

August 2013

Disponible en español
[https://www.childwelfare.gov/
pubs/impactoadoptadas.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactoadoptadas.cfm)

Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons



As discussion of the adoption process becomes more open and accepted in American society, and as more Americans have experience with adoption, there is also more attention focused on those involved in adoption—the adopted person, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents (often referred to as the adoption triad or the adoption constellation). This factsheet examines the impact of adoption on adopted persons who have reached adulthood.

What's Inside:

- Postadoption issues
- Openness, searching, and access to family history
- Managing adoption issues
- Resources



Use your smartphone to
access this factsheet online.



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

While it is difficult to make sweeping statements about such a large and diverse group as adopted persons, adopted persons generally lead lives that are no different from the lives of nonadopted persons; however, they have experiences that are unique to being adopted, and these experiences may have an impact on their lives at various times. There are several themes that emerge from personal accounts and data from academic studies about issues that adopted persons may face. This factsheet addresses these themes, which include loss, the development of identity and self-esteem, interest in genetic information, and managing adoption issues.

Postadoption Issues

Adopted persons may deal with a range of issues at different points in their lives.

Loss and Grief

The loss of birth parents as a result of adoption may set the stage for feelings of grief for many adopted persons. The loss experienced by adopted persons may be characterized as ambiguous loss, or the loss of someone who still is (or who may be) alive (Powell & Afifi, 2005). This type of loss also may increase the feelings of uncertainty (e.g., “Do I resemble my biological parents?”) an adopted person feels. Adopted persons who feel secure in their adoption and have open adoptive family communication may be better able to manage their uncertainty and grief (Powell & Afifi). Additionally, adopted persons may have difficulty finding an outlet because their grief may not be recognized by others.

Feelings of loss and grief, as well as anger, anxiety, or fear, may especially occur during emotionally charged milestones, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a parent.

Adopted persons may also suffer secondary losses. For instance, along with the loss of their birth mother and birth father, adopted persons may experience the loss of brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. There also may be a loss of cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial adoption). For those who were adopted as older children, there may be a loss of friends, foster families, pets, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings.

Identity Development

Identity formation begins in childhood and takes on increased importance and prominence during adolescence (Grotevant, 1997). Adoption is a significant aspect of identity for adopted persons, even when they are adults (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). The task of identity development may be more difficult for an adopted person because of the additional issues related to adoption, such as why he or she was placed for adoption, what became of the birth parents, does he or she have siblings, and whether he or she resembles the birth parents in looks or in other characteristics. Adoption remains an important aspect of identity throughout adulthood, and one study described the development of adult adoptive identity as having five phases:

- **No awareness/denying awareness:** The adopted person does not overtly acknowledge adoption issues.
- **Emerging awareness:** The adopted person views adoption as a positive influence and recognizes some issues, but he or she is not ready to explore these issues.
- **Drowning in awareness:** The adopted person has feelings of loss, anger, and sadness about the adoption.
- **Reemerging from awareness:** The adopted person recognizes the issues related to the adoption, but also sees the positive aspects and is working toward acceptance.
- **Finding peace:** The adopted person has worked through his or her issues with the adoption and is moving toward peace and acceptance (Penny, Borders, & Portnoy, 2007).

Self-Esteem

Often accompanying these issues of identity are issues of self-esteem—that is, how the adopted person feels about him or herself. A number of studies have found that, while adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in most ways, they often score lower on measures of self-esteem and self-confidence (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996). This result may reflect the fact that some adopted persons may view themselves as different, out-of-place, unwelcome, or rejected. Some of these feelings may result from the initial loss of birth parents and from growing up away from birth parents, siblings, and extended family members. They also may be caused by an ongoing feeling of being different from nonadopted

people who know about their genetic background and birth family and who may be more secure about their own identity as a result. Additionally, some adopted persons report that secrecy surrounding their adoption contributes to low self-esteem.

Thinking About the Adoption

The amount and degree of thought an adopted person devotes to his or her adoption may change over time and may vary based on each person's circumstances. For example, the birth of a child to an adopted person, which may be the first experience with a biological family member, may cause the adopted person to revisit earlier issues of identity. The new parent may also be prompted to think about what his or her birth mother experienced in giving birth and what the birth mother and father may have experienced in making the adoption placement decision. Adopted adults who become new parents may be sympathetic to the difficulties of their birth parents, or they may wonder how their birth parents could ever have placed them for adoption. In a study of adopted adolescents' thinking about adoption, 13 percent never thought about adoption, 54 percent thought about their adoption once a month or more, and 27 percent thought about their adoption once a week or more, with males thinking about their adoption more frequently than females (Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002). Adolescents in closed adoptions were no more likely to have increased frequency of thought about their adoption than those in open adoptions.

Genetic Information

Adopted persons often lack birth family genetic and medical history. This information can be vitally important to the diagnosis and treatment of genetically based medical conditions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010). In addition, being asked to supply medical history information at a doctor's appointment may make adopted persons acutely aware of how they differ from those who were not adopted. Finding out later in life that they were adopted as infants puts adopted persons at risk of misdiagnoses or other medical issues due to their long-held assumption of a family medical history that they later find is incorrect. Additionally, when adopted persons plan to get married or become a parent, they may want to know about genetic characteristics their children may inherit.

In many cases, nonidentifying information, such as medical history, may be placed in the adoption file by the birth parents or agency at the time of the adoption. Adopted persons are allowed access to this nonidentifying information, which is usually at least as old as the adopted person. In some States, adopted persons can petition a judge to have their adoption records opened, and some judges will agree to do so in order to provide urgently needed medical information.

However, obtaining access to information provided by the birth parents at the time of the adoption may not be sufficient to provide a full medical history. For example, a birth parent, sibling, or grandparent may later develop or be diagnosed with a genetic disease or condition. It is more useful if

birth parents regularly update the file that is kept with the adoption agency or attorney. Additionally, those in open adoptions may be able to get this information directly from their birth parents.

For more information about the collection of and access to birth family information, see the following Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheets:

- *Collection of Family Information About Adopted Persons and Their Birth Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/collection.cfm)
- *Access to Adoption Records* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm)

LATE DISCOVERY

Adopted persons who find out their adoption status later in life often call themselves an LDA (for Late Discovery Adoptee). Responses may include anger directed toward the adoptive parents, depression, and issues with trust in other close relationships. For additional information about late discovery in adoption, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/discovery.cfm.

Other Behavioral Health Issues

A review of the research on the mental health of adopted adults shows there is a divide about whether adopted adults' psychological well-being is comparable to

their nonadopted peers. Many studies report that adopted adults have a higher degree of mental health issues, but some researchers view these differences as minor while others view them as substantial (Baden & Wiley, 2007). Additionally, the studies are not always in agreement about what the differences are. For example, some studies cite higher rates of depression among adopted individuals than their nonadopted peers (Borders et al., 2000; Cubito & Obremski Brandon, 2000), while others have found similar levels of depression within both groups (Feigelman, 2005).

Even with the split in research conclusions about adopted adults' psychological well-being, most of the literature points to adopted adolescents and adults being more likely to receive counseling than their nonadopted peers (Borders et al., 2000; Miller et al., 2000). Studies comparing adopted persons to their nonadopted peers also indicate that adopted adults have similar rates of suicide ideation and attempts (Feigelman, 2005), that adopted adolescents have similar rates of antisocial behaviors (Grotevant et al., 2006), and that adopted persons are at an increased risk of substance use disorders during their lifetime (Yoon, Westermeyer, Warwick, & Kuskowski, 2012).

VARIATIONS IN THE ADOPTION EXPERIENCE

Even given all the research about trends in the lives of adopted persons, each adopted person will have unique feelings, experiences, and thoughts about his or her adoption. Some of these differences may be accounted for by individual personality traits, coping mechanisms, or other life events, but circumstances surrounding the adoption also may affect how an adopted person views the adoption. The following are examples of characteristics of adoptions that may have an impact on an adopted person:

- Being adopted transracially (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_ethics/types/trans.cfm)
- Having lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) parents (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_ethics/types/lgbt.cfm)
- Being adopted from another country (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_ethics/types/intercountry.cfm)
- Being in an open adoption (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_openness.cfm)
- Discovering later in life that you were adopted (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/discovery.cfm)
- Being placed for adoption because your birth parents' rights were terminated involuntarily (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm)

Openness, Searching, and Access to Family History

Being placed for adoption does not necessarily mean an adopted person will never be able to contact his or her birth parents again. Adoptions may have some degree of openness, meaning that there is some communication between the birth and adoptive families—possibly including the adopted person.¹ Additionally, the birth family or the adopted person may attempt a search and reunion later in life. The number of open adoptions (in which the birth and adoptive families know each other's identities and have direct contact with the adopted child) and mediated adoptions (in which contacts between the birth and adoptive families are made indirectly through a mediator) are on the rise. In a 2012 survey of adoption agencies with infant adoption programs, the agencies reported that only 5 percent of their placements during the previous 2 years were confidential, with 55 percent of the adoptions being fully disclosed and 40 percent being mediated (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012).

There are myriad reasons adopted persons may seek information about or contact with their birth families, such as a desire

¹ The level of communication between an adopted person and his or her birth family may vary due to the adopted person's age and developmental level or the particular openness agreement of that adoption. Additionally, some adoption advocates believe that an adoption is only truly open when all members of the triad (the birth family, the adoptive family, and the adopted person) communicate with each other.

to establish or reestablish a relationship, help further develop their own identity, or to obtain genetic or medical information. The desire to search may be prompted by specific life events, such as marriage or having children (Corder, 2012). Studies have shown that adopted persons rarely search for their birth parents because of a negative relationship with their adoptive parents (Muller & Perry, 2001). Perhaps half of all adopted adults search for identifying information or try to make contact with their birth parents (Curtis & Pearson, 2010; Evan B. Donaldson, 2010; Muller & Perry, 2001). Adopted persons in an open adoption or who otherwise have contact with their birth parents generally have positive feelings about the relationships (Grotevant et al., 2007; Siegel, 2012) and are glad they searched (Penny et al., 2007). Some earlier studies, however, found that adopted persons who search for their parents may exhibit lower self-esteem, have lower family and friend support, have higher incidences of anger and depression, and more frequently use mental health services (Borders et al., 2000; Cubito & Obremski Brandon, 2000).

For additional information about open adoption and birth family contact, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway: https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/preplacement/adoption_openness.cfm

For additional information about obtaining birth and/or adoption records, including State laws that govern this access, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search/records.cfm>

SEARCH AND REUNION AND THE INTERNET

With seemingly everything available on the Internet, adopted persons and birth families are much more easily able to find contact information and establish connections than they had been in the past. This increase in information availability is changing the landscape of privacy and confidentiality, including in adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). With a simple Internet search or a review of social media sites, individuals may be able to quickly determine identities and establish connections. Search and reunion among birth parents and adopted persons is not new, but the speed at which it can occur is. Because of the sometimes instantaneous nature of the Internet, connections may be attempted without giving pause for self-reflection, consideration of the consequences, or assistance from support systems, such as family, friends, and professionals (Howard, 2012).

Since search and reunion can be enormously emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss, adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before search and reunion. Preparation will help individuals think through their expectations and prepare for a range of potential reactions from the other party, including rejection (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

Managing Adoption Issues

Most adopted adults overcome any adoption-related issues they experience during childhood and adolescence and are as well-adjusted as nonadopted persons (Borders et al., 2000; Corder, 2012). However, there is also significant research that suggests that many adopted persons struggle with issues such as grief, loss, identity development, and self-esteem. The following describes some ways that adopted persons manage these and other issues.

Support Groups. Many adopted persons are helped by support groups in which they can talk about their feelings with others who have similar experiences. The support group may provide a long-needed outlet for any lingering feelings related to the adoption, such as loss or grief. In addition, support groups may provide help with the decision of whether to search for birth relatives.

Counseling. Some adopted persons may need more help than they find from family and friends or through a support group. In these instances, adopted persons may seek professional counseling. Many mental health practitioners report not having enough training in adoption-related issues, so it is important for adopted adults to find a counselor who has the requisite skills, knowledge, and outlook (e.g., the counselor does not assume all issues are related to adoption) (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Corder, 2012). Also, support groups may have experience with local counselors and be able to make a recommendation. For more

information, read *Selecting and Working With a Therapist Skilled in Adoption*, available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm.

Education. For many adopted persons, learning about the experiences of others, whether through first-person accounts or through adoption research, can be a helpful coping mechanism. There are an ever-increasing number of books, articles, videos, and websites (including blogs) that focus on a wide range of adoption-related topics. Adopted persons may be reassured discovering that others who have gone through similar experiences have had similar reactions.

Conclusion

Adopted persons generally lead lives that are very similar to their nonadopted peers, but their adoption experience frequently can contribute to circumstances that the adopted person may need to overcome, such as feelings of loss and grief, questions about self-identity, or a lack of information about their medical background. The increasing occurrence of open adoption—and therefore the increased contact adopted persons have with their birth families—has dramatically affected the issues faced by adopted persons over the past two decades. Whereas adopted persons from a past era may have more frequently dealt with issues of secrecy and large gaps in information, persons adopted recently may more often be faced with issues related to having contact with their birth parents. Additionally, with the seemingly limitless

availability of information, in large part due to the Internet, adopted persons now have access to widespread information and resources, which can greatly aid them in discovering information about their birth families or finding resources for support and encouragement.

Resources

American Adoption Congress. This nonprofit membership organization provides education, advocacy, and support for families touched by adoption. <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/>

Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association (ALMA). This membership organization provides an adoption reunion registry and advocates for the right of adopted persons to know the truth of their origin. The ALMA registry has a one-time registration fee of \$50. <http://www.almasociety.org>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. This service of the Children's Bureau provides information and publications about a wide range of adoption topics. It also provides adoption statutes for each State.

- For Adopted People (web section) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_people/)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (list of organizations) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?svcID=132&rate_chno=AR-0031A)

- *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)
- *Working With Birth and Adoptive Families to Support Open Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm)
- *Laws Related to Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/laws/>)
- *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/index.cfm)
- *National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>)

Donaldson Adoption Institute. The Adoption Institute provides information about a wide array of adoption issues. <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org>

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project. This website provides information on a longitudinal study of openness in adoption. <http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption>

Open Adoption Bloggers. This website lists more than 300 blogs about open adoption, including those by adopted persons, birth parents, and adoptive parents. <http://openadoptionbloggers.com>

References

- Baden, A. L., & O'Leary Wiley, M. (2007). Counseling adopted persons in adulthood: Integrating research and practice. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*, 868–901.
- Borders, L. D., Penny, J. M., & Portnoy, F. (2000). Adult adoptees and their friends: Current functioning and psychosocial well-being. *Family Relations, 49*, 407–418.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013a). *Openness in adoption: Building relationships between adoptive and birth families*. Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013b). *Working with birth and adoptive families to support open adoption*. Retrieved from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm.
- Corder, K. (2012). Counseling adult adoptees. *The Family Journal, 20*, 448–452.
- Cubito, D. S., & Obremski Brandon, K. (2000). Psychological adjustment in adult adoptees: Assessment of distress, depression, and anger. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 70*, 408–413.
- Curtis, R., & Pearson, F. (2010). Contact with birth parents: Differential psychological adjustment for adults adopted as infants. *Journal of Social Work, 10*, 347–367.
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. (2009). *Beyond culture camp: Promoting health identity formation in adoption*. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2009_11_culture_camp.php.

- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. (2010). *For the records II: An examination of the history and impact of adult adoptee access to original birth certificates*. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/7_14_2010_ForTheRecordsII.pdf.
- Feigelman, W. (2005). Are adoptees at increased risk for attempting suicide? *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 32*, 206–216.
- Grotevant, H. D. (1997). Coming to terms with adoption: The construction of identity from adolescence into adulthood. *Adoption Quarterly, 1*, 3–27.
- Grotevant, H. D., Miller Wrobel, G., Von Korff, L., Skinner, B., Newell, J., Friese, S., & McRoy, R. G. (2007). Many faces of openness in adoption: Perspectives of adopted adolescents and their parents. *Adoption Quarterly, 10*, 79–101.
- Grotevant, H. D., van Dulmen, M. H. M., Dunbar, N., Nelson-Christinedaughter, J., Christensen, M., Fan, X., & Miller, B. C. (2006). Antisocial behavior of adoptees and nonadoptees: Prediction from early history and adolescent relationships. *Journal of Research on Adolescents, 16*, 105–131.
- Howard, J. A. (2012). *Untangling the web: The Internet's transformative impact on adoption*. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2012_12_UntanglingtheWeb.php.
- Kohler, J. K., Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (2002). Adopted adolescents' preoccupation with adoption: The impact on adoptive family relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*, 93–104.
- Miller, B. C., Fan, X., Grotevant, H. D., Christensen, M., Coyl, D., & van Dulment, M. (2000). Adopted adolescents' overrepresentation in mental health counseling: Adoptees' problems or parents' lower threshold for referral? *Journal of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 39*, 1504–1511.
- Muller, U., & Perry, B. (2001). Adopted persons' search for and contact with their birth parents I: Who searches and why? *Adoption Quarterly, 4*, 5–37.
- Penny, J., Borders, L. D., & Portnoy, F. (2007). Reconstruction of adoption issues: Delineation of five phases among adult adoptees. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 85*(1), 30–41.
- Powell, K. A., & Afifi, T. D. (2005). Uncertainty management and adoptees' ambiguous loss of their birth parents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 22*, 129–151.
- Sharma, A. R., McGue, M. K., & Benson, P. L. (1996). The emotional and behavioral adjustment of United States adopted adolescents: Part I. An overview. *Children and Youth Services Review, 18*(1/2), 83–100.
- Siegel, D. H. (2012). Growing up in open adoption: Young adults' perspectives. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 93*, 133–140.

Siegel, D. H., & Livingston Smith, S. (2012). *Openness in adoption: From secrecy and stigma to knowledge and connections*. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2012_03_openness.php.

Yoon, G., Westermeyer, J., Warwick, M., & Kuskowski, M. A. (2012). Substance use disorders and adoption: Findings from a national sample. *PLoS ONE*, 7. Retrieved from <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0049655>. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0049655

Suggested Citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). *Impact of adoption on adopted persons*. 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

