

Module #7 Adopted Adolescent and Identity Formation

Handout #7.2 The Six Stuck Spots for Adolescents (by Debbie Riley, *Beneath the Mask*)

Stuck Spot	Features of the Stuck Spot	Clinical Objectives and Interventions
Reason for Adoption	<p>During adolescence, a teen begins to think more deeply about circumstances around his or her relinquishment or the termination of his/her parents' rights. Their questions might be: Why was I given away? Why couldn't my birth parents figure out a way to keep me? Why did my parents mistreat me and why did I end up in foster care? Did my parents abuse drugs and that is why I was taken away? These questions filter through their minds replacing earlier vague questions with personal in-depth exploration.</p>	<p>The therapist will assist the teen by including the parents in treatment to help provide their teen with a deeper understanding as to WHY they were adopted, clarify the information surrounding their story, and help them to understand that they were not responsible for the decision. Too often young adoptees believe that they did something to cause the relinquishment; therapy must get rid of this untrue burden. The therapist invites the adolescent to think about what information they want and need and don't have. They can also provide teen with thoughts from other teens going through similar experiences. See puzzle exercise as a tool.</p>
Missing/Difficult Information	<p>As adopted teens begin to make sense of their story, they must face very harsh realities: history of abuse , abandonments, death or incarceration of a parent , loss of siblings , mental illness Do I have any brothers and sisters? Where are my brothers and sisters? What did my birth parents look like? Where are my birth parents now? Why did my parents abandon me in foster care? As teens make sense of their stories, they may push even harder for the detailed facts surrounding why they were adopted.</p>	<p>The therapist can create a safe, nurturing space to assist the adolescent to explore and come to terms with the painful aspects of their adoption experience. Information is empowering and the "truth" often is easier to manage than the internal beliefs held by adoptees as they try on their own to make sense of their history. Give them permission to pose questions they hold. The therapist will need to engage the adoptive parents in the process and provide them with the skills to help their teen cope with difficult, and at times, painful aspects of their stories. Support adoptive</p>

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		<p>parents in talking with their teen about these issues even when they tend to want to steer away. When adoptive parents have little information to share, support them in helping the teen cope with the reality. Support adoptive parents in their frustration in not being able to do everything they can to fix their child's pain.</p>
<p>Difference</p>	<p>Some adopted teens struggle with a sense of being different. Teens may say: "I am not like most kids I hang out with, they are not adopted like me." "I don't look like my family, my parents are white and I am black." "I think I would like to go to culinary school after high school but my parents went to college and they said I should, too. Cooking can be a hobby,' they tell me." These feelings of difference can and do become accentuated during adolescence.</p>	<p>Therapists will need to affirm the teen's feelings of differentness, seek to honor those differences and recognize the negative impact upon their sense of self-worth and security within their adoptive families. Again create the opportunity for teens to communicate their struggles and navigate these differences in their quest for sense of self. Help adoptive parents reflect upon the differences that their teen is experiencing and come to terms with the reality that their teen's abilities, racial connections and aspirations may not match their expectations. Help adoptive parents recognize the importance of celebrating these differences and honoring the unique attributes of their children. We will explore in more depth in a future module the issues inherent in transracial adoption.</p>

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<p>Identity</p>	<p>Identity formation involves exploring the questions: Who am I? Who am I like? How can I figure out who I am if I don't know where I came from? Adopted teens begin to connect adoption to their sense of identity. Not only do they need to consolidate their identity by seeing how they are similar to and different from their parents who raised them, but they must also consider how they are similar to and different from their birth family and how this contributes to their self-concept.</p>	<p>Help the teen to integrate the many pieces that make up "self". Help the adopted adolescent must figure out how he or she is like and different from TWO sets of parents. Encourage the teen to explore the similarities and differences he/she sees with both his/her adoptive and birth families as well as their own unique qualities. This is why the information gathering and reality quest for the truth is so important. Without clarity and information the task of identity development can be compromised. Support adoptive parents in supporting their teen's identity exploration. Help adoptive parents present both the negative and the positive aspects of the birth family – too often what is presented is only the negative – "your birth mom was a drug addict ". If only the negatives are shared then that is all the adolescent can connect to/identify with. Want to also provide the positives " Your birth mom was really talented in music" "your birthfather while he struggled with drugs was a strong athlete just like you."</p>
<p>Loyalty</p>	<p>Adopted teens may struggle with a sense of conflicting loyalties. Teens may say, "I'll upset my parents if I ask too many questions about my birth father. "I would like to meet my birth mom; I just want to see what she looks</p>	<p>It is important for therapists to help remove adolescents' sense of guilt and normalize the conflicting loyalties that adopted teens experience. Educate them that thinking about their birth parents does not mean they love their</p>

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	<p>like. How do I tell my mom? "I think a lot about my sister who was not adopted. I miss her." The teen may experience tremendous guilt related to his or her frequent, and at times, intense thoughts about biological connections. Fearing disapproval, teens may hide their feelings and struggle alone.</p>	<p>adoptive family any less. Guide adoptive parents in supporting their teen's interest in their birth family and their desires to know more or potentially connect with birth family members; support adoptive parents in encouraging their teen to share their questions about and interests in their birth families . Recognize that this can be very difficult for many adoptive parents who will need much support to presenting an "openness "to the teens psychological connections to birth family. Note: There really is not a disparity between when the adoption occurred and the teen's pondering of their birth family. Even children placed at birth who had no contact with their birth family can have as intense thoughts about their birthparents as children placed at older ages.</p>
<p>Permanence</p>	<p>Adopted teens may be at risk for developing beliefs about the security of the relationship with their adoptive parents. Even as a budding teenager, they still need affirmation that their parents are their forever family. Teens may think, "I have lost one set of parents, I could lose another." "I have lived in so many foster homes, I am sure I'll be moved again." I am going to be 18 soon, will my parents be there for me after I leave home?"</p>	<p>Educate the teen that they are not alone, that many of their adopted peers also worry about losing the 'security" of their parents, and that they will be there for them –that thinking about leaving home is a normal step for all teens. Acknowledge their insecurities as an adoptee and point out behaviors that might reflect these insecurities.</p>