

Seeking Identity in Adoption

Traditionally, adoption has been associated with seven common issues, one of which is identity formation. The development of personal identity is often not consciously considered when a person adopts an infant who shares their own race or ethnicity. The child grows into adulthood while embracing the adoptive family's routines, values, and rituals to which they are exposed from the beginning. Some questions about birth family traits naturally arise as children age. However, things can be quite different for a family that adopts an older child who is already familiar with their birth family, especially when the child does not share their adoptive parents' racial or ethnic heritage. For parents who adopt older children, identity formation will need to be more intentional.

What can adoptive parents do to navigate this identity formation for their adopted child? Initially, it will be necessary for a parent to reflect on how their own identity was formed by asking some questions. What did I learn from my mother and father regarding my identity? How do my ethnicity, age, experience, education, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs define me today? How has this changed over the years? What biases or assumptions do I make about others who don't share my background? Do I need to challenge my value system as the norm? What pieces would I like to pass on to my adopted child?

For parents who have adopted transracially (i.e., white parents adopting a black child), they will need to acknowledge that racism and discrimination are still prevalent in the United States and will impact their child as they navigate the world. Parents need to be prepared to have difficult conversations with their child and to address microaggressions when they encounter them. They will need to provide their child with the tools to cope with and respond to discrimination, as well as ample opportunities to interact daily with people who look like them.

White, heterosexual, and male individuals in the United States often do not have to question their access to certain social privileges. If your child falls outside of these categories, parents will need to understand that their child's experience of the world will be vastly different. Scan the QR code for additional reading on the iconic article by college professor Peggy McIntosh about the invisible knapsack.



Helping children develop an appreciation for the resiliency and beauty of their birth culture is crucial. Adoptive parents need to promote their child's racial and ethnic pride by embracing the child's racial history within the context of slavery or oppression in the United States and how that legacy continues to impact them today. Reading books or watching movies that feature important historical figures or provide confident role models is another way to support your child in developing a positive identity. Challenging the current state of society and reinforcing your child's interests in social justice demonstrate to your child that you support them.

Another area closely aligned with identity, especially for youth coming of age in the era of social media, is the discussion of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, known by the acronym SOGIE. This potentially divisive topic can be a source of stress for adoptive parents and their children. While youth who identify with the LGBTQ+ community face the same developmental tasks as all adolescents, they also have the additional challenges of being comfortable with their identity, orientation, and presentation in the community. They are at higher risk of bullying, victimization, and rejection. As an adoptive parent, you will need to be committed to listening and learning from your child. Be curious, keep language open and accepting. A parent's ability to embrace their adoptive child's whole identity can make all the difference in how your child navigates their teen years into adulthood.

Parenting is a challenging job. Parenting an adopted child who has additional layers to uncover in their search for self-identity can be daunting, but equally gratifying when you remain a constant presence on their journey to defining themselves and their place in the world.

November is National Adoption Month, we wish to honor all individuals who have been impacted by the transformative power of adoption.

A Hidden Link

In addition to many other complex processes, our brain, in combination with our central nervous system, is responsible for taking in the vast array of sensory information around us. Processing this incoming knowledge requires the brain to select which information to attend to, enhance, or inhibit. The way we function in the world and engage with others is directly affected by this undertaking.

Our brain not only takes in information from the “outer” or “far” senses of hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell but also receives details from our “inner” or “near” senses. This includes particulars such as our sense of balance, the amount of force needed to complete tasks, the position of our trunk and limbs in relation to ourselves and our environment, and our states of hunger, wakefulness, and arousal, to name just a few. Regardless, it’s a tall order. For those fortunate enough to have “typical” sensory functioning, this happens seamlessly and primarily out of our conscious awareness.

As research on the developing brain has shown, neurological associations are formed over thousands upon thousands of experiences, and our brains wire these bonds at an astounding rate during infancy and early childhood. We continue to make new connections throughout our lives, but that process does slow down with age. Children who are exposed to harmful substances in utero (such as alcohol, drugs, or high-stress hormones), have experienced abuse or neglect, undergone intense medical interventions, or were born prematurely, among other developmental difficulties, are at an increased risk for sensory processing challenges.

In other words, a child’s brain that has been deprived of a “typical” childhood experience becomes preoccupied with trying to decode sensory material. When any of these senses, inner or outer, cannot be received and processed efficiently, accurately, and consistently, it leaves the child with a chaotic existence, lighting up the brain stem and leading to longer periods spent in “fight or flight.” The child is dysregulated

by their internal struggle to process what is happening outside or inside their body. This leads the child to feel largely uncomfortable in their own skin and question their biology’s reliability to help them navigate the world. Similar to the temporary awkwardness of puberty, this is a consistent feeling of confusion that can leave a child concluding that they lack intelligence or are less capable than others. The reality is that they have to work much harder than their peers at basic tasks due to developmental differences resulting from their sensory differences.

Since our primary way of understanding the world around us from infancy onward is through our senses, this makes learning (academically, relationally, and otherwise) and overall development for these children a slower, more taxing process. Because stress is easily passed along to others, living with someone with sensory differences can be incredibly difficult. Often, without insight, a child’s behavior is wrongly viewed by others as defiant, or parents’ expectations exceed the child’s abilities, leading to disappointment, frustration, and strained relationships.

In reality, the child is simply trying to communicate a need for which they have no language or understanding.

Attachment is a process that happens through the senses. Babies are fed, held, rocked, and snuggled. When hungry, tired, have a dirty diaper, or just need a snuggle, an attentive caregiver comes and meets the need. This person often sings to, talks with, or massages the baby, explaining the discomfort and how the need is being met. These experiences form the basis for typical sensory development. The conversations happening during these times of need help the child understand their body more accurately. When these occurrences are missing due to neglect or abuse, drug or alcohol use, caregiver depression, a need for extended medical placement, or other extenuating circumstances, healthy sensory processing is at risk. Because the sensory system has developed in a way that does not allow the child to experience pleasure, instead connecting sensory experiences with stress, chaos, or pain, the child lacks the ability to calm down in response to caregiving actions.

Relationships are a two-way street. When a child is often stressed, irritable, and generally unable to relax, providing care lacks a sense of reward. Those in the immediate support system for the child find themselves reacting to the stress the child is feeling. Being the regulated, calm adult becomes next to impossible. Knowing when and how a child is experiencing sensory distress requires expertly attuned care. If a child you are providing care for has risk factors in their history that could result in sensory challenges, consulting an expert in the field of sensory integration is key.

Armed with a better understanding of a child’s needs over time, adjusted expectations, increased self-awareness, and fine-tuned intervention, those who care for children with trauma can become a powerful force for change. We will be exploring sensory differences in our classes this quarter. We hope to see you there!



Navigating Loss During the Holidays

The holiday season can be particularly challenging, especially when it's the first one following the loss of a significant loved one or, for children in foster care, the first holiday without their family. It can be a daunting task to figure out what to do or where to find any semblance of joy. Balancing our grief, anger, and disappointment alongside festive elements like cookies, decorations, and presents can seem nearly impossible. How do people manage to get through that first holiday?

Since the holidays often involve family gatherings, the weight of grief can be even more pronounced, with each person carrying their own pain into the day. Complicating matters, individuals are at different stages of their grieving process. Some are still in shock or denial, having little to say and less ability to hear, perhaps glued to the TV set. Some are holding back tears in the back rooms of their souls, while others may be barely holding it together. Some feel confused, angry, and betrayed, while others want to “keep it together” for the sake of everyone else. It's important to remember that as a family, we will be just that—a mixed bag of pain and needs. What is right for one person may not be right for another.

So, how can we navigate this? Here are some suggestions for grieving together. It's important to recognize that not everyone in your family will want to participate, and that's okay. It's not disloyalty; it's just a different side of grief.

Create a shrine: Set up a quiet space away from the holiday commotion, perhaps a shelf, with a picture of the missing loved one. Let everyone know that you put it there so that each time they think of that person, they are invited to put an object next to that picture. It could be a seed, a seashell, a spatula, whatever is meaningful to them and readily available. Allow this to be a personal and private moment without questioning anyone about it. Near the end of the day, invite your group to look at all these objects and share their reasons for putting them there if they want to. If no one shares, just observe the objects and have a moment of silence.

Reserve a seat for them: Set an extra place at the table and explain that it is a symbol that those who are missing are not forgotten. They still occupy space in our hearts and minds. Take some time to talk about what your loved one enjoyed about the holiday, share some favorite memories, and raise a toast of gratitude for the person you had. If you pray, ask God to watch over them and to comfort your family.

Rip it up: Gather some old phone books or larger paperbacks. Begin by saying, “I hate it that...” and fill in the blank. Then, rip up a piece of your book. Let the other person go next. Take turns sharing your frustrations. At some point, you may be ready to stop talking and might want to just go ahead and rip up the whole book without interruption.

Read a book: There are some wonderful children's books that can help everyone grieve or at least feel better about grieving. Be sure to sit side by side, barely touching, and talk as you go.

Write a goodbye letter: Write down all the things you wish you had said. Then, write about the things you had hoped for that never happened. Explain how inconvenient it was for them to leave at this time. Tell them about the hole that cannot be filled without them.

If you have folks who don't want to participate... simply go and sit next to them on the couch or pull up a chair. If it feels right, sit close enough to touch. Don't make eye contact. Don't speak; just be present and in parallel with them. Be aware of the type of energy they have. Are they engrossed in a video game? Lethargic and bored in front of the TV? Or maybe they are a bit glassy eyed, zoned out. Feel their energy and be present. Give it several minutes. They may surprise you and begin talking to you. Let them lead the conversation. It's an awfully nice thing to be lost in denial and have someone visit you who doesn't demand that you deal with your grief. It may not seem like it at the time, but they noticed.



For more tips on navigating the holidays, sign up for our Holiday Stress class in November. See class listings for more information.



safer, healthier relationships
for children and families

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Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.

Educational Opportunities for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Parents

All in-person classes will be held at FamilyForward's Developmental Trauma Center located at 11358 Van Cleve Ave in St. Louis County. *Light refreshments will be provided.*

Sensory Processing and Integration

Wednesdays, October 25 and November 1, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Difficulties with sensory processing are often confused with behavioral problems. Children who have been in foster care or adopted are at a heightened risk of experiencing these challenges. Learn about Sensory Processing Disorder, its signs and symptoms, suggested ways that parents and teachers can help, and resources in the area. This two-part training provides parents with a hands-on experience.

Understanding the Effects of Sexual Abuse

Mondays, October 30 and November 6, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Parenting a child with a history of sexual abuse can be frightening—from responding to the child's acting out behavior to dealing with emotions. Discussions focus on the best ways to minimize the trauma and help your child heal. Sex trafficking will be explored in the training. This is a two-week class, attendance at both weeks is strongly encouraged.

Calming Chaos-Navigating our Fears When the Worst Happens

Thursday, November 16, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

As foster parents begin their work, many have unspoken worries about abuse allegations, elopement, or dealing with sexual abuse; the list could go on! Jokes about these topics during STARS class disguise the underlying tension regarding these difficult subjects. This class will help foster parents disarm their fears by giving them a sense that they can navigate challenging situations and come through in one piece.

Points Along the Adoption Circle

Monday, November 20, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

The experience of adoption creates a unique and lasting emotional and psychological impact on the lives of all who are touched by it. This class gives participants a chance to consider various perspectives of those linked to one another through adoption, including birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees, including extended family members. The focus will be on deepening the insight, awareness, empathy, and practical ways to care for all members in the adoption circle. This class is designed for anyone who cares for children at any point along the adoption journey.

Holiday Stress

Wednesday, November 29, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

The holidays often bring much excitement and celebration for families. But for children who have experienced the disruption in their lives of being separated from their families, the holidays can be a time of great emotional upheaval. The stress level can become intolerable. This class will help parents see the holidays through their child's eyes and give tips on how to navigate this wonderful time of year!

Nurturing Routines-Virtual Lunch and Learn

Friday, December 1, 2023 | Noon-1:00 pm

Developing nurturing parenting routines with children of any age is the foundation for good attachment. Learn how simple nurturing habits help build a child's sense of trust, empathy, and personal power while cultivating positive self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-Compassion-Virtual Lunch and Learn

Friday, December 8, 2023 | Noon-1:00 pm

Self-compassion has become a popular term these days. What does that mean? Self-compassion is an essential trait that caregivers must learn to practice to sustain themselves through the long, challenging job of parenting. Understand that being kind to yourself is not selfish but rather a gift you need to give yourself to prevent compassion fatigue.

TIPS I-Trauma Informed Parenting for Success

Tuesday, December 5, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

This series of classes takes a closer look at the six core strengths required for healthy child development, focusing on how parents can facilitate these strengths after a child has experienced a traumatic beginning. Attachment is the foundation for all other strengths, including self-regulation, affiliation, attunement, tolerance, and respect. This is an excellent refresher course after taking FamilyForward's Parenting KIDS. Attachment is the focus of the first class.

TIPS II-Trauma Informed Parenting For Success

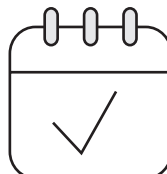
Tuesday, December 12, 2023 | 6:00-9:00 pm

This series of classes takes a closer look at the six core strengths required for healthy child development, focusing on how parents can facilitate these strengths after a child has experienced a traumatic beginning. Attachment is the foundation for all other strengths, including self-regulation, affiliation, attunement, tolerance, and respect. This is an excellent refresher course after taking FamilyForward's Parenting KIDS. The second class in the series focuses on attunement, affiliation and self-regulation.



Online resources

Sign up for our LifeLines email newsletter and view training information online by scanning the QR code or by visiting familyforwardmo.org/calendar



Register for training

Call: 314.534.9350 ext. 7234

Email: intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org