ADOPTION EDUCATION LLC

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

1. Cultural Issues for Internationally Adopted Children
2. Race
3. Checklist For Awareness By Prospective Transracial Adoptive Parents
4. Identity Issues For Adopted Children
5. Pathways of Building Tasks for Identity
6. Understanding Adoption
7. Belonging in Adoptive Families
8. Adoption Issues for Children and Teenagers
9. Searching for Birth Parents
10. Key Points For Internationally Adopted Children

TO ACCESS THE QUIZ:
After reading this course, please sign back on to www.adopteducation.com. Go to the table of contents and click on the last page (#10). Click the NEXT arrow at the bottom of the page to begin question 1 of the quiz.

CULTURAL ISSUES FOR INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED CHILDREN

The importance of cultural identity is increasingly recognized as a part of international adoption. Occasionally the child's country of origin is part of the family's heritage. In these situations, the shared culture strengthens the ties between parent and child ("We chose a child from Ukraine because my grandparents emigrated to the United States from Ukraine," "I've always been interested in Central America since studying Spanish in school," or "I wanted a child from China because I am Chinese-American, and grew up speaking Cantonese at home"). More commonly the internationally adopted child brings a new culture to the adoptive family. A large cohort of Korean children adopted by Americans in the 1950s through 70s were pioneers of "visible" adoption.

The existence of adoptive families with children who did not resemble their parents exposed many cultural issues and identity assumptions inherent in adoption practices at the time. The secrecy that permeated many aspects of adoption could no longer be maintained. Adoption professionals and parents gradually realized that recognition and celebration of the child's cultural heritage was healthier and more psychologically appropriate than the pretense that the child was "just like the parents" and that "adoption didn't matter." That these attitudes seem so odd today is a tribute to the shift in perspective over the past few decades.

Today, cultural identity is considered a vital part of the individuality of the internationally adopted child. Most adoptive parents embrace the opportunity to provide their child with a connection to his country of origin. Exposure to toys, clothing, songs, special foods, and books from the child's country is routine. Parents excitedly recount their own adventures during their own journey to receive their child. An unexpected benefit of the "two-trip system" in Russia and Vietnam has been to allow parents to gain more familiarity with their child's birth country. Parents who adopt from Kazakhstan (and in previous years from Peru) often spend many weeks in the country for legal procedures. Many report that this experience enhances their connection with the country, allows time to establish friendships with local citizens, and promotes fuller appreciation of the culture.

Magazines for adoptive parents are replete with information about different cultural activities for internationally adopted children from specific countries (e.g. special recipes for typical foods, pictures or even sewing patterns for traditional garments, descriptions of particular celebrations.) Many adoptive family support groups are culturally based (e.g., Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption, Families with Children from China). These organizations offer adoptive families the chance to meet others whose children came from the same country.

Social events may be planned around themes such as Russian Christmas or Chinese New Year. Families and children learn about important cultural traditions and incorporate the child's cultural heritage into their own traditions. Other events such as special dance lessons (India, Cambodia, Thailand), language lessons, or even a special week at a "culture camp" offer wonderful opportunities for the child to incorporate some parts of his or her heritage into daily life. Such activities provide children the opportunity to see other families that look like theirs (e.g. Asian child with white parents). Birth siblings may also benefit (e.g., white sister and Indian brother).

Many adoption agencies have regular gatherings for previous clients. Families who met before, during, or after the adoption process have the opportunity to reconnect. Since many agencies work with a limited number of orphanages, this may also offer children the chance to meet with previous "Group-mates" or at least children from the same orphanage ("Marla, come meet Kelly. She came from your orphanage!").

Children respond differently to these cultural activities, in part depending on developmental stage and understanding of adoption. Some whole-heartedly join the fun. For others, especially new arrivals grappling with transition issues, these events may be terrifying. For children at some stages, exposure to the birth country language, culture, restaurants, and activities raises terrifying or disquieting questions: Is my birth mother here? Will I meet her? Could that man be my birth father? Am I going to be sent back to the orphanage?

The existence of these activities, programs, and groups represents a dramatic shift in the way adoption, culture, and identity are viewed. No formal studies have been done to evaluate the long-term effects of incorporating such activities and exposures into the child's life. It will be of great interest to compare the identity formation of these children as they enter adolescence and adulthood with that of children raised in a climate of secrecy about adoption and family origins. The widening acceptance of multiracial, multicultural families is reflected in recent media and advertising images. This transformation in adoption is thus mirrored in society at large.

RACE

Many international adoptions are also transracial adoptions. This adds another layer of complexity to the adoption. The distinction between racial and cultural identity is unclear in most adoption outcome studies. Visible adoption affects the whole family; the family loses its privacy and becomes a transracial family. The child may have the stressful experience of "double consciousness" – identification with two cultures simultaneously but alienation from both. Depending on the makeup of the surrounding community, the child may be stigmatized within the daily environment. This may be subtle and insidious; adoptive parents are sometimes unaware of their child's experience of covert racism.

Transracial adoption or transcultural adoption accounted for 14% of all domestic adoptions in the United States in 1994; adjustment was deemed successful in 70-90%. Some question whether good adjustment comes at the cost of sacrifice of heritage. This concern is the basis for the current practice supported by most social work organizations of transracial placement only after the possibility of same-race placement is exhausted.

Experts on transracial adoption recommend that parents cultivate special awareness of the roles of race, ethnicity, and culture in the lives of their children. They must become sensitized to racism and discrimination, and create opportunities for their child to learn about and participate in his or her culture of birth, beyond attending the occasional ethnic festival. This is best accomplished by finding role models for their children within their birth culture. Finally, parents must provide their child with survival skills to cope successfully with racism. A survey of transracial adoptive parents generated 39 recommendations for prospective parents considering this type of adoption, which is set forth below.

CHECKLIST FOR AWARENESS BY PROSPECTIVE TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Racial Awareness
1. I understand how my own cultural background influences the way I think, act, and speak.
2. I am able to recognize my own racial prejudice.
3. I am aware of stereotypes and preconceived notions that I may hold toward other racial and ethnic minority groups.
4. I have examined my feelings and attitudes about the birth culture and race of my children.
5. I make ongoing efforts to change my own prejudiced attitudes.
6. I have thoroughly examined my motivation for adopting a child of a different race or culture than myself.
7. I am knowledgeable of and continue to develop respect for the history and culture of my children's racial heritage.
8. I understand the unique needs of my child related to his or her racial or cultural status.
9. I know that transracial—cultural adoptive parenting involves extra responsibilities over and above those of in-racial parenting.
10. I have examined my feelings about interracial dating and marriage.
11. I know that others may view my family as "different".
12. I know that my children may be treated unkindly or unfairly because of racism.

Multicultural Planning
1. I include regular contact with people of other races and cultures in my life.
2. I place my children in multicultural schools.
3. I place my children with teachers who are racially aware and skilled with children of my child's race.
4. I understand how my choices about where to live affect my child.
5. I have developed friendships with families and individuals of color who are good role models for my children.
6. I purchase books, toys, and dolls that are like my child.
7. I include traditions from my child's birth culture in my family.
8. I provide my children with opportunities to establish relationships with adults from their birth country.
9. I provide my children with the opportunity to learn the language of their birth culture.
10. I provide my children with the opportunity to appreciate the music of their birth culture.
11. I have visited the country or community of my child's birth.
12. I have demonstrated the ability for sustained contact with members of my child's racial or ethnic group.
13. I seek services and personal contacts in the community that will support my child's ethnicity.
14. I live in a community that provides my child with same-race adult and peer role models on an ongoing basis.

Survival Skills
1. I educate my children about the realities of racism and discrimination.
2. I help my children cope with racism through open and honest discussion in our home about race and oppression.
3. I am aware of the attitudes of friends and family members toward my child's racial and cultural differences.
4. I am aware of a variety of strategies that can be used to help my child cope with acts of prejudice or racism.
5. I know how to handle unique situations, such as my child's attempts to alter his or her physical appearance to look more like family members or friends.
6. I help my children recognize racism.
7. I help my children develop pride in themselves.
8. I tolerate no biased remarks about any group of people.
9. I seek peer support to counter frustration resulting from overt and covert acts of racism toward my children, my family, or me.
10. I seek support and guidance from others who have a personal understanding of racism, particularly those from my child's race or birth culture.
11. I have acquired practical information about how to deal with insensitive questions from strangers.
12. I help my children understand that being discriminated against does not reflect personal shortcomings.
13. I am able to validate my children's feelings, including anger and hurt related to racism or discrimination.

IDENTITY ISSUES FOR ADOPTED CHILDREN

There are typical stages of identity formation in children. From the toddler's first declarations of "No!" and "Mine!" through the teenager's struggles with individuality to the young adult's formation of independent identity, the stages are familiar and predictable. The adopted child must also progress through these stages; however, this journey is complicated by the additional psychic tasks imposed by adoption. The adopted child's progress through these stages necessarily differs from that of a non-adopted peer. Professionals must be prepared and knowledgeable about these differences to support the child and family through these transitions. Because the psychological tasks for the adoptee at each stage differ from that of the non-adoptee, the adopted child's behavior and emotional response may be misinterpreted as "abnormal." Renowned adoption expert Joyce Maguire Pavao relabels these stages as "normative crises": Necessary and important steps in identity formation for the adopted child. In her acclaimed work on adoption, she advises professionals and parents to broaden their awareness of the developmental tasks of the adopted child. Her book, The Family of Adoption, is a readable, insightful, and comprehensive analysis of theses stages.

Each psychosocial stage is complicated by adoption; the adopted child must reconcile these issues to progress to the next psychological level. In every stage of life, except infancy, toddlerhood, and old age, "copying with adoption-related loss" is necessary. This means different challenges arise at different times in life. Adjusting to the fact of adoption is not something that happens once, but must be processed again and again. The following chart identifies typical developmental stages and has added the necessary adoption-related tasks at each level.

PATHWAYS OF BUILDING TASKS FOR IDENTITY

Age Period	Typical Tasks	Adoption-related Tasks
Infancy	Trust vs. mistrust	Adjusting to transition to a new home Developing secure attachments, especially in cases of delayed placement
Toddlerhood and Preschool years	Autonomy vs. shame and doubt; initiative vs. guilt	Learning about birth and reproduction Adjusting to initial information about adoption Recognizing differences in physical appearance, especially in interracial and intercountry adoption
Middle Childhood	Industry vs. inferiority	Understanding the meaning and implications of being adopted Searching for answers regarding one's origin and the reasons for relinquishment Coping with physical differences from family members Coping with the stigma associated with adoption Coping with peer reactions to adoption Coping with adoption-related loss
Adolescence	Ego identity vs. identity confusion	Further exploration of the meaning and implications of being adopted Connecting adoption to one's sense of identity Coping with physical differences from family members Resolving the family romance fantasy Coping with adoption-related loss, especially as it relates to the sense of self
Young adulthood	Intimacy vs. isolation	Further exploration of the implications of adoption as it relates to the growth of self and the development of intimacy Further considerations of searching; beginning the search Adjusting to parenthood in light of the history of one's relinquishment Facing one's unknown genetic history in the context of the birth of children Coping with adoption-related loss

5

Middle adulthood	Generativity vs. stagnation	Further exploration of the implications of adoption as it relates to the aging self
		Reconciling the creation of a psychological legacy with one's unknown past
		Further consideration of searching
		Coping with adoption-related loss
Late adulthood	Ego integrity vs. despair	Final resolution of the implications of adoption in the context of a life review
		Final considerations regarding searching for surviving biological family

UNDERSTANDING ADOPTION

Young children have little understanding of adoption, although most can parrot their adoption stories and readily declare that they are adopted. It is not until school age that most children realize that adoption started with a loss – the loss of their birth family. Ages 6-18 years are said to be the most difficult for adoptees. The complexities of understanding adoption and its meaning resonate deeply for many children in this age group. For some school-age children, adoption itself is a risk factor for low self-esteem, academic problems, rebellious behavior (aggression, lying, hyperactivity, oppositional behavior, stealing, running away).

The frequency of these behaviors may account for the overrepresentation of adopted school-age children who require mental health support services. However struggles with adoption issues at this age are normal and should be supported. Internationally adopted children face additional psychological tasks. For these children, the toll of adoption also includes the loss of language, culture and heritage. The psychological burden of adjustment to these losses has not yet been fully evaluated and, relatively few parents are equipped to help their kids face the depths of sadness they feel regarding their losses.

BELONGING IN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

The formation of a family requires time and adjustment for everyone. Perceived similarities and differences between parents and children are an important facet of this adjustment. Biologic families search for similarities in appearance, temperament, intelligence, interests, and behavior. Identification of these traits promotes bonding and closeness between parent and child. In adoptive families, the meaning of similarity and difference between parent and child is more complex.

Considerable literature supports the notion that adoptive parents have higher expectations and more satisfying experiences in parenting than biologic parents, and offer significantly more warmth, affection, and acceptance of their child. Parenting quality is often superior to that of birth parents, which suggests that genetic ties are less important for family function than strong desire for parenthood. Adoptive parents tend to be highly functional individuals, less inclined to live vicariously, and more tolerant or sensitive of differences.

ADOPTION ISSUES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

Adoption issues are raised at many different times during childhood. Birthdays bring thoughts of birth parents and questions about why the adoption took place. School assignments (drawing the family tree, describing the family, bringing in baby pictures) place the adopted child in a predicament. Teasing or taunting on the playground and unthinking remarks by others may particularly resonate with the adopted child. Many stories, cartoons, and movies have parental loss and adoption themes (most recently, the Harry Potter series), and bring up questions or concerns for the child.

Worries about physical appearance become more common in pre-teens and teens. Adopted children may have particular anxiety about not resembling family members, and not knowing what to expect. One adopted teen stated, "I couldn't take it for granted that I looked like my parents. My non-adopted sister can look at our mother and see what she will look like when she grows up. I wish I could look ahead like that."

Children may feel embarrassment or shame about unknowns in their medical history. During the teen years as they explore sexuality, some common themes emerge. Thoughts that "my birth mother got into trouble, I will too" may lead to sexual acting out as a form of identification with the birth mother. Some children, especially girls, resolve the wish for a blood relative by having a baby, and reason that keeping that child in some way rectifies the mistakes made by the birth mother.

Nonetheless, in a large survey of teens adopted as infants, most had positive self-concepts, warm relationships with their parents, and psychological health comparable to non-adopted teens. The survey included 881 adopted adolescents and their 78 non-adopted siblings from 715 families; 289 were adopted transracially, most from Korea. Nearly 75% of the teens had good mental health, although one-third had received counseling or mental health services. Two-thirds of the teens were interested in searching for their birth parents. The children had stronger involvement in churches and volunteer community organizations than non-adopted peers; the investigators concluded that the adoptive families emphasized these activities. Such findings may not be applicable to all adopted children; the families that participated in this survey were notable in that there were few divorces or separations.

SEARCHING FOR BIRTH PARENTS

Adoption records in most states in the United States are sealed. Domestically adopted children are issued a "new" birth certificate at the time of adoption, and have no legal right to the information on their original birth certificate. In the past decade, many adopted people have viewed this as an abrogation of their civil rights. Individually and in groups, adopted people have tried to break down some of the legal barriers that separate them from information about themselves. In many ways, such efforts have succeeded, and more importantly, these efforts have raised awareness about the need for adopted people to have access to this information for their medical and psychological well-being. Many adoptees conduct searches for their birth parents, often wanting simply to "see a face that looks like mine." Depending on age and individual circumstances, most adoptees are "not looking for a relationship, but for a relation."

The Internet has greatly facilitated adoptees' ability to search for their birth parents. The typical searcher is a female in her late 20s usually married. The search is often triggered by a significant life event such as having a child, or death or divorce of an adoptive parent. Experts concur that for most children, a major consequence of search is the clarification of the adoptive parents' dominant position in the adoptee's life. A survey of Danish-born adoptees, now adults, who met with their birthparents, found that most subjects concurred with social anthropologist David Schneider's statement "kinship is socially constructed not biologically inscribed." These young adults all emphasized to the researchers "when I said my real mother of course I meant my adoptive mother."

Although the psychological benefits of a search (and of many, but not all, reunions) have been carefully studied for domestic adoptees, this area remains murky for international adoptees. The practical difficulties of a search in another country are considerable. The legal records provided at the time of the adoption are often scanty and incomplete. In Eastern Europe, it is common to have the name and date of birth of one or both parents, and some additional identifying information (ethnic background, occasionally address). Number of siblings may also be listed (sometimes with first names and ages). However, in some cases, birth mothers who do not wish to be identified or traced have deliberately falsified these records. Records of infants placed from Guatemala include DNA testing of the relinquishing birth mother, her name, national identity card number, and other facts. In China, the unusual circumstances of child abandonment forestall identification of the birth parents. In other countries, information is variable.

Searching for roots raises complex identity issues for international adoptees; the child may not feel fully a part of his new culture, but finds upon return to his birth country that he does not have a common cultural understanding or language despite the physical resemblance. The usual terminology applied to adoption, that the child "comes home," implies that he finally arrived at where he was meant to be all along. This diminishes the biologic processes and transforms the birth parents and birth country into temporary caretakers.

A study of 181 adoptees ages 13-27 years found that most had good mental health and self-esteem. Nonetheless, 70% thought of their biologic families and imagined many things about them. Few variables predicted which children were in this group – age at adoption, for example, did not relate to thoughts of the biologic family. Seven percent of the group was intensively preoccupied by thoughts of their birth families. Many of the children imagined a return to their birth country – most were more interested in an "ethnic search" (to learn more about the country) than actually finding their birth families.

Adoption researchers agree that some children may benefit from such a search. With the adoptive parents, the child (usually an older teen or young adult) may wish to travel to his or her country of origin. "Homeland tours" are increasing in popularity (some travel agents advertise such group tours in adoption magazines). The child may visit his town of birth, possibly visit the orphanage where he resided, and even perhaps meet some of his early caretakers. It is particularly poignant to realize that the child would likely need an interpreter to talk with any birth relatives. Regardless of these limitations, this type of search offers the opportunity for the child to reconnect with his culture of origin, and may dramatically reveal the stark contrasts in his life as it would have been had he not been adopted. Such tours may benefit family members who feel a special purpose and meaning while traveling together with others who have had similar experiences in adoption. These visits, however, must not be undertaken without careful consideration of the child's wishes and his present developmental stage and needs. Expert consultation may be advisable before endorsing a plan for such a trip.

KEY POINTS FOR INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED CHILDREN

- International adoptions must recognize and respect differences in culture and race between children and parents.
- Adopted children must process their identity throughout life.
- Adoptive families should prepare for "normative crisis" as children progress through different life stages.
- Identity problems for internationally adopted children may include racial and cultural differences.
- Openness in international adoption is logistically problematic, but efforts should be made to maintain a connection with the country of origin.