

Teens Need Families Too

By Rose M. Garland, Adoption Consultant

One of the bigger misconceptions in our society-at-large is the belief that adoption brings more benefit to younger children than their elder counterparts. While younger children may seem more helpless and needy for a good parental figure, older children, including teenagers, are no less in need of a loving and stable home.

Fourteen years ago, my experience as a teenager getting adopted was probably not typical. I had been in foster care for 10 years, excluding one short-term reunification with my birth mother and had moved to quite a few foster homes while in the system. I had no one person in my life that was stable—the closest was my younger brother, but we had been separated for four years of our time in the system.

When a social worker first asked me if I wanted to be adopted, my first response was, “Heck no, I can take care of myself!” Taking care of myself, of course, meant that at the age of 13 going on 14, still in foster care, I was ‘hanging out’ at a crack house with my other high friends. My best friend at the time, whose birthday was only a week earlier than mine, was already pregnant. There is no doubt in my head that if it weren’t for my adoption a year later, my life would have been very different from what it is now.

So, why would a parent want to adopt a teenager who is rebellious and may not seem to want to be adopted? Because it is not true that foster teenagers do not want a loving, stable home just as much as the younger children do. It is only true that a teenager is a child old enough to understand that what they are being asked to do is to go into another uncertain situation.

When that social worker asked me at that age if I wanted to be adopted, what I heard was, “Do you want to move to yet another home, another school, and another set of uncertain circumstances?” The social worker was promising me “security” by telling me that my life would only get more uncertain. Most adults are wary enough to not buy a lottery ticket based on a “sure thing.” Why would a child be any different?

The truth of the matter is that although I thought I could take care of myself, I really needed a family, as well as a lot of guidance to steer me onto a better life path.

My adopted parents’ provided security and unconditional love that really made a difference in my life. When I failed a class at school, they didn’t lambaste me, but encouraged me to do better. When I got C’s or higher in subjects, they took me out to a special dinner to celebrate. My adopted parents encouragement

of me helped me get past my distrust of adults and, in only a year, I finally had found the wonderful community and family that I hadn’t even known I needed.

There is a sort of desperation one starts to feel when you’ve been in the foster care system for a long time. A child starts thinking that they are not good enough to have people who will love them, and they hunger for that love in a voracious way. I believe that the older you get, the hungrier for that love you get, but also the more angry and defensive you feel because you feel so let down.

You become afraid of people being nice to you. Although you could sit at school and dream about a teacher taking you home and taking care of you, or of a foster parent or social worker who would be wonderful, sweep you up and love you always, you’d eventually acknowledge to yourself that your dreams of stability and love were not ever going to be fulfilled.

All of a child’s experience with adults to the point of their adoption, is a failed effort to find a community and a love that will help them thrive. A good placement of an older child with a terrific adoptive parent really could provide that for them!

I believe an older child has more experience and consciousness of rejection than a younger one does. Therefore, an older child may need more reassurance and care because while they are cognitively more developed, the older child is still without the understanding to make sense of the unstable situations in which they find themselves living.

As for me, I only lived with my adopted family for five years, but that five years made as much of an impact on my future as the 13 years of abuse and neglect before it.

My parents, brother and me are approaching our 14th year anniversary, and even as an adult woman, there is no question in any of our minds whose daughter I am or whether the adoption of my brother and I was worth it to our family.

Adopting an older child or a teenager can make an amazing difference in that child’s life, just for the very fact that you are giving them the gift of belonging to someone. The need for a stable and loving home does *not* go away with age and children are never in less of a need for one as they get older.

A child is never too old to need a loving family.

Author

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