



The Impact of Adoption at School: Elementary Age Youth

Adoption can impact children at school in two ways: educationally and socially. If a child is grieving for or fantasizing about birth family to the extent that it affects his ability to concentrate and learn, that is an educational effect. If a child is teased on the playground by classmates who say that he must be bad because his "real" parents gave him away, that is a social effect. Teasing can also affect self-esteem, which can affect school performance. A child who is of a different race or ethnicity than his parents may also face difficulties when classmates question how they can have parents who "look different" than them. Parents should consider how adoption impacts elementary aged children in both these areas. First grade is when "real school" begins. Six-year-olds have reached the age when they can be required to sit still, pay attention, maintain order in line, and learn to read and write. They gain a new sense of independence and assurance as they ride to school on the bus alone, negotiate the cafeteria, receive a report card, and perform in the school pageant. They also begin to participate in group activities outside of school such as the soccer team, cub scouts, or ballet lessons—that help them to develop a variety of new skills.

At this age, adopted children begin to be able to grasp the fuller meaning of their adoption, including the loss and abandonment issues that may be associated with it. They may spend time fantasizing about their birthparents and wondering what they are like. They may feel that they were placed for adoption because they were not good, pretty, or smart enough to be kept. With mental energy tied up in these concerns, children can find it difficult to pay attention in class and to learn their lessons, even if they do not have learning disabilities. And because this is the first time that more intense educational demands are placed on the child, if a child does have a learning disability or a specific condition such as attention deficit disorder, this is when it may surface.

Children in elementary school are old enough to decide for themselves whether to tell their classmates about their adoption. They must be taught, however, that once they tell, they will not be able to "take it back." Also, you need to help your child recognize that people have different reactions to this information. You must give him the tools to respond to these reactions, especially if they are negative. Your experience with preschool teachers may help you decide whether to share adoption information with grade-school personnel. If you feel it is important to discuss adoption with your child's teacher, tell your child exactly what you will be talking about and why. Good opportunities for adoption discussions are at the very beginning of the school year, at parent-teacher conferences, and on back-to-school night.

Some professionals and adoptive parents think it is unwise to share adoption information with teachers because they fear teachers will single out their children, make them feel different, or cause them to be made fun of, called names, or given special treatment. Others say that parents cannot expect teachers to become more sensitive to adoption issues, use positive adoption language, and help adopted children feel more secure if parents are not willing to share openly and affirm their own positive feelings about adoption. Keep in mind that there are some assignments that are often used in elementary school curriculum, such as family trees, that may be problematic for adopted youth (more information on how to handle these are included further in this article). You may want to share strategies for how these assignments can be adapted for your child. It is not uncommon for adopted children and youth to feel so embarrassed or uncomfortable with these assignments that they refuse to complete them. Some children would rather take a failing grade rather than explain to their teacher why they are uncomfortable doing the assignment. Adoptive parents can be proactive by asking teachers about these potential assignments ahead of time.

Linda Yellin, an adult adoptee, therapist, and consultant from the Detroit area who specializes in pre and post adoption services, believes in most cases it is useful to share information about certain aspects of adoption with appropriate school personnel. Regarding preschoolers and elementary school age children she states, "With the increase in openness in adoption practice, it is helpful for school personnel to understand that some adopted children continue to have contact with their siblings, former foster families, and in some cases, with birthparents and extended birth family members. If school personnel are aware and sensitive to these situations, they are more apt to respond appropriately."

Children Adopted From the Foster Care System or Foreign Countries

A child who is newly adopted from the foster care system at age 6 will have some of the same school issues as a 6-year-old adopted as an infant. He will be dealing with the grief and loss that all children living away from their birthparents deal with. He may also have some other difficulties. If he experienced abuse or neglect and more than one caretaker, he may not have received the emotional nurturing he required at a younger age. Interruptions in attachment, early deprivations, cultural differences, and moves can cause a child to act younger than he is. He may not be able to learn as fast as children his own age; and yet, if he is physically the same size as his classmates, he will be expected to perform at the same level as everyone else. These negative experiences may also cause a child to have low self-esteem, problems with authority, difficulty in getting along with other children, depression, or antisocial behavior, such as lying, stealing, or disrupting class.

A child adopted from a foreign country may also have experienced multiple placements, institutional neglect, or abuse. They may also have sensory issues due to institutionalization. These children have also had to learn a new language and new customs – all of which can affect their physical, emotional and intellectual development. If the child is of a different race than his or her parents, there is yet an additional layer of complexity.

A parent of a child adopted from the foster care system or from a foreign country almost has to discuss the child's adoption with school personnel, so that they will understand these background factors and be able to plan useful interventions together with the adoptive family.

If your child has the potential to have some serious school problems because of his former birth family or foster care system experiences, you need to get school personnel to become a part of the problem-solving team with you, along with your child's social worker, former foster families, and other key players that you determine. To enlist their support, you should share relevant information about your child's background; however, you should be cautious in how much detail you provide, and to whom. There is no need to talk about the specifics of the abuse, for instance, or to reveal who the perpetrator was. The level of detail provided to a therapist or counselor is different from that provided to a teacher. The teacher needs to know just enough history so that he or she can understand some of the reasons for the child's current functioning in the classroom.

When you share this information, you should tell the teacher that you expect the information to be treated as a professional confidence. It is not to be shared freely with anyone who does not have a need to know. If you think your child will need services not normally provided in the regular classroom, you need to advocate for those services. Unlike past adults in his life who were not trustworthy and who did not work as a team on his behalf, you and school personnel must work together. Your child needs to get the message: "You are important. We can make this work," It also might be necessary for your family to seek other post-adoption services along with the school-provided educational services, such as psychotherapy or association with other adoptive families in an adoptive parent support group.

School Assignments Related to Adoption

In many elementary schools, third or fourth graders are asked to make a family tree. You can help ease the possible uncomfortable feelings that your child might have about this assignment by talking with the teacher about the child's adoption ahead of time. If you have enough information about the birth family, perhaps your child's family tree can include information about both the birth family and the adoptive family. Lois Melina, in "Making a Family Tree Helpful for Adopted Child," points out the benefits to adopted children that such an assignment can provide. It is a natural opportunity to talk about adoption with your child.

In the 1990's there are many varieties of families. Children nowadays can live with adoptive parents, foster parents, one parent, divorced parents with joint custody, stepparents, grandparents, or two parents of the same gender. Most teachers in this day and age are aware of these differences. Hopefully they will take the opportunity to point out that each type of

family is a "real" family, and that no one type is better than the other. You might suggest to the teacher to emphasize to the children that while families may look different on the outside, on the inside they are all the same—they are made up of people who care for and love one another. If handled in this way, the assignment should be a self-esteem builder for your child and all the children in your child's class.

Elementary school may also be the time when a teacher suggests what he or she thinks is an innocent-sounding science or social studies project for the class to undertake—adopt a whale, zoo animal, redwood tree or highway. While the intent is to impart positive messages about the need for all of us to take responsibility for saving endangered species and improving our environment, this kind of project can have negative effects on adopted children of this age.

These types of projects may lead school-age adopted children to conclude (because they are still concrete and not abstract thinkers) that all you have to do to adopt is pay some money. Adoptions of whales and redwoods must be renewed every year. Do their parents have to pay more money every year to keep them? And if their parents do not pay the money, will they be thrown out? You might need to mention to your child's teacher that the project is fine, but that the phrase "adopt-a-" is problematic. Such a project may require some sensitive explanation on the teacher's part to a class containing adopted children. If your child is comfortable with the idea, presentations on internationally adopted children's countries of origin are often well received by children of this age and their teachers. Slides, photographs, crafts, traditional clothes, and foods are particularly enjoyable. This type of presentation can sometimes be worked into social studies units, particularly in schools where there is already a multicultural population. Activities that are aimed at eliminating cultural stereotypes and getting children to see that we are a diverse global community where people have many differences as well as similarities are also useful.

This information was provided by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau, 1993
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families
Email: info@childwelfare.gov