



The Impact of Adoption at School: Junior and Senior High

Educational and social demands are much greater on youngsters in junior or senior high school. There are different teachers for each subject, rather than one dependable teacher to report to, and each one has different expectations. School assignments are longer and more complex, and exams are harder. The school itself is much larger, and the number of kids can be overwhelming. There are lockers and gym class, clubs to join, and cliques to figure out. Messages and music from the popular culture and media bombard the youngster. And with all of this, hormones are raging and causing all kinds of bodily and emotional changes.

Since teenagers are more capable of abstract thinking, adoption discussions in school can be more sophisticated. Teenagers know how a girl gets pregnant, and can understand why someone might not be able to care for a baby after it is born. They can also understand the concepts of child abuse and neglect, and that society has an obligation to protect children and provide a safe and secure environment for them. All this being said, adopted teens still may not have worked through all their feelings about their adoption. Precisely because they have more understanding, and because this is a time when sexuality and identity issues surface, their adoptive status may cause them to feel even more embarrassed or rejected than when they were younger. Teenagers sometimes render harsh value judgments about themselves, seeing only the black and white and none of the grey areas. You may still need to help school personnel see that adoption affects adopted children's performance and adjustment at school even when they reach junior high or high school age.

School Assignments Related to Adoption

Adopted adolescents may still act out when it comes to assignments in the classroom. 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.

Jae Ran Kim, an adult adoptee and social worker, recalls an assignment where she was asked to trace her family's genealogy back to when her family entered the United States as immigrants; her parents suggested writing about a maternal descendent who signed the Declaration of Independence, ignoring the fact that she herself was a first generation immigrant to the country and, as an adoptee, had no knowledge of her biological family's history. An adoptive parent, hearing this story remarked, "That's why my [teenaged] son got angry when I suggested he write a paper about my descendent who came on the Mayflower – it wasn't 'his' descendent, it was mine! Being adopted from foster care, he doesn't know who his descendents are!" It was an "aha" moment for that adoptive parent. She understood then why her son chose to fail the assignment rather than write about a history he felt uncomfortable with. Another parent shared that her African American, transracially adopted youth decided to "fail" a history assignment in which she was asked to write an essay in the persona of a European "explorer" who comes into contact with an "African native."

Many adopted adolescents will not tell their parents about these assignments, so the first hint of a problem comes from a call from the teacher or a report card. Knowing in advance that these kinds of assignments may lead to refusals or incompletes gives parents the opportunity to talk to their teen about ways to deal with these potential assignments.

Transracial or Transnational Issues

The teen years are full of anxiety about fitting in to peer groups. For teens who were transracially or transnationally adopted, fitting in with a racial peer group can be an extra layer of complexity, especially if the teen is moving from a smaller school where they have been known by their peers to a larger school where they encounter more same-race peers than their previous schools. Although it is normal for teens to separate from their parents during this time, transracially adopted teens may express this more by choosing same-race peer groups or hiding the fact that they have parents of a different race. They may also hide the fact that they were adopted.

Education Outcomes

How do adopted kids in this age group do in school? Well, there is good news. According to a recent national survey conducted by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota, out of 4,600 adopted teenagers in the United States, 56 percent say they like school, and 20 percent "aren't sure." These percentages are not much different than those of non-adopted teens (54 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Two out of three adopted teens say they try as hard as they can to do their best in school, and three out of four say they plan to finish high school and go to college. Adoptive parents ask about homework and curriculum, help with homework, and attend meetings at school at the same rate as other parents. Thus, despite our worries, and even though some adopted teens struggle because of learning disabilities, school is a positive experience for most of them.

One cautionary note, however, is that this survey focused on teens who were adopted as infants or young children. If the survey included more young people adopted at a later age and as a result of birthparent abuse or neglect and placement in the foster care system, the results might be different. Just because one study finds that adopted kids do okay in high school does not mean that you can sit back and do nothing. The repercussions of adoption can last a long time, and as conscientious parents, you still need to stay involved.

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