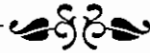


THE ADOPTIVE BIND

*The adoptive family's tough task:
Acknowledge differences from biological families
without insisting on them.*

TURNING TWO IDENTITIES INTO ONE



"ADOPTED" USED TO BE synonymous with "illegitimate" in many minds. The sins of original parents were visited upon the child regardless of the adoptive parents' respectability or of how well the child and the family developed.

Today, that particular stigma is virtually gone. No one blames the child, and unmarried women and girls are encouraged to have their babies and put them up for adoption. What crosses our minds now when we hear the word "adoption" isn't sin but trouble. Couples considering adoption are often warned that they're asking for aggravation and told of adopted children who "just didn't work out" for one reason or another.

There are even some statistics that appear to support that idea: Although fewer than 2 percent of Americans are adopted, adoptees make up 5 percent to 10 percent of patients in child or family therapy. They also account for 25 to 35 percent of the adolescents in residential psychiatric facilities.

Clearly, however, most adoptees don't

wind up in therapy and don't reject their parents any more than other adolescents do. But the importance psychoanalytically-oriented writers have assigned to early mother-infant bonding has lent credence to popular doubts about the adopted child's prospects.

In reality, there is no solid evidence that children are devastated by changing caregivers once in early infancy. Janet Hoopes of Bryn Mawr College, who studied the adjustment and identity formation of 260 adoptees, says that when children are adopted before the age of 2, "if parenting attitudes and skills are positive and strong, the relationship differs little from that of nonadopted children." Adoption certainly is not the same as genetic parenting, "but the healthiest families acknowledge this difference without dwelling on it." In new work, I have found that families in which differences are emphasized do seem to have more problems.

Most adoptions work out fine. So why do some lead parents and children to

By Kenneth Kaye

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL FISCHER



genealogical bewilderment and low self-esteem? Part of the reason may be biological. Mothers who give up a child, for example, have often had stressful pregnancies that lead to congenital problems such as attention deficit disorder. But the adoptive parents' attitudes can also become self-fulfilling prophecies or make it harder for them to talk to adoptees about where they come from and why.

Compare the comments of these couples who have teenagers adopted early in life. Dennis's parents say his adoption doesn't matter. "We feel absolutely no differently about our adopted son than other parents feel about biological children. If anything, he's more special to us because it was harder to get him." They also believe it matters little to Dennis. "He's always known he was adopted, but he doesn't have any concerns about it."

Iris's parents, on the other hand, freely acknowledge difficulties and regrets. "As an adoptive parent, you always struggle with doubts about how entitled you are to the child and whether she is really as attached as you would like." They mention the adoption practically every time they talk about their family. Saying grace on Iris's birthday, her mother thanks God "for letting us be Iris's adoptive family" and adds a prayer for the biological mother "who loved her enough to place her with us." Positive as their attitudes are, they are also quick to mention the adoption in explaining Iris's learning disability and shyness with peers.

The two sets of parents express the credos of two warring factions. Dennis's parents cling to the traditional compact between agencies and their clients: Once the baby passes through the agency's doors, it is yours forever; the identities of its natural parents will remain a secret. Many adoptees go along with those ideas. One teenager spoke for many when he told me, "I feel just as close to my parents and siblings as if I had been born into the family. I don't hate my natural mother, but I wouldn't be interested in meeting her."

Parents on the other side of the issue fight to have birth records unsealed, encourage reunions between adoptees and natural parents and believe in prearranged channels of communication between adoptive and birth families. Their position is supported by adoptees who explain, "You aren't sure who you are, what your roots are. And other people ask, 'Why didn't your real mother want you?'"

Hotly contested questions include whether to search for the lost child or parent, whether to aid such searches or

hinder them and how much to protect the privacy of the child's four parents. Both sides of these questions have supporters among natural and adoptive parents, agencies, adoptees, lawyers and mental-health professionals. Selfish interests unquestionably play a part in those battles. But so do theories of human development. The two sides' implicit notions about what children and parents need are as different as night and day.

No one knows accurately how many adoptive families are on either side, but experience suggests that the extreme positions held by Dennis's and Iris's parents are in the minority. Most adoptive parents are somewhere in the middle. Amy's parents, for example, admit that knowing she is adopted does make a difference to Amy and to them but insist that it's not an important factor in their lives. The subject comes up several times each year, they say, as Amy's growing mind forms new questions or when someone's offhand remark bothers her. In a few years, if she wants to learn more about her birth parents or even meet them, "It will hurt a little, but we'd help her do it."

Since the 1960s, most parents have heeded the experts and told children early in life that they were adopted. But because of the parents' own anxieties, and mistaken beliefs about how much a young child can understand, many disclose the fact in a perfunctory way and don't mention it again. Adopted children need the story retold more fully as they get older, in ways that encourage questions. Parents who deny or strongly downplay differences between adoptive and biological families may actually create the barriers they fear. Their denial stifles natural feelings, confuses adoptees about their identities and hurts their self-esteem.

Or at least that's been the accepted wisdom since the early 1960s, when Canadian sociologist H. David Kirk distinguished between two approaches used by many adoptive parents: "acknowledgment of differences" and "rejection of differences."

Acknowledgers, he wrote, put their family's and their children's uniqueness in a positive light but sacrifice the comfort of fitting society's norms. Those who deny differences, by pretending to feel like all other parents, sacrifice the benefits of truth and openness. After analyzing hundreds of questionnaires filled out by adoptive parents, Kirk concluded that rejection of differences more often creates problems. Others have taken his interpretation one step further: the more

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acknowledging, the better. My own recent research, and that of others, leads us to revise both assertions.

Based upon current child-development theory and his own experience in counseling adoptive families, Rutgers University psychologist David Brodzinsky suggests that when acknowledgment takes the extreme form he calls "insistence of

difference," it is as unrealistic and potentially confusing to children as rejection of differences. Parents often come to insist on differences, he proposes, after years of serious family problems.

Doctoral student Sarah Warren and I reached much the same conclusion when we studied parent-adolescent communication in 40 adoptive families (see "Discussing the Differences," this article). The adolescents who said, one way or another, "being adopted has serious disadvantages" were usually the ones whose families reported more behavioral, school, emotional and marital problems. This clearly doesn't support the idea that parents' rejection of differences stifles children's natural feelings and creates problems. On the contrary, emphasizing differences is associated with more problems.

We found we could distinguish among the adolescents we studied on the basis of these two beliefs. Nearly all the teens consistently said either that being adopted

Discussing the Differences

HERE ARE TWO EXCERPTS from discussions Sarah Warren and I taped between parents and their teenagers who had been adopted as infants (*Journal of Family Psychology*, June 1988). The first family was talking about whether their feelings differed from those of a biological family:

DAUGHTER: I don't think so.

MOTHER: (*laughs*) I don't think so either. You seem like our biological daughter.

DAUGHTER: I don't think twice about it. Maybe sometimes when you're little you think to yourself, "Gee, they picked me, only a baby," you know . . . I mean, you can use that to make yourself feel special and that kind of thing but other than that, no. I feel perfectly normal.

FATHER: Then the answer to the question is no.

MOTHER: That's right.

DAUGHTER: Coming right down to it, yes, the answer is no. I mean, am I supposed to treat you differently, is there something they didn't tell me? (*laughs*)

MOTHER: Not to my knowledge. I think it has all been very natural.

FATHER: Next question.

This family wasn't "denying." They'd had very few problems over the years, and no need for therapy. But here's how another family talked about whether their family life would have been different if they'd been a biological family:

DAUGHTER: No way.

SON: Didn't you ever think, if you were with your own birth parents you would have a better life or something?

DAUGHTER: I don't know.

SON: That's what I think about. I think, what if they're rich (*laughs*). Then I think, they're probably poor.

MOTHER: They probably weren't married, so they weren't rich yet, but we do know Laurie's grandparents were well off, or at least very educated.

FATHER: That could mean schoolteachers.

MOTHER: But very cosmopolitan, brilliant, dedicated and idealistic, not like what you got stuck with!

We heard this sort of exchange mostly in families who acknowledged differences. In individual interviews with members of this family, both the daughter, a chronic underachiever in school, and the son, who had been arrested for a minor burglary, clearly felt that the fact they were adopted was important in their lives.

had serious disadvantages or that it made no difference. Their parents generally made more subtle distinctions. Some, for example, attributed family problems largely to the adoption while denying that their lives or their children's had been harder in any way than the life of a biological family.

It's only natural to explain developmental problems and personality traits by pointing to a divorce, a sibling close to the

same age, planetary configurations at the moment of birth . . . or the fact that a child was adopted. The real explanation may be nothing more than a normal stage in development or some problem in family relationships that has nothing to do with adoption. Yet both parents and adolescents persistently blame adoption. We found that the more problems they had experienced, the more likely families were to attribute their problems to adoption and to wonder

about the natural parents.

Children who "reject differences" aren't denying or suppressing inevitable feelings, we found. Most likely, adolescent adoptees who say they don't feel different or disadvantaged are simply telling the truth. Recognizing some differences is also probably realistic. But when these adoptees insist upon pervasive differences, they are probably merely trying to cope with problems in a family that's had more than its share over the years. The adolescents we studied who felt this way scored extremely low in self-esteem and were the ones most interested in their biological roots.

To Barbara Gonyo, president of a search group and lobbying network in Illinois, searches and reunions are a normal, often necessary step in family development. They open up the stigmatizing secret so that everyone can "do their grief work and get on with their lives." We don't know much about why some adoptees want to search and some do not. Those who do search almost always say they are glad, which does not mean those who don't would have been glad if they had.

Virtually all professionals today agree that adoptees need to know, or at least to believe, some basic facts about who their natural parents were. As Lois Melina says in *Raising Adopted Children*, "The teenager's job is to become a separate person from his parents. To do this, he has to learn who he is in relation to his parents. The adopted child must learn who he is in relation to two sets of parents before he can fully develop his own identity."

Still, adopted children are as likely to suffer from too much focus on differences as from too little. Acknowledging differences to the degree that Iris's parents do, for example, may backfire if it makes the child feel inferior. Members of adoptive families and their advisers should neither deny nor insist upon different feelings.

We don't know whether adopted children really have more adjustment problems than other children. Perhaps the statistics are skewed by adoptive parents' greater willingness to seek help. In any case, the parents and children both need more guidance and support than they usually get. The law calls adoption complete when the judge signs the papers; in reality, it has barely begun. ■

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My Family, Myself



COMMON LORE AND professional opinion agree: We adoptees are missing a crucial piece of ourselves. Not knowing our natural parents, the argument goes, we don't know the sources of our own identity: Whose legacy is the olive skin, the talkative tendency, the curious mind, the unappeasable sweet tooth?

But my identity has never really revolved around my genetic roots. I don't believe in the idea that knowing my blood relatives means knowing myself, a notion that seems

to trouble many adopted people.

Cold as it may sound, I've never felt that I have four parents. In my mind, my adoptive mother and father are my only parents. They did not give me genes, but they did give me life. Their legacy—the love, warmth, guidance and opportunities they've provided—has helped me develop a sense of myself without knowledge of my blood roots.

The Latin root of the word "parent," to give birth, neglects the major contributions parents make in shaping a newborn as it goes from infant to child to teen to adult. I was adopted at birth, and I believe my identity began to form then. The circumstances of my conception and the lives of the two people who made it possible naturally intrigue me, but these unanswered questions have never seemed central to my development.

Growing up, I used my imagination to satisfy my curiosity. It amused me that in my fantasies, I could be related to anyone I chose. For a while, I proudly joked that my ancestors were American Indians. In later, vainer days, I pointed out to friends my (wishful) resemblance to Jaclyn Smith. This always felt like fun rather than confusion.

In my family, acceptance runs thicker than blood. Not one grandmother, cousin or uncle ever discussed roots and relatives as though I were an outsider to my adoptive family's history. I felt no more need to search for another clan than does any child whose family gives her a strong sense of belonging. Only one who feels alienated from her family, for whatever reason, seeks to fit in elsewhere. Alienated adoptees naturally turn to their birth families.

Certainly adopted people should have the right to search, but the need to, on a quest for identity, seems misplaced. I think that little of a person's character rests in her bloodline. But others are often incredulous when I tell them that I have no desire to hunt down my natural—or, as many people call them, "real"—parents. At summer camp and later on at college, just mentioning my adoption often drew disbelieving responses. "Really?" a friend or acquaintance would ask a couple of times, as though they never expected to actually meet one of those people who had switched parents when nurture picked up where nature left off.

I may seem like an oddity to some, but I don't feel any different than my biologically raised buddies, nor do I feel that my identity lies somewhere outside of the Roberts family. In fact, strangers have told me many times that I look like my mom. We've giggled at that suggestion more than once, both a private laugh over the truth and a shared acknowledgment that dissimilar genealogy matters little when it comes to the ties that bind.

—MARJORY ROBERTS