



The Adoptee Search: Looking for the Missing Piece

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“Being adopted is like being a puzzle with a piece missing.” Jeremy, age 10

Among the special tasks of adoptive parenting is one that could definitely benefit from an instructor’s manual--knowing how to handle our children’s potential interest in searching for connections to or relationships with their birth families and birth heritage.

Joyce Maguire Pavao, author of *The Family of Adoption* (1998) and an adoptee herself, writes that “search is something that all human beings do in one way or another . . . It is a human need to know as much as we can about who we are.” Dr. Pavao separates *search* from *reunion with birth parents* and defines it as the process of gathering information about the past and the present to better move forward into the future. It is healthy and normal for children, teens, and young adults to make connections to their past that will help them develop positive, strong identification with where they came from as well as where they are and where they are going. Search may lead to the desire for reunion, and then again, it may not.

Adoptive parents need to know that it is normal and necessary for children to search for information about their birth and heritage.

Regardless of how we feel as parents about the concept of *search*, the most important thing is to focus on what is best for our children. To do that, it is helpful to look at search through the eyes of adoptees themselves and then to consider how that information relates to the unique needs of each of our children.

The Search for Self

Of course, the challenge for many adoptees, as they go in quest of information about their past, is that the facts have been lost or hidden. It is difficult for those of us raised in our birth families to fully comprehend how it can feel to go through life without very basic details about our existence that most of us take for granted:

The time of day that we were born;
The history of our birth family as well as the culture(s) and talents it incorporates;
What illnesses or medical conditions we may have inherited.

“Sometimes I don’t even feel like I was BORN. Everyone can tell stories about their birthday except me.” --Sam, age 13

“Who celebrated my birth?” --Anna, age 6,
upon seeing pink balloons outside the house of a neighbor who just had a baby.

“For many adoptees, the loss of part of themselves is felt intensely,” states well-known researcher David Brodzinsky in *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* (1992). Dr. Brodzinsky has studied how children at different ages, and with different temperaments and personalities, cope with the common emotions of growing up adopted. He has found that many adoptees are bothered by the lack of control they had over major decisions that brought them to adoption.

As they grow up, the continued decisions by others to prevent them from gaining personal information can become what he calls a “life stressor.” As individuals, adoptees quite naturally develop a wide variety of ways to deal with these feelings of powerlessness—everything from minimizing those feelings to allowing them to consume their lives.

It is important to create home environments for adopted children that are open to

(Continued page 2)



The Adoptee Search: Looking for the Missing Piece (Continued from page 1)

are open to communication about their search.

“One of the misconceptions that adoptive parents have is that they have done something to make their child want to search. They haven’t,” notes Marshall Schechter, who co-authored *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* with Dr. Brodzinsky and Robin Henig. The need to know more information or to make contact with birth families is highly individual, and the desire to reunite with birth parents in particular can be generated by a wide variety of reasons.

As parents, there are ways to help our children decide for themselves what search will mean. Holly van Gulden, author of *Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting an Adopted Child* (1993) advises parents to initiate the searching process when children are young. “If your child isn’t already asking questions about his past and her genetic history by age eight or nine, raise the issue yourself . . .” she writes.

Whose Search Is It?

Other than providing our support and keeping communication open, what is our role as parents in helping our children search for the connections they need?

Obviously, when our children are young, we can greatly influence those connections, by providing them at the appropriate time with information about their adoption story, and by choosing neighborhoods, schools, and family activities that bring them in contact with their birth culture or heritage. We can bring home books about adoption that help them to understand how other adoptees have searched for connections. By providing them with opportunities to meet other adoptees, such as culture camps or peer counseling groups for adoptees, we can help our children develop their own thoughts about what search will mean for them. By making efforts to link our children to other adoptees, we send the message that we can handle whatever needs they have around adoption.

As children become teens, parents can continue to offer opportunities for connections, although it is important to allow adoptees to take the lead. The issue of control is a high priority for all teens as they separate from their parents, and it can especially be so for adoptees. The search for identity that relates specifically to birth connections should not be minimized, although teens may not communicate about this very well. Notes Dr. Brodzinsky, “Sometimes a teenager’s newly emerging disruptive behavior can really be a search in disguise.” Adoption therapists who have expertise in the complexities of adoption issues in the teen years can greatly impact the outcome of this difficult time.

Sometimes we try to push our typically non-communicative kids on the issues of adoption. Our reasons may be right, but our methods can get misinterpreted. One example is the mother who offered to return with her 12-year-old son to the hospital where he was born. He agreed to go, but “only if we don’t go inside.” It took the mother several weeks to figure out that her son still felt on some level that his birth mother might be there, and he was completely unprepared for that contact. Families who adopted internationally often want to make a homeland tour, but some children have serious reservations. Rather than leaving these concerns unresolved, or forcing a decision on our children, we can give children the opportunity to explore their thoughts with an adoption professional. This is particularly important if there are siblings, who certainly may feel differently about a trip even if they are adopted from the same part of the world.

Hollee McGinnis, who joined her family at age 3 from Korea, studied female Korean adoptees and their identity while she was in college. She founded Also-Known-As, Inc. for adult international/interracial adoptees. In her personal search and through her relationships with other adoptees, she has learned how critical it is for adoptees to be in control of decisions they make about birth family connections. She explains:

“As adoptees we did not get to choose our adoptions. We did not choose to be relinquished . . . to be adopted. The decision to search is one of the few things adoptees get to choose. It is a part of our adoption life journey; it is not our adoptive parents’ journey.”

(Continued page 3)



The Adoptee Search: Looking for the Missing Piece *(Continued from page 2)*

Adoptive parents can help by taking steps to give their children increasing control over their search decisions, even at an early age, and by providing them with opportunities for exploring with others how they truly feel about search as they grow up.

Will search take my son or daughter away from me?

Supporting our children's search process may bring up mixed feelings of fear, sadness, and anger. It forces us to come to terms with what can be one of the most difficult aspects of adoptive parenting . . . acknowledging that we are not the only parents of our children.

By giving our children control over their search, we often feel that we are losing them. It's common to worry that our kids will be hurt by connections they make and information they find, or that they will seek reunions with their birth parents and then desert us altogether. (The research so far points more in the direction of strengthened adoptive family ties after reunion with birth family members.) We also get very upset—sometimes more upset than our kids—when customs or laws make it impossible to retrieve information that our children desire.

Parents are likely to feel pulled and pushed in many directions by the emerging trends in domestic and international adoption today. As we explore the best ways to help our children, we need to keep in mind that searches will be as varied as the hundreds of thousands of adoptees who are making choices for themselves. We can best support our children by staying focused on helping them feel loved and positive about themselves, and giving them assurances that we will stick with them regardless of how and where they carry out their search.

**No matter what our children choose to do when they search,
they will need to know that we will always be their parents and that we love them.**

What we know about the search for birth parents

As many as 50% of adoptees who search do not tell their adoptive parents until the search is over.

Adoptees search for:

Curiosity – *What do my birth parents look like? Are my birth parents doing OK now? Do I have siblings? Who were my ancestors?*

Medical Information – *What genes do I carry? Is there anything that will affect MY children?*

Wish for Similarity – *Who likes the kinds of things I do? Does someone else understand me better?*

Control – *Everyone else made decisions about my life . . . now it's my turn! Answers – WHY was I really placed for adoption? Was I missed? Don't you want to know about ME?*

