Children Process Adoption Throughout Early Years

Each stage of childhood has its own challenges; look for red flags that may indicate a need for treatment.

By Michele G. Sullivan
Mid-Atlantic Bureau

WASHINGTON — During each stage of childhood, adopted children must master a different level in processing their unique life story, Kay Seligsohn, Ph.D., said at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"Each stage has its own tasks, its own challenges, and its own red flags," said Dr. Seligsohn of the Children’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School Adoption Program, Boston.

The tasks of the toddler years are to develop a sense of autonomy and self-identity. Adoption during these years can hinder the process, which is a history of the attachment delays and behavioral problems these children often experience as they settle into their new family. "Parents should anticipate they will see extreme 2-year-old behavior."

But behavior issues, "beyond the normal 'terrible twos,'" should be red flags that the attachment process isn’t going well or that the child might have an underlying medical or psychological problem.

"We diagnose a lot of fetal alcohol effects and sensory integration problems at this stage," Dr. Seligsohn said.

"Toddlerhood also is the best time to begin introducing the child’s personal adoption story, she said. "The best way is simpl to have it become part of the general family fabric, like knowing what town they live in."

The preschool years are a time of emerging self-awareness for children. "They experience an explosion of physical skills and language development. At this time, children can parrot their adoption story as though it’s a bedtime tale, but probably don’t really understand much of it," she said.

"Adopting a child who is preschool age has both its challenges and its rewards. "They know what a family is and are often looking forward to belonging to one. But they will go through a period of extended grief and loss even if they are going to a better situation."

"The behaviors surrounding grief and loss can be upsetting to adoptive parents, who view adoption as a time of happiness and excitement. It’s important to let parents know that the grieving process is both normal and necessary. 'Attachment proceeds slowly because of the grieving, but it moves simultaneously with it.'"

Grieving for the birth family is both normal and necessary. "Attachment proceeds slowly because of the grieving, but it moves simultaneously with it."

Law that require parental notification for teens to receive prescription contraception at family planning clinics could increase the risk of teen pregnancy, according to a study by Rachel Jones, Ph.D., reported in the work that they are doing in the field of teen pregnancy, according to a study by Rachel Jones, Ph.D., reported in the work that they are doing in the field of teen pregnancy.

"Policymakers need to stop treating parenthood as a suspect class, presumed not to have their own kids’ best interests at heart," Wendy Wright, CW A’s senior policy director, said in a statement.

"Adopted adolescents are struggling to understand their ego and sexual identity. Adoptive parents often aren’t much help during this crucial period, Dr. Seligsohn said. "The [adoptive] parents are horrible at talking about sexuality, especially if there is any history of difficulty in the birth family. There’s also the myth that all people who place kids for adoption are promiscuous teenage moms."

"Unfortunately, she said, adopted teenagers may believe this as well and may engage in high-risk behavior as a subconscious way of identifying with their birth parents."

Adolescence is the time when most adopted children begin searching for their birth families. The advent of the Internet has made it much easier to do this and much easier to be secretive about it. It’s important to monitor Internet use to forestall secrecy.

Adoptive parents need to understand and support the child’s need to discover this important part of his or her past, Dr. Seligsohn said.

Teen Pregnancy May Rise With Parental Notification Laws

By Mary Ellen Schneider
Senior Writer

WASHINGTON — Among each stage of childhood, the end of middle childhood, but for some children it can be connected with the development of oppositional or mood disorders, which would include depression, anxiety, bipolar, and posttraumatic stress disorders.

"There is a higher incidence of these disorders in the adopted population, so it’s good to check this out when the patient expresses any concern," she advised.

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The majority of teens who responded to the survey—about 60%—said their parents were aware that they were using a clinic for sexual health services.

"Not wanting parents to be disappointed in the teen’s sexual activity."

"Not feeling comfortable with discussing sex with their parents."

"Not wanting parents to know the reason for the teen’s clinic visit."

"Wanting to take responsibility for their own health.

Concerned Women for America (CWA), a group that supports abstinence-only education, discounted the study. CWA said the study is biased because its authors are researchers associated with the Alan Guttmacher Institute, which is affiliated with Planned Parenthood.

CWA contends that Planned Parenthood is concerned that greater parental involvement will mean less business for them.

"Policymakers need to stop treating parents as a suspect class, presumed not to have their own kids’ best interests at heart," CWA’s senior policy director, said in a statement.

"Adopted adolescents benefit when their parents are involved in their lives, and policymakers shouldn’t forbid their involvement in their daughters’ and sons’ most important decisions," she said.

Texas and Utah currently require parental consent for teen use of state-funded family planning services, and a similar restriction exists in one county in Illinois.

Last year, lawmakers in Kentucky, Minnesota, and Virginia introduced bills that were aimed at imposing parental consent requirements on teens seeking contraception.

On the federal level, lawmakers have introduced proposals in recent years to require parental involvement in teenagers seeking contraceptives at federally funded clinics; none has become law.

"All this has to do not bode well for the future," Cynthia Daldair said in a teleconference sponsored by the Alan Guttmacher Institute.

Ms. Daldair, a public policy associate at the institute, predicted that notification for sexual health services will be high on the federal agenda in the wake of the 2004 elections.

In addition, several newly elected senators have aggressively advocated against the use of federal dollars for family planning, she said.