



**Adoption:
A Life Long Loss**
How Adoption Impacts Life Transitions

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NJ Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ ARCH)



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NJ Adoption Resource Clearing House (NJ ARCH) www.njarch.org

NJ ARCH: *The One-Stop Resource for those Touched by Adoption*; website includes over 1500 sortable pages of resource information on adoption and foster care. Free lending library, newsletter, training workshops, and more.

Start-up Grant from Adoption and Safe Families Act in 2003.




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Website: www.njarch.org

- ❖ Services
- ❖ Resource directory
- ❖ Links to adoption related sites
- ❖ Adoption bibliography
- ❖ Upcoming events
- ❖ Newsletter
- ❖ Information on Adoptees Birthright Act



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NJ ARCH WARMLINE
Phone: 877-4ARCHNJ (877-427-2465)
E-mail: warmline@njarch.org

Our warm line is open 24 hours /7 days per week. Warm line specialists are available to answer calls during business hours.

All contacts are confidential; calls or e-mails are returned within one business day; resolved within a week.




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Resource Directory

- ❖ Adoption Agencies
- ❖ Summer Camps
- ❖ Children's Crisis Intervention Services/ Mobile Response
- ❖ Family Support Organizations & Family Success Centers
- ❖ Fetal Alcohol Diagnostic Centers
- ❖ Mental Health Professionals
- ❖ Pre and Post Adoption Counseling
- ❖ Support Groups



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Free Lending Library and Article Library

- ❖ Over 3,000 books, articles and videos on adoption, foster care and kinship care in our free lending library

Includes:

- ❖ Professional
- ❖ General for families and individuals
- ❖ Children's Books
- ❖ Spanish books



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Kinship Care Clearing House (KinKonnnect)
www.kinkonnnect.org

KinKonnnect: An Information Center for Kinship Legal Guardianship and Kinship Care Families; website includes over 600 sortable pages of information related to Kinship Care.
www.kinkonnnect.org



NJ ARCH and KinKonnnect are programs of Children's Aid and Family Services

Objectives/Goals for Today's Workshop

1. Gain an understanding of how children understand adoption from infancy through adolescence
2. Learn the Seven Core Issues in Adoption
3. Increase knowledge and learn techniques to assist children as they grieve their adoption loss throughout their lives



I Wonder...



I Wish...



I Hope...



A Child's Understanding of Adoption: Infancy/Early Childhood

- ❖ Attachment and bonding to primary caregiver
- ❖ Magical thinking
- ❖ Born the same way as other children
- ❖ May repeat his or her adoption story, but does not really comprehend it
- ❖ Needs to understand the concept of time and space (age 4 or 5) to see events happened in the past
- ❖ Telling a child his adoption story helps parents feel comfortable with the language of adoption



A Child's Understanding of Adoption: School Age

- ❖ Operational Thinking and Problem solving
- ❖ Understands that being adopted is different
- ❖ Feelings of loss and sadness as child struggles to understand the meaning of adoption
- ❖ "Was there something wrong with me?"
- ❖ Withdrawal and sadness
- ❖ Daydreaming
- ❖ Difficulty with transitions
- ❖ Fear of abandonment
- ❖ Sleep difficulty, nightmares



A Child's Understanding of Adoption: Adolescence

- ❖ Identity also has to do with "Who isn't here?"
- ❖ "Who am I? Where do I come from? What do I want to become?"
- ❖ Adopted adolescents need to make sense of both sets of parents
- ❖ Shame, guilt
- ❖ Need for answers, questions more complex



Seven Core Issues of Adoption

- ❖ Loss
- ❖ Rejection
- ❖ Guilt and Shame
- ❖ Grief
- ❖ Identity
- ❖ Intimacy
- ❖ Control



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Loss



- ❖ Loss begins the journey
- ❖ Loss of birth family, history, culture, lineage, genetics, family history, language of origin
- ❖ If adopted as an older child - loss of friends, foster families, pets, school, neighbors, etc.
- ❖ Societal status of being part of the norm
- ❖ Ambiguous loss - a feeling of distress and confusion about people who are physically absent but emotionally present in their lives

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Rejection



- ❖ Adoptees think they suffered loss because they are unworthy of having what they lost
- ❖ May experience a sense of worthlessness and defeat, fear they will be rejected by adoptive parent(s)
- ❖ Often affects relationships
 - ❖ Rejection can be real, imagined, or implied
 - ❖ Rejection can trigger feelings of abandonment
 - ❖ Can feel unworthy, of little value, and have a fear of future rejection
 - ❖ Can feel judged, unwanted, different, "not good enough"

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Guilt and Shame



- ❖ Rejection leads to feelings of shame and guilt
- ❖ Shame and guilt impact self-esteem and self-worth and can create anxiety
- ❖ Shame is a painful feeling that one is bad and undeserving of deep connections and happiness
- ❖ Guilt is a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime or wrong, whether real or imagined

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Guilt and Shame (cont.)



- ❖ Shame is about "being": I'm bad
- ❖ Guilt is about "doing": I did something bad
- ❖ Children impacted by loss experience both shame and guilt - ongoingly
- ❖ "I wasn't good enough" to prevent rejection by biological parent or avoid rejection by adoptive parent
- ❖ Secrecy attached to adoption creates increased guilt and shame

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Grief



Five stages of grieving:

- ❖ Denial: Adoption has not had an impact on me
- ❖ Anger: Awareness that someone we love is no longer present
- ❖ Bargaining: "What if's"
- ❖ Depression: Loneliness and heavy sadness
- ❖ Acceptance: The reality of loss is acknowledged
- ❖ David Kessler added a sixth stage
 - ❖ Meaning: Grief will not end but can be transformed into something rich and fulfilling

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Identity



- ❖ As a life-altering event, adoption affects identity
- ❖ Pieces to the puzzle are missing, incomplete or broken
- ❖ Children may feel angry and say "You're not my real mother/father"
- ❖ People may ask "Are those your real children?"
- ❖ Birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day create questions about connections and identity

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Intimacy/Relationships



- ❖ Intimacy requires trust and the ability to open up and be vulnerable
- ❖ Trauma, multiple moves, attachment disruptions, abuse, violence, neglect create intimacy challenges
- ❖ Avoidance of intimacy becomes a way to self-protect
- ❖ Children who have felt rejection over and over do not see themselves as deserving - too much of a risk
- ❖ Identity and Intimacy are linked. As a person clarifies who they are, their ability to relate to, forgive, embrace and trust others is enhanced
- ❖ Fears the risk of loss in intimate relationships

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Control



- ❖ Unidentified, un-named, un-grieved losses can create intense feelings of powerlessness
- ❖ Trauma and multiple disrupted attachments result in loss of control
- ❖ Child had no input about the decision that changed their life trajectory
- ❖ Wonder "how did I end up with this family?"
- ❖ Understanding, learning, self-awareness and forgiveness can lead to empowerment

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Grief is Part of the Fabric of Adoption

<https://nomatterwhatfamilies.org/video/grief-is-part-of-the-fabric-of-adoption/>



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Developing Skills and Strategies to Assist Adoptees in their Life long Grieving



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Adoption is Loss

- ❖ Loss, grief, and trauma are unavoidable parts of adoption
- ❖ It could be helpful for parents to consider recognizing and confronting their own misconceptions about adoption
- ❖ May need to adapt parenting to meet the child's needs
- ❖ How we were parented might not work, how others are parenting their children may not work
- ❖ See things from the child's perspective, not their own
- ❖ Even children adopted from infancy grieve and feel loss
- ❖ Trauma impacts the brain even prior to a child's birth (prenatal drug usage, chaotic lifestyle, domestic violence, poor nutrition, difficult delivery)



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Helping Kids to Grieve

- ❖ Parents must also grieve the losses in their own lives
- ❖ Understanding these losses can help connect with the grief and loss the child is experiencing
- ❖ There is no right way to experience grief
- ❖ Concrete ways to help children process grief:
 - ❖ Offer a lot of nurturance
 - ❖ Look at pictures of birth family together
 - ❖ Create or review a Life Book together
 - ❖ Create tangible ways like planting a flower, holding a candle-lighting ceremony
 - ❖ Assist kids to express emotions verbally, artistically, physically
 - ❖ Offer calming tools
 - ❖ Answer all the questions they ask
 - ❖ If appropriate for your family - pray, turning hurts over to God
- ❖ Connect with other families who have adopted - create a support system for you and your child



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Create space to continuously talk about loss and birth family

- ❖ Parents could benefit from processing their own thoughts and feelings regarding birth parents
- ❖ Share information on birth family. Avoid making up information. If information is unknown - allow child to grieve the unknown
- ❖ Let child explore their thoughts and feelings regarding birth family
- ❖ Do not push them to work through something when they are not ready. Just give them lots of opportunities to talk about their adoption
- ❖ Parents can let the child know they are comfortable discussing



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Looking Beneath Behaviors

Door Slamming
Cursing
Shutting down
Hitting a sibling
Challenging Authority
"I hate you!"
Arguing about everything
Pushing boundaries
Difficulty transitioning
Hyperactivity
Angry outbursts
Isolating



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According to Heather T. Forbes, LCSW:

"Children's behaviors are perfectly logical. The issue is that we've been looking at the behavior from our logic, not the child's logic. Before judging a behavior as either 'right' or 'wrong,' look at it first from a literal perspective and ask yourself, "What is he/she trying to communicate with this behavior?"

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Look beneath the behaviors cont.

- ❖ When children do not know how to express their needs verbally, they use their behaviors to speak
- ❖ Change the narrative (Karyn Purvis): "This child is giving me a hard time" to "This child is having a hard time"
- ❖ "Their traumatic history of rejection and abandonment have left a blueprint that says not only will their needs not be met but they might be rejected for voicing their needs" (Heather T. Forbes LCSW)
- ❖ Turning this blueprint around and helping them to rewire the brain to know that asking for their needs is exactly what you want them to be able to do
- ❖ Teaching children how to communicate their need is key
 - ❖ Label the behavior for them
 - ❖ Wonder or be curious about what they might be feeling

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Validate feelings - sit with the grief rather than fixing

- ❖ Become aware of the child's emotions
- ❖ Listen to and accept their feelings (All feelings are okay)
- ❖ Help your child to describe how they feel. Where in their body do they feel the emotion?
- ❖ Help your child name the emotion
- ❖ Empathize and stay out of judgement
- ❖ Ask what they think might help them to feel better
- ❖ Sit with and be beside (sometimes saying less is more)



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Take Care of You

- ❖ Parenting a child through grief is not easy and is ongoing
- ❖ Carrying their pain can be exhausting
- ❖ Sometimes you may mess up or lose it and that's ok
- ❖ What are some ways you can care for yourself so you can go back in, day after day, and be what your child needs?
 - ❖ Self-reflect or journal
 - ❖ Use positive self talk (encourage and lift yourself up)
 - ❖ Ask for help
 - ❖ Let yourself off the hook



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Closing

- ❖ Adoption loss is a journey, prepare and expect loss will come up at different times of the child's life (graduation, leaving for college, starting a new job, getting married, having a baby, adoptive parent illness)
- ❖ Parent's job is to walk beside the grief
- ❖ "Parenthood is about raising and celebrating the child you have, not the child you thought you would have. It's about understanding that she/he is exactly the person she/he is supposed to be. And if you're lucky, she/he just might be the teacher who turns you into the person you are supposed to be" (Joan Ryan)
- ❖ Thank you for being here today!
- ❖ Questions/Comments/Thoughts



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