



ADOPTIVE PARENT SUPPORT

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

ADOPTEE IDENTITY



What's Inside ?

DID YOU KNOW?



Listen

Marta Sierra, LMHC talks about identity development as adult adoptees. She talks through some of the ways adoption trauma can mean delayed development, and that finding out who we really are is possible in adulthood.



Read

Adoption involves inherent grief, processed through four steps—accepting loss, working through pain, adjusting to a new reality, and moving forward—while encouraging healthy coping strategies like therapy, journaling, and open communication.



Watch

In this Ted Talk, "Rewriting Family" Cheryl Nankoo speaks from the perspective of an adoptive mother about the importance of language mindfulness and intentionality in helping adoptees develop their own identity.

1

An estimated 5 million people in the US are adoptees

2

1 out of every 25 families have an adopted child

3

25% of adopted children are of a different race than their adoptive parents

4

About 1 in 10 adults in the US are adoptees

ADOPTION AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT: HOW DOES IT ALL INTERACT?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Understanding the developmental stages of children is vital for new parents, especially for those with adopted children. This article explores issues like separation, loss, anger, grief, and identity, detailing how these may manifest as the child grows. Recognizing these behaviors can help parents support their child in developing healthy self-esteem and a sense of belonging.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

- **Infancy** – A nurturing environment fosters security and trust through consistent love and attention, laying the foundation for contentment.
- **Toddlers** – At this stage, children balance attachment with growing independence. They may display aggressive behaviors that puzzle parents, and adoptive parents in particular may feel concern about the role of genetic traits.
- **Elementary School** – Children focus on developing skills and strengthening their identity within the family. This is also when questions about adoption and their birth parents' decisions often begin to emerge.
- **Adolescence** – The central task is forming a secure sense of identity, which can be an intense process. Open communication between parents and teens is essential during this time. Adolescents often test boundaries and rebel against parental standards, while their awareness of different origins deepens their need to define themselves independently. It can be reassuring when adoptive parents acknowledge their child's desire for autonomy and express readiness to support them in any way they can.

Stages of Adoptee Identity Acceptance

An adoptee's identity development is a lifelong journey of self-discovery marked by complexity and questions. Unlike biological children, adoptees often start with limited knowledge of their family history and culture, particularly if adopted internationally. This lack of information, coupled with potential trauma from early separation, results in unique challenges throughout their growth. Below, Maddie Gustafson, The Park's Adoptee Programs Coordinator explores adoptee identity development through different life stages. For more information check out The Park's blog series on this topic:

<https://theparkcommunity.org/stages-of-adoptee-identity/>

ADOPTEE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

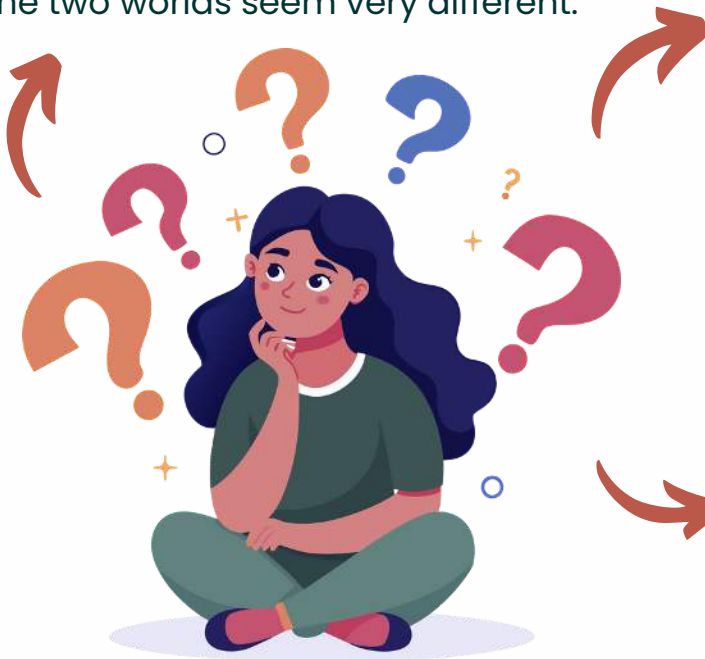
STAGE ONE: PARENT LED IDENTITY	STAGE TWO: IDENTITY AWARENESS	STAGE THREE: IDENTITY AWAKENING	STAGE FOUR: IDENTITY CONFLICT	STAGE FIVE: SELF LED IDENTITY	STAGE SIX: IDENTITY ACCEPTANCE
AGES 0-5	AGES 6-10	AGES 11-14	AGES 15-18	AGES 19-22	AGES 23+
<p>Identity is primarily shaped by parents</p> <p>Experiences that parents allow or encourage their child to participate in influences the adoptee's identity</p> <p>Whether adoption is discussed or not, child may have basic knowledge of their adoption but doesn't fully understand it</p>	<p>Identity is shaped by parents, peers at school, and experiences</p> <p>Adoptee becomes aware of their differences, both in terms of their race and adoption status</p>	<p>Identity is largely shaped by peers with less parental influence</p> <p>Peer acceptance is highly sought after</p> <p>Bullying, racism, and microaggressions begin, which may influence identity</p> <p>Sex education is taught, which can trigger questions about adoption</p>	<p>Identity is largely shaped by peers with less parental influence</p> <p>Peer acceptance is highly sought after</p> <p>Bullying, racism, and microaggressions continue, which may influence identity</p> <p>Adoptees may start to push back and realize perpetrator is wrong, which can awaken them to start exploring their identity in a more positive way</p>	<p>Adoptee is typically in college, away from parents and free to explore their identity in their own way</p> <p>New friends and community don't have preconceived ideas or knowledge of their adoption</p> <p>Typically, peers are more accepting</p> <p>Adoptee incorporates new concepts into previous ideas about themselves</p>	<p>Various major life events may influence an adoptee's identity such as moving, starting a relationship, having children, health scares, etc</p> <p>Understanding and self-acceptance of their more complex identity</p>

The “Big” Questions

Adoption is a transformative experience that unites individuals and families from various backgrounds. Adoptees often face unique emotional and psychological questions that influence their identity and sense of belonging.

Who Am I?

The question of identity is deeply significant for adoptees, who must reconcile their biological heritage with their adoptive family's influence. Balancing these dual identities can be challenging, especially when the two worlds seem very different.



Where do I come from?

For adoptees, understanding their origins is crucial to their identity, focusing on biological heritage, family history, cultural background, and medical history. This knowledge helps them form a more complete self-understanding.

Why was I adopted?

Understanding the reasons for adoption is vital for adoptees, as it relates to feelings of worthiness, abandonment, and acceptance.



Understanding the 7 Core Issues of Adoption

Adoptees face identity formation challenges, making it hard to manage emotions due to fragmented or unknown histories. While everyone grapples with understanding their identity, this process can be especially sensitive for adoptees, who encounter additional complexities.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

[7 Core Issues of Adoption – Cincinnati Children’s](#)

Covers seven recurring themes adoptees face: loss, rejection, shame/guilt, grief, identity, intimacy, and control. These issues are not linear stages but can resurface throughout life for adoptees and their families.

[Coping With Adoption Grief – American Adoptions](#)

Explains how grief is inherent in adoption and adapts the grief process into four steps: accept loss, work through pain, adjust to new reality, and move forward. Emphasizes healthy coping strategies like therapy, journaling, and open communication.

[The Big Three Questions Adoptees Think About – Adopting.com](#)

Highlights three identity questions common to adoptees: Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I adopted? Encourages caregivers to support exploration without forcing closure.

[Stages of Adoptee Identity – The Park Community](#)

Outlines stages of adoptee identity: parent led identity, identity awareness, identity awakening, identity conflict, self led identity, and identity acceptance. Note that identity development is unique to each individual, and no two processes are the same.

[Adoption and the Stages of Child Development – UNC HR \(PDF\)](#)

Links adoption challenges with typical developmental stages: infancy (attachment), childhood (trust, belonging), middle childhood (self-esteem, fitting in), and adolescence (identity, autonomy). Suggests caregiver strategies for support at each stage.

[Adoptees On Podcast – Identity with Marta Isabella Sierra](#)

Therapist Marta Sierra discusses adoptee identity, healing, and the lifelong work of reconciling birth and adoptive identities. Provides clinical insights and emotional tools for adoptees.

[TED TALK - “Rewriting Family” Cheryl Nankoo](#)

Cheryl speaks from the perspective of an adoptive mother about the importance of language mindfulness and intentionality in helping adoptees develop their own identity.

[Need additional support? Contact our post adoption team!](#)

