

## **Who am I?**

### **Where did I come from?**

### **Where do I belong?**

### **What matters to me?**

These are questions we have all asked ourselves as they are part of our life's quest to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world. We revisit them at various stages in our life, particularly during a crisis – it's normal. It's how we establish our own identity. To achieve an identity we have to integrate various aspects of the self over different points in time. Our teens are a time when we are striving towards establishing some independence and autonomy and we begin to pull away from authority in general and parents in particular. We start to distance ourselves from our family, and our friends become more important. It's normal child development.

But it's more complicated for adopted teenagers as there is another important component – the self as a family member, but which family? The one we know or the one we don't know? 'Who am I really?' is a question which for adopted people there is often no good answer.

In addition, what authority should be challenged when so many crucial decisions in their life – whether they should be placed for adoption, which family should adopt them – have been under someone else's control? Who do they separate from when there are two families they are connected to? We see that when they rebel against adoptive parents they often head toward aspects of their birth family – consciously or unconsciously.

### **How can parents and others help?**

- .Adopted people who achieve an identity they can live comfortably with tend to be those whose families allow them to discuss adoption and help them to come to a resolution about how being adopted does or doesn't fit into an overall sense of themselves. They have a sense of 'What being adopted means to me'
- Talking to other adopted teenagers about what it means to be adopted is a way of confronting the issue more directly
- Searching for answers can be helped by getting more information from the adoption agency – answers to such questions as 'Why was I abused?'

### **What if they are not talking?**

A significant group of young people will deny that adoption means that much to them and will say they don't really think about being adopted much or they

don't wonder about their birth family. On further questioning they turn out to have mostly accepted their parents' attitudes toward adoption rather than investigating adoption issues on their own. There may have been relatively little discussion about adoption in the family. These adolescents may feel that to be too curious is to betray their parents. They experience a strong sense of identity as a member of the family which precludes any sense of what it means to be adopted. Whilst this may mean they make reasonably good adjustments throughout teenage years, future landmarks – marriage, parenthood, the death of adoptive parents – can shake the very foundation of their personal meaning. For these adolescents, thinking about the past is a frightening prospect.

### **A sense of loss and bewilderment**

Going through the process of identity formation can take on added pain – a sense of lost birth parents, but also a loss of part of themselves – feelings of being cut off from your heritage, culture, race, can lead to a sense of 'genealogical bewilderment'. We can think of examples of adopted young people, raised in a good standard home who appear to seek out friends who are much closer in lifestyle to the birth family. 'Am I like my birth family or my adoptive family?'

The characteristics of the adoptive family are seen and experienced daily, the traits of the birth family are largely unknown.

When things aren't going well it is hard for the young person to accept their ambivalent feelings towards those s/he loves and depends on, and leads to a split view of their family, and by extension to themselves. It becomes easy to blame the adoptive parents and imagine their birth parents would understand them.

### **What do you do if your child is curious about birth family**

Many adopted teenagers start to search for birth parents during adolescence. Social networking sites such as Facebook have made this much easier for them (for further exploration of the risks see article in last year's Newsletter). Suffice to say the impact of these sites has been devastating for many adoptive families.

### **Steps we can help with include:**

- Clarifying feelings about being adopted
- Obtaining more information
- Adjusting Letterbox arrangement to make it more a meaningful contact

**If your child is under 18 talk to us and ask us to help you with these things.**

**Over the age of 18** adopted people can ask us for help with obtaining more information and support in making contact as of right. We will also explore with them their feelings about being adopted.

**Adoptive parents may have concerns** and wonder if birth family members can ask us to make contact with the adopted person on their behalf. The answer is 'Yes we can' but you may like to know that unless there are exceptional circumstances we now do not contact adopted adults who are under the age of 25. This is because we know that the legacy from neglectful and abusive early years experienced by many of our young people often leaves them with limited thinking skills, low self-esteem, poor emotional regulation all of which leave them less able to cope with the impact of contact. Also we are unlikely (at the point of approach) to know the needs and current life situation of the young adult, who may be doing exams, had a recent relationship break-up, be pregnant, depressed etc.

### **Ask us for help**

We know any reconnection should be carefully planned. We can take an active role in managing everyone's expectations at a safe time for all. We can offer support to all parties. Contact and reconnection after many years apart is a huge thing. Even if all parties want contact, the ramifications are enormous because it can shake everyone to the core. For a while it can destabilise all 3 corners of the adoption triangle because it challenges everyone at an identity level.

### Acknowledgements:

'Being Adopted – a Sense of Self' - Brodzinsky, Schechter et al

'Facebook: direct contact with no safeguards part 1' - Helen Oakwater, Adoption Today, April 2010

'Shame and Shadow Facebook part 2' – Helen Oakwater Adoption Today, June 2010

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