

Adoption and Development: What Does the Research Tell Us?

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According to the Center for Adoption Research and Policy (1997), there are more than five million adopted persons living in the United States at this time and as many as one million families are currently seeking children to adopt. Many children exposed to alcohol and drugs find their way into the foster care system or are adopted by families who have concerns about later development. As a result, professionals and parents are interested in how adoption affects the child emotional and social development. Many professionals believe that adopted children are likely to have more problems than children reared in their birth families. These concerns were formalized by Kirscher in 1995 in an article describing an “adopted child syndrome”. This syndrome was described as including attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder, learning and conduct disorders. Attachment disorder is also a concern if a child is adopted after infancy or if the child has experienced very negative early caregiving.

In trying to understand whether these problems are really more common in adopted children, many studies of this problem have been carried out. This research has attempted to answer the following questions: 1) Are there more adopted children among those referred for clinical and developmental services? 2) Do adopted children actually have more developmental problems? 3) Do adult “adoptees” have more social and emotional problems? To answer these questions, researchers have done both clinical and epidemiological studies and looked at social adjustment as well as intellectual and academic development over the lifespan.

The results suggest that development outcomes for most adopted children are similar to that of children in the general population. That is, adoptees do not show a high incidence of problems either in childhood or later in life. When childhood adjustment is examined, the following factors predict positive outcomes: maternal sensitivity, development of a good attachment relationship, “positive” child temperament, and female gender. Boys who display behavior problems have the most negative outcomes but even in such cases, family environment is an important predictor.

Using databases in Sweden, England and the United States, studies have followed adoptees in to later adulthood. Positive outcomes in adult hood are associated with the incidence of childhood behavior problems as well as higher family education and socioeconomic status as well as parental interest in education. Overall, a review of the literature suggests that the most important considerations in later adjustment are: 1) age at adoption with later adoption leading to more problems, 2) Gender, with females having fewer problems than males; 3) Developmental optimality, with children having fewer developmental problems showing better adjustment, 4) Parenting and home environment, with more positive outcomes seen in homes that provide better environments and finally, 5) Socioeconomic Status with home that have more social resources associated with better outcomes.

Conclusions from research studies are that most adopted children are like children reared in birth families and that long-term adjustment is good. However, there may be a subgroup of children at higher “risk” due to developmental and social factors who will require more attention and intervention.

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