



How to Talk *Exploring the Stuck Spots* to Your Teens

By Debbie B. Riley, MS

Teens typically have an endless appetite for talking with friends, but when it comes to talking with adults, or even worse, parents, conversation often consists of one-syllable words, grunts and eye rolls. When it comes to talking about adoption with some teens, parents might as easily climb Mount Everest. During adolescence, however, adopted teens need parental guidance, comfort and support as much as ever, and parents must work to keep lines of communication open.

All parents of adolescents at times become confused when their adolescent presents a brick wall of silence or withdrawal, particularly on subjects such as drugs, sexuality and friendships. Well-meaning parents who are trying hard to keep the lines of communication open find their teens unwilling to talk. This can happen for several reasons.

Teens may stop talking as a way of getting distance from their parents. Distance helps them to feel separate and independent; it is a normal task of adolescence. Even teens who once shared every thought with their parents as children, may now desire a great deal of privacy around their innermost thoughts and feelings. Parental attempts at communication may fail because the teens perceive their parents' interest in their feelings as intrusive or controlling.

Second, adoptees may not be able to clearly articulate for themselves what they are feeling, let alone convey their feelings to others, especially their parents. Adoption-related issues can be the most emotionally loaded issues they will ever face. A range of feelings may impact the adolescent — anger, sadness and confusion. However, they often are unable to connect the

experience of adoption with their feelings.

After providing more than a decade of post-adoption support services at the Center for Adoption Support and Education, or C.A.S.E., it became clear to me that parents may underestimate the power and depth of their teen's feelings of ambivalence, uncertainty and loss surrounding their personal adoption story. As adoptees mature into young adulthood, issues related to their adoption experience may take them into "rough seas." In the book I co-authored with Dr. John Meeks, "Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens," we described the "Six Stuck Spots" that teens who came to C.A.S.E were struggling with. Despite differences in their adoption experiences, there appeared to be several major common areas of difficulty that the adolescents we treated were troubled by. It is therefore crucial that parents understand these "stuck spots" so that they may more effectively support their teen through one of the most challenging developmental phases in life: adolescence.

Although not every teen will be impacted by each "stuck spot," our experience has shown that it is common for teens to move in and out of these trouble spots because they desire a deeper understanding of their personal journey in adoption. It is important that parents strive to embrace these constructs through their teen's lens instead of their own. Parents need to send a clear message that they are open and willing to listen to their teen's thoughts and feelings without judgment. So many teens have told me that all they wanted from their parents was to listen, affirm their feelings and stop trying to make them feel better.

"I just wanted my dad to be there for me. Each time I tried to tell him how angry I was at my birth mom, he would tell me that I should not feel this way and that she did the best she could. It's just that she could not raise me. This made me angrier. I was confused and sad that my birth mom give me away," one teen said.

The following provides parents with a brief overview of the six areas where adoptees may get stuck and can benefit from extra guidance from parents and in some instances, an adoption competent mental health professional.

1. Reason for Adoption: During adolescence your son or daughter will begin to think more deeply about circumstances around his or her relinquishment. Questions such as "Why was I given away? Why couldn't my birth parents figure out a way to keep me? Did they abuse drugs and that is why I was taken from them?"

These questions filter through their minds replacing earlier vague questions with personal in-depth exploration. We must help them to gain a deeper understanding as to WHY they were adopted, clarify the information sur-

As teens make sense of their stories, they may push even harder for the detailed facts surrounding why they were adopted. Parents must help them to cope with difficult, and at times, painful aspects of their stories such as histories of abuse and neglect, loss of sibling connections, incarceration, mental illness, death, and drug and alcohol abuse.

rounding their story, and help them to understand that they were not responsible for the decision.

2. Missing and Difficult Information: "Do I have any brothers and sisters? What did my birth parents look like? Did she do drugs and is that why she abused me?"

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Amanda, mother of 16-year-old Julia, stated in a parent support group, "If I tell her the truth that her birth mom had three other children and then gave her up, she will be devastated. I just can't hurt her that way. It's better that she does not know now. Maybe when she is older I can help her with this."

Many adoptive parents have little information to share with their teens. While parents can try to make sure that no further information can be obtained, they must help their teen cope with this painful reality. Again this poses incredible challenges for parents. Parents usually see their role as doing everything humanly possible to fix their children's pain. It can be frustrating and upsetting to realize that this simply cannot be done.

3. Difference: Traveling back to one's teen years, most parents can remember the importance of belonging, fitting in with our peers,

the powerful need to be like everyone else. Most teens work hard to fit in and to be part of the group.

For some teens, being adopted can create a sense of being different. "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. Parents must reflect upon these differences and come to terms that their teenager's abilities, racial connections and aspirations may not match their expectations. It is imperative that parents celebrate these differences and honor the unique attributes of their children.

4. Identity: 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?

Adoptees 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, they must also consider how they are similar to and different from their birth family and how this contributes to their self-concept.

5. Loyalty: “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 like. How do I tell my mom? “I think a lot about my sister who was not adopted. I miss her.”

The adolescent 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.

6. Permanence: “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 par-

ents be there for me after I leave home?”

Adoptees may be at risk for developing beliefs about the security of the relationship with their parents. Even as teenagers, they still need affirmation that their parents are their forever family. This may be a bit confusing as parents supporting their teen’s healthy separation from them by gently pushing them out of the “nest.” Parenting adopted teens who are moving toward emancipation may present some unique challenges. They often need extra reassurance that their parents are there for them for the long haul. Parents must carefully prepare the “launching pad” without creating fears of abandonment.

Communicating with teens will not be easy, particularly when the issues are as complex as the ones discussed above. The extra set of tasks for adopted teens increases the need for parental guidance when emotions surrounding their adoption journey become overwhelming. Parents play an important role in helping teens navigate through these “stuck spots,” sharing in the emotional journey and providing the foun-

ation for open, honest communication. Part of being an adoptive parent is making sure that your teen is not walking the path alone.

Steps for effective communication:

- Send a clear message that you are open and willing to talk about adoption.
- Share all available information. The more they know, the better they can manage the situation.
- Communicate respect for your teen’s feelings and value his or her opinions.
- Listen without judgment.
- Support the need for connections to the past.

To learn more about the developmental challenges and psychological issues adopted adolescents and families experience, visit www.adoption-support.org. CASE is offering a 15 percent discount to readers this month for “Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens.” Enter ATreader as you check out in the store.

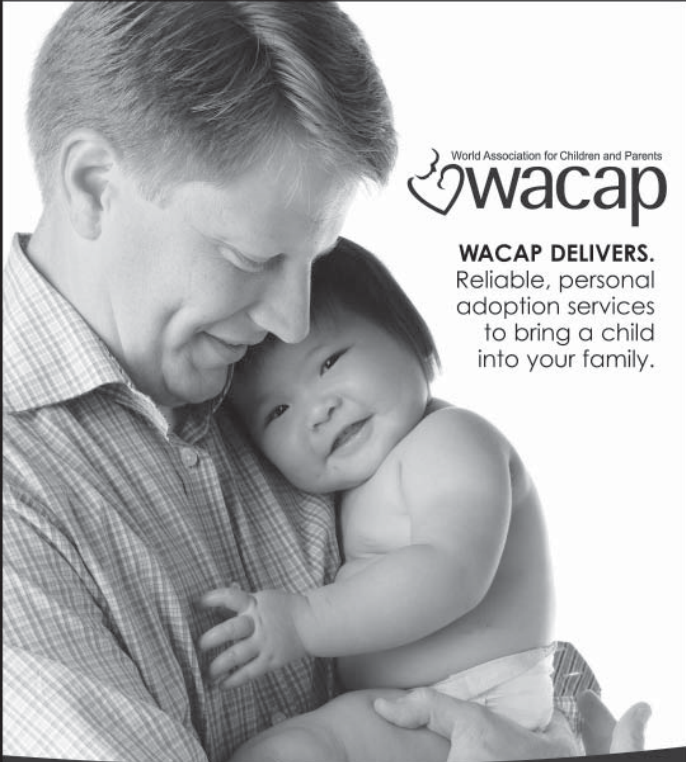
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