

Stages and Ages in Adoption

	Infants (birth to 12 months)	Toddlers (12 to 36 months)	Preschoolers (3 to 6 years)
Typical	<p>Parent helps restore feelings of safety and security</p> <p>Parent responds sensitively to baby's cues and signals</p> <p>Emotional back and forth communication begins</p> <p>Secure base: by end of first year, baby exploring on his/her own</p>	<p>Exploration, autonomy, sense of self as separate from caretaker; if child feels secure in parent's support, he/she is free to move out on his/her own, returning for "re-fueling"</p> <p>Curiosity, learning about the world around her/him; can cope with the anxiety of new things because he/she has learned to use the parent to recover from fear or other negative emotions</p> <p>Language development</p>	<p>Growth in self-regulation and impulse control</p> <p>Still depends on parent to soothe hurts and anxieties</p> <p>Gains interpersonal skills; able to empathize; interested in peer friendships</p> <p>Expresses attachment needs verbally; can negotiate</p> <p>Makes cognitive gains; can understand limits and explanations</p>
Typical in Adoption*	<p>Loss of initial attachment figures destroys basic trust and security</p> <p>If inadequate caretaking in first families, baby unable to develop capacity for regulation</p> <p>Children can look blank, frozen, unresponsive; or they can be irritable, constantly fussing and crying, problems with feeding and sleeping, inconsolable.</p> <p>More extreme with more moves and homes</p>	<p>For adopted kids, sometimes this is the beginning of control and power struggles (the "terrible twos" to an extreme); Feeling out of control may remind kids, viscerally, below conscious thought, of situations that were too scary to bear and constant strangers as caregivers</p> <p>Ongoing insecurity issues make it hard to explore without anxiety. Limits often feel triggering. Temper tantrums abound.</p> <p>For children who were born in another culture, language may be delayed – creates frustration</p>	<p>Child begins realizing his/her family is different; tries to make sense of what adoption means for him/her.</p> <p>Fears and worries: Permanence (will these parents stay with me? Why didn't my other parents keep me?); Hypervigilance (on the lookout for disaster)</p> <p>Emotionally younger than chronological age; insecure attachments delayed emotional development: Clingy, whiny, afraid to let parent go, wants to be a "baby". "Bossy" and controlling with friends</p> <p>"Not listening" to parents and teachers, meltdowns, disruptive behaviors in daycare and school</p>
Strategies	<p>Understand what is happening.</p> <p>Get enough support and respite for yourselves that you can stay patient, loving, and soothing with the baby.</p> <p>Provide reassurance and nurturing.</p> <p>Work on reciprocal interactions every day: tune into subtle cues like direction of baby's gaze, response of baby to your voice, etc. Begin back-and- forth games.</p>	<p>Create predictable, consistent routines and structures.</p> <p>Pick your battles.</p> <p>Give the child choices.</p> <p>Stay calm.</p> <p>Minimize physical control and coercion.</p> <p>Treat the child with respect – explain rules and consequences.</p>	<p>Help child identify, name, and normalize feelings.</p> <p>Parents ask themselves: What was your own attachment history in your family of origin? What are the buttons that get pushed when child is out of control? Do you assume, maybe not quite consciously, that it is your fault, or the child's fault? Do you feel angry, guilty, or disappointed, or all three?</p> <p>Maintain empathy for child, seeing the world from his/her point of view.</p> <p>Conscious limit-setting: intentional planning</p>

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	School-Age Children (7 to 12 years)	Teens/Adolescents (13 to 18 years)
Typical	<p>“Industry vs. Inferiority”: issues of competence, ability, excellence: skills, sports, hobbies</p> <p>Tasks: self-confidence and self-esteem</p> <p>Child moves into the larger world: less dependent on parents, more involved in peer group</p> <p>More impulse control; moral development increases</p> <p>Child still needs closeness, connection to parents; revisits earlier attachment feelings</p>	<p>Identity vs. confusion: who am I? (in relation to family, peers, world of work, the past/future)</p> <p>Hormonal changes at puberty: emotional mood swings, conflict with parents, drama with peers, focus on romantic relationships</p> <p>Adolescent’s pre-frontal cortex not yet fully developed, contributes to lack of impulse control, risk-taking behaviors</p> <p>Separation from family is the individuation process.</p>
Typical in Adoption*	<p>More questions and feelings about adoption, may start asking specifics about birth parents</p> <p>Continued insecurity for many children: anxiety, anger, difficulty with rules, school structures; feelings of difference, inferiority, lack of self-esteem</p> <p>Various kinds of acting out; may get labeled at this stage by school staff/mental health professionals as “oppositional,” “defiant,” “hyper-active,” or “conduct disordered” (Labels pathologize, but our goal is to normalize what is happening and change learned behaviors)</p> <p>May have learning delays, developmental lags, perceptual differences, sensory processing issues</p>	<p>For adopted teens, identity confusion often focuses on birth family questions, including racial identity issues in trans-racial families.</p> <p>Adolescent emotional upheaval and drama can be even more intensified, driven by fear insecurity, anger, self-doubt; Risk-taking, impulsive behaviors very common.</p> <p>Prospect of separation from parents brings up any unresolved attachment issues. Extremes: the teenager who can’t wait to turn 18 to get out of the house, vs. the one who can’t manage to leave home, needs parents’ close and constant emotional support into his/her 20’s.</p> <p>A child adopted later may not be developmentally ready to individuate.</p>
Strategies	<p>Importance of “life narrative” for children, making sense out of their own history</p> <p>Important for child to know parents are OK with his/her feelings/questions, for child to feel supported</p> <p>Information and validation is a soothing emotional regulation strategy and helps diminish anxiety.</p> <p>Don’t wait for child to ask about adoption: it is not the child’s job to bring things up – that is for the adults to do.</p> <p>Continue conscious, intentional limit-setting structures, communicated to child when calm.</p> <p>Get school staff/helping professionals on same page; all use the same language with the child.</p> <p>Get help from competent, sensitive mental health professionals trained in and expert about adoption and post-adoption issues. Adoption is, after all, a lifelong issue.</p>	<p>De-fuse, divert, and reduce conflict, rather than escalating it. Sometimes a mediator is needed, or even respite: somewhere else for teen to be on temporary basis</p> <p>Priority in parenting all adolescents should be keeping lines of communication open, rather than winning arguments.</p> <p>Need limits to maintain safety, but not to establish who’s in charge</p> <p>If searching for birth parents/family, manage your own emotions, reactions; provide support and reassurance; normalize the process (Good to have professional help in this effort).</p>

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