

The Adopted Teen's Quest for Identity

Mark Gregston
Parenting Today's Teens
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Adoption is obviously a better alternative to a child languishing “in the system” – living in foster care or an orphanage. That’s why I have worked many years with national and international adoption organizations whose goal is to match needy kids with great parents. As I’ve experienced these adoptions first hand, I firmly believe that God has His hand in every case. After all, God is the ultimate authority on adoption. I think He provides specific parents with specific children for specific reasons. It may be hard to believe, but God may have given you a child knowing that as a teen they would struggle, and that He would need you for such a time as this.

And, because I believe God maneuvers children into families, I also believe that God is prepared to help these new parents know what to do should their adopted child spin out of control in the teen years. Not all adopted kids go through this struggle, and usually not if they were adopted earlier in life, but many of the older kids do. God is a great example of how to restore an adopted child going through this struggle. His example of nurturing, understanding, love, patience, kindness, goodness, forgiveness and grace is the best pattern for helping them through their time of difficulty.

The drive for an adopted teen to uncover their history intensifies during the teen years, and they will do almost anything to get their questions answered. I’ve seen kids pull all kinds of stunts, including tracking down their birth parents through the Internet, contacting them unexpectedly, and even setting up a time to meet without ever telling their adoptive parents about it. I’ve witnessed them pay for cell phone numbers, contact attorneys to get help, and send photos to their birth parents — uninvited.

Adopted children face unique circumstances, and it is not unusual for them to struggle with issues surrounding their identity in the teen years. For their parents, the most difficult part is trying not to take their sudden confusion personally. This tussle isn’t about teenage rebellion as much as a struggle to answer questions about their history — who they are, why their birth parents gave them up, and what it means for their future. It isn’t that the teen no longer loves the adoptive parents and are no longer appreciative of all their new family has done for them. It’s that they are in confusion over how they got to where they are.

If you are an adoptive parent, your role is to continue to parent them with the same kind of love you’ve always held. Remember God’s example of nurturing, understanding, love, patience, kindness, goodness, forgiveness and grace. Don’t respond negatively because your feelings are hurt. Don’t say you’re giving up as their parent. And don’t try to “fix” the problem with giving the teenager more “things.” All of this only adds to an adopted teen’s mixed up sense of self and can lead to even more instability.

These kids need both time and stability to work through their issues. It is often a stage that they can work through and come out on the other side even more appreciative of their adoptive parents. In the meantime, they need their parents to remain steady and calm while they turn their world upside down in a quest to understand their history. And they may need professional help sorting it all out when the truth is finally made known. While not always true, your teen may discover that the circumstances of their adoption are not what they expected, and the history they uncover has potential to cause even more hurt. So, be watchful and take care to get your adopted teenager the kind of professional help they may need at this time in their life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Gregston is an author, speaker, radio host, and the founder and director of Heartlight, a residential counseling center for struggling teens located in Longview, Texas.