be familiar with your teen’s social media use.** Establish Internet rules and provide guidance for safe use (e.g., don’t give out identifying information and location). Discuss with youth the possibility that a birth relative could try to make contact through social media, the importance of you knowing about any attempts at contact, and the various ways you might respond—together.

Search and/or Reunion

As noted above, the desire to search for birth relatives is a normal part of identity formation among adopted youth. Keep in mind that “search” and “reunion” do not have to go together. Some 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. Still others may want to meet their birth relatives, but aren’t necessarily interested in an ongoing relationship.

What you can do:

- **Gather information about conducting a search.** Adoption agencies may have resources and services for assisting adopted persons in locating birth family members. The Internet and online registries can be helpful. For more detailed guidance, visit the Search and Reunion section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search>.
- **Prepare youth for a range of reactions.** If there has not been prior or ongoing contact with the birth family, help your teen recognize the possibility that the birth family member may not want to be contacted and/or may need time to adjust to the idea. It also may be possible that a birth parent is interested in an ongoing

relationship, while the teen only wants to meet. In addition, youth adopted from foster care may imagine that their birth family members have changed since they entered care. They should be prepared for the fact that their birth family members may still be facing ongoing challenges (e.g., they abuse drugs, they are in a violent relationship).

- **Provide guidance around contact with birth family members.** Stress the importance of moving slowly in the process of getting to know one another. Set limits, if needed, regarding visits and roles. Professional adoption workers may be able to provide assistance.
- **Find support for you and your teen.** You and your teen may benefit from learning about other people's experiences with search and reunion, for example through search support groups for adopted persons and adoptive parent support groups. (To find groups in your State, search the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>.) Because searches can trigger deep emotions, you and your teen may want to talk with a counselor or therapist with experience in adoption. Adopted persons may be afraid of hurting their parents when they search for their birth family. Your love and support will be very important if and when your son or daughter is ready to take this step.

Helping Your Teenager Communicate With Others About Adoption

Being adopted can affect a teen's peer interactions. While teens are capable of sophisticated understanding and discussions about adoption, they can be quite narrow in their judgments. Some teens may believe that "giving up" a baby for adoption is wrong, for example. Similarly, people who have no personal experience with adoption can unintentionally make 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 teens' peer relationships occur. As they age, it becomes the responsibility of the teens to

decide if they want to bring up the subject of adoption in their classes.

What you can do:

- **Prepare your teen for talking about adoption.** Help teens anticipate potential questions and practice how they could respond, especially if your son or daughter is newly adopted. Ask teens if they want coaching on how to talk with teachers about including adoption in the curriculum (for example, in genetics or family life classes).
- **Help your teen understand that personal family information does not have to be shared.** 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 they do 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 take great pride in researching and writing about adoption 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.

Effective Discipline

As teenagers assert their emerging identities and independence, they frequently will test the boundaries of family rules. While navigating peer pressures, they may experiment with risky or forbidden activities. Be clear and consistent about your expectations for youth and set reasonable limits (e.g., curfews). Talk openly about safety issues. At the same time, allow your teen to make choices and to see that you have trust in him or her to make good decisions. Look for positive discipline approaches that emphasize strengthening your relationship and

supporting independence within a nurturing atmosphere of guidance and structure.⁵

Adopted teens, particularly those who were recently adopted or who were previously abused or neglected, require discipline practices that emphasize relationship building and support attachment and trust. Use discipline to help teach acceptable behavior, and reinforce positive behavior as often as possible. Some punishment can trigger trauma memories, create anxiety, lessen trust, and cause further harm. In addition, discipline must be appropriate for the teen's prior experiences and developmental level. For example, an adopted teenager who has experienced severe neglect may not respond well to the removal of his or her valued belongings. Requiring a youth who has attachment issues to go to his or her room may not be as helpful as having that teen work alongside you to complete a household chore. If your child struggles with peer relationships or low self-esteem, it is not wise to remove an activity (such as a youth group or sport) that provides an opportunity for growth in these areas.

What you can do:

- **Focus on attachment and relationship building.** Create avenues of open communication and support that build trust and a strong relationship.
- **Encourage and reinforce good behavior.** Point out things that your youth does right as often as possible, more than you point out the things you don't approve of.
- **Be specific.** Don't tell teens to be home "at a reasonable hour"; instead, tell them exactly what time you expect them in the door.
- **Give your teen a voice.** Ask your teen to help set reasonable rules and resolve issues. For example, ask "What can we do to help you remember to clean up the kitchen after you've used it?" Being invited into the problem-solving process shows your respect for your teen and motivates him or her to be part of the

⁵ See, for example, Durrant, J. (2013). *Positive discipline in everyday parenting*. Sweden: Save the Children. Available from <http://www.frp.ca/document/docWindow.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewDocument&documentid=1147&documentFormatId=1978>

solution. If you find out that your teen has broken a family rule (e.g., attended a party with no adult supervision), listen to his or her explanation, yet be clear about limits and your concerns for his or her safety.

- **Match discipline to the teen's abilities.** Match your expectations to your teen's developmental stage. In addition, while use of logical consequences can sometimes discourage undesirable behaviors (e.g., limiting video game time in response to inappropriate behavior), it's not practical for a teen who has difficulties seeing the connection between actions and consequences. Also, tying incentives to short-term rewards (allowing use of the car if they keep their grades up) may be more powerful than long-term goals (studying for college).
- **Stay calm.** A teen's emotions can be overwhelming and prompt challenging behaviors. Be a role model in how you deal with frustration. When emotions "heat up," stay composed and resist the urge to yell. If you need to take a few moments to yourself to calm down, then do so. Reassure the teen that he or she is safe and cared for. Once anger has lessened, discuss the situation calmly.

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. Teenagers need time to gradually learn and practice adult life skills and will need ongoing support systems to negotiate the adult world.

Adopted teens may need extra time and encouragement to learn adult tasks. They may not be ready for adult responsibilities at the same age as their peers. Additionally, teens who have experienced unstable living situations may not be emotionally ready to live away from their families, even if they are developmentally able. Some may choose to live at home and attend a local community college rather than go away to a university. Teens with learning delays or disabilities will require extra time and effort to learn adult life skills. They may need to find

alternatives and adjustment for certain life skills, such as driving.

What you can do:

- **Teach your teens adult life skills.** Provide varied opportunities for youth to learn about and practice daily living activities such as balancing a checkbook, cooking, doing laundry, making medical appointments and filling prescriptions, maintaining a car, etc.
- **Look into available services.** If you adopted your child as a teen, check to see about eligibility for any of your State’s Independent Living services. (For more information, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/independent/>.) Check with your teen’s school about transition services the district may provide.
- **Promote ongoing, supportive relationships.** Few young adults are ready for fully “independent” living. Your teen will need continued assistance and guidance from you, other relatives, mentors, etc. Even after your young adult moves out of your home, you can help him or her feel less overwhelmed by providing emotional and tangible support—perhaps by helping paint a new apartment, showing up with a care package of groceries, or giving tips on filling out tax forms.
- **Be clear with your teen about limits and expectations for how you will help him or her move into adult life.** For example, young adults need to know how long they can live at home and whether or not their parents will help them with college tuition, rent, health insurance, etc. Base your support and expectations on your youth’s abilities, level of emotional security, and history—and not on his or her age. If you feel it is time for your child to move out, be sure to help him or her find suitable housing, employment, or schooling, as the young adult may feel overwhelmed.
- **Explore 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 (driving, living alone, etc.).
- **Advocate for services 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 must provide a plan that may include help in obtaining further education, getting a job, or living independently. Talk with the school’s “transition coordinator” about your teen’s transition plan and available services.

Seeking Help for Behavioral and Mental Health Concerns

For many adopted persons, growing up in an adoptive family involves some challenging emotions. Adoption issues, such as feelings of loss and grief, may appear and reappear throughout an adopted person’s life. Talking with a counselor or therapist who is skilled with adolescents and knowledgeable about adoption issues can be helpful. Having an adopted peer who is a good role model, a mentor, or a teen adoption support group to talk to and share experiences with can also be valuable.

Adolescence is a time when behavioral or mental health issues 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 risk. It’s important to remember that it can be common for teens to behave in ways that challenge their parents; parents shouldn’t jump to the conclusion that the youth has inherited his or her birth family’s behavioral/mental health issues.

For some youth, inner turmoil may lead to risky behaviors, and some adopted teens may be at increased risk for a variety of negative outcomes due to previous abuse or neglect. Depression, anxiety, or relationship problems might indicate a response to trauma. Childhood trauma does not resolve itself; it needs to be treated by a qualified, trauma-informed behavioral/mental health provider.

What you can do:

- **Be aware of signs that can indicate your teen needs help.** (See the box on page 11 for more information.) Seek a professional opinion from your doctor or a mental health professional.

- **Find the right person to help.** Adoption support groups, postadoption programs, and other adoptive parents can provide referrals for mental health professionals. Look for a therapist or counselor who has experience working with youth and is knowledgeable about adoption. The professional should understand any special needs your teen might have (attachment issues, medical conditions, learning disabilities, etc.) and make it clear to your teen that he or she is not “the problem.” (For more information, see *Selecting and Working With a Therapist Skilled in Adoption* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>.)

Signs and Symptoms That Youth May Need Professional Help

- Extreme moods or emotions. The teenager is:
 - Angry, sad, or depressed much of the time
 - Extremely fearful or anxious
 - Withdrawn or completely lacking energy
- Risky or out-of-control behaviors, including:
 - Self injury
 - Harmful sexual activity
 - Eating disorders
 - Drug and/or alcohol use or abuse
- 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”)

Summary

Parenting an adopted teenager is not without challenges. These may include navigating the youth’s need for greater independence while offering continued supervision, guidance, and support. It can also be a greatly rewarding experience as the young person strengthens his or her identity and develops new capabilities. Most youth move out of the turbulent teen years and become positive members of society.

Parents who show respect for their teens’ histories and birth families will help create long-lasting, positive relationships with their sons and daughters. With clear communication, trust, and support, parents can help their teenagers prepare for healthy, happy, and productive adulthoods.

References

- Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2011). *The adolescent brain: New research and its implications for young people transitioning from foster care*. Retrieved from http://www.jimcaseyouth.org/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Adolescent%20Brain_prepress_proof%5B1%5D.pdf
- Keefer, B., & Schooler, J. E. (2000). *Telling the truth to your adopted or foster child: Making sense of the past*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Smith, S., Howard, J., & Monroe, A. (2000). *Issues underlying behavior problems in at-risk adopted children*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 22(7), 539–562.

Suggested citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2015). *Parenting your adopted teenager*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau.



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

