

Dealing with Adoptee Fears of Loss

Preteen adoptees may develop fears of a parent's death or loss. Here's what may be behind such worries, and ways to talk about them.

by Joni Mantell



Nine- to 12-year-olds have seen disasters in the news and may have experienced the death of an older family member. So it's not uncommon for kids this age to think about the eventual death of their parents. Since preteens understand that death is permanent, they feel anxious when thinking about losing Mom and Dad.

But do adoptees who've already experienced the loss of birth parents worry more than other kids about their parents dying?

It all depends. Children who were adopted at an older age, or whose birth parents have died, may have greater concerns. But, in general, a child's anxiety level is tied to her individual temperament, life experiences, and, most important, how her parents talk about death and dying.

Dealing with Loss

As your children learn about the cycle of life, they may have concerns about your mortality. Here's how you can address them:

- **If your child brings up the topic, listen carefully**, and ask questions before commenting. Your child's concerns may not be what you think they are.
- **Find out whether your child's worries are typical for someone her age**, or are somehow related to adoption. Talk with nonadoptive parents to find out whether their kids are having similar concerns, or speak to your child's teacher (or a counselor) about which issues are age-appropriate.
- **Discuss with your child his fears of losing you**, and any related emotions he might have. For instance, your child might feel unlucky because he lost parents before, or guilty, if he imagines the adoption (and subsequent loss) to be his fault.
- **Help your child make connections.** Explain that he may worry more about current losses because of what happened in the past. You might say, "Losses seem to press your buttons; perhaps that's because you lost your birth parents. Let's talk about what you feel, and what we can do when those hot buttons are pressed."
- **If a loved one dies, support your child's grief** and let him know that you share in it. Take this opportunity to talk with him about death and loss. Listen for adoption-related issues that the death may bring up.
- **Encourage activities that help your child express her feelings** and handle her loss. Have her write a letter to the person who died, create a memory album, or plant a tree.
- **Seek counseling.** If your child becomes preoccupied with your dying, or her anxiety is intense, consult a therapist who specializes in child development and adoption.

What Are They Really Saying?

When tweens talk often about their parents' mortality, they may be trying to express other underlying fears. In dreams, the subject of death often symbolizes anxiety about separation and loss, and is rarely an expression of real concern about an anticipated death. Children who seem to worry about a parent's death may be worrying, symbolically, about the permanence of their parents' love. A child may be thinking, If my birth parents could leave me, could my adoptive parents abandon me, too—especially if I am bad?

The tween years are a good time for ongoing discussion of how love and commitment work in your family. Children this age tend to think in concrete, black-and-white ways, so you should explain things to them in such terms. Let your child know that you still love her, even when you get mad, and that your family will stick together through thick and thin.

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Birth Parent Fantasies — and Fears

Is your child entertaining a wild birth parent fantasy? Don't worry — it's totally normal.

by Joni Mantell



Around ages six to seven, children are capable of more complex thinking and begin to grasp what adoption means. This gives rise to new, sometimes alarming fantasies and fears. While many children daydream about another set of parents — who may be rich, or who don't make their kids go to bed at 9 P.M. or restrict television shows — the difference for adopted kids is that they actually do have another set of parents.

Between the ages of eight and 10, children have enough biological facts to understand that their birth parents are real people, out there somewhere, even if they don't know who they are. With this increased awareness, they often begin to wonder who their birth parents are and why they were relinquished for adoption. One savvy nine-year-old, Susanna, even realized that, "Oh, my, I could be living a completely different life."

Common Fantasies

This awareness stirs emotions, from incredulity to sadness, disappointment, anger, confusion, and guilt. Kids at this stage may not always express their feelings, so parents should watch for fantasies, and help their child work through his story.

+ **"I could have had a different life."** A child may develop an elaborate, detailed account about who her birth parents are, based on fantasy or on her embellishment of bits and pieces that she knows about. One seven-year-old thought a teacher who looked like her was her birth mother. Your child may say, "My birth mother is a princess or a famous actress or rock star," even after hearing your explanations. Michelle, age nine, fantasized that Jennifer Lopez was her mother. She identified with Lopez's heritage, beauty, and singing talent.

Imagining better parents may be a haven from distressing realities, or a way to repair the child's self-esteem. Jason, a bookish 10-year-old, felt like a disappointment to his athletic parents, and imagined his birth parents as "very smart professors."

Some fantasies fluctuate between positive and negative images (rich and beautiful birth parents can morph into a couple who is mean to children). Children need to know that they can share these feelings with their parents. You can help, just by conveying to your child that his curiosity about his birth parents is normal.

+ **"Why didn't they keep me?"** While the politically correct terminology is "made an adoption plan," and we prefer to use this language to educate young children and the social world, deep inside, adopted children may feel they were "given up for adoption" or rejected. Kids at this age are black-and-white thinkers. So in trying to figure out what happened to them, they typically make someone the bad guy, blaming themselves, their birth parents, or their adoptive parents for the adoption.

Alison, age six, would retreat to her bedroom rather than join in family board games. One day, she told her mother, "You like my brother better than me, just like my birth mother, who kept my brother, because she likes boys better than girls." David, age seven, has ADHD and has frequently gotten into trouble at school. He said his birth parents "gave me away because I was bad." Other children fantasize that their adoptive parents kidnapped them from birth parents who really wanted to keep them.

Kristina, age eight, expressed a lot of anger toward her adoptive mother, especially during times of transition. She often missed her school bus, requiring her mother to drive her and be late for work. Kristina said her adoptive parents could have helped her birth mother "with an operation because she was in the hospital," rather than kidnapping her. This fantasy needed clarification because it was causing Kristina and the family distress. Her parents explained that the birth mother was not ill, but in the hospital because she had given birth to Kristina there. With this knowledge, Kristina was able to begin processing her loss.

Emerson, age seven, knows that her birth mother "looked at a big pile of books," and picked her parents" because they were kind people." Emphasizing that your child's birth mother cared about him may temper his feelings about having been "given up and rejected."

+ **"My birth parents gave me away. Could my parents do the same?"** A child who was previously confident about the permanence of his family may suddenly fear that family relationships could be tenuous. Realizing that they were once given up, some children fear it might happen again. Some fear that their birth parents will come back to reclaim or even kidnap them; others fear their adoptive parents will give them back because they are bad.

Seven-year-old Grace frequently chose to do chores rather than play with other children. Her parents came to realize that Grace feared being abandoned if she was not super-good.

When Robert turned eight, he began to play hide-and-seek incessantly, and he delighted in being found (and feeling wanted) by his mother. His well-intended parents had told him a lot about his "middle" family in Korea. Exploration revealed that he expected to have a series of families, "like cars of a train." He wanted to know that he was in the last car of the train, and that he was very much wanted by his parents.

Ashley, age six, panicked whenever her mother left the house, even to take out the trash. She would exclaim, "Mom, you know how I feel. You have to tell me when you are going out." Ashley feared another loss, and was unable to understand that her birth mom and her adoptive mom are two different people — and that not all mothers make adoption plans. With parental support and reassurance, Ashley, like most kids, regained her belief in permanence.

The elementary-school years may be a tough stage, yet in offering the opportunities for open and honest discussions, this stage will bring your family closer together, and ensure that it stays that way.

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD:

- Share age-appropriate information about birth parents and the reasons for their decision. Stress the fact that they made their adoption plan owing to grown-up problems, not because something was wrong with your child as a baby. Point out that the plan was made before delivery (if this was the case), and that the birth mother would have placed any baby she delivered.
- Demonstrate family commitment. Remind literal-thinking kids often that people who love each other get mad at each other, but still love each other and stick together. This is the normal course of family life.
- Show confidence in your child. Show that you can tolerate some of their stronger and more complex emotions about adoption. Replace "It's going to be OK" with "I know this upsets you." This will keep the communication going and keep you abreast of what your child is feeling and fearing.
- Wait to see what the fantasy means to your child. Fantasies serve different purposes. Some help children process what was lost, some provide an ego boost, some even present a new idea. Parents do not need to correct every fantasy, only those that cause their child distress.
- Give him time to process and grow. Listen, be available, and know that your child's spurt in cognitive development has increased his anxiety. He will master this if you offer him time, a good ear, and room to experience and process his own feelings.

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