

Adoption

Most adopted children thrive in their new family. Your pediatrician can offer helpful advice if your family is considering adoption or has adopted a child. It is important that you talk to your child about being adopted as soon as he or she is old enough to understand. Children adopted from other countries and from foster care may have special health needs.

What is adoption?

Adoption is the process of providing a new family for a child whose birth family cannot or will not care for the child. Adoption is not only a legal process, but also a social and emotional process. For the most part, adopted children share the same bonds with their parents as birth children do.

Most adopted children and families adjust well and lead healthy, productive lives. It is normal for adopted children to wonder about their birth family—open communication is important. Children should be told they are adopted as soon as they are old enough to understand—usually in the toddler years.

In the United States, a growing number of children are being adopted from other countries or from foster care. These children may have special health and developmental needs and should be screened for health problems soon after adoption. Your pediatrician's office can answer questions and provide useful information if you are considering adoption or are raising an adopted child.

Some important facts on adoption

- Adoption is common. There are approximately 1 million adopted children in the United States—2% to 4% of American children are adopted.
- Today, an increased number of adoptions take place through public agencies or international adoptions. In the past, most adoptions either went through private adoption agencies or were family adoptions (children adopted by relatives or stepparents).
- More older children are being adopted, as opposed to newborns. Brothers and sisters may be adopted together. Many families are adopting children with special medical, developmental, or educational needs.
- The Internet has had a major impact on the adoption process, including putting families in touch with adoption resources and children who need families. The Internet has been especially important in driving the trend toward increased international adoption. Unfortunately, it has also led to an increase in unethical practices related to adoption.

Do adopted children have any special medical concerns?

The pediatrician's office can play an important role in assessing the health of your adopted child. Most adopted children are perfectly healthy, both physically and developmentally. Their medical care is no different from that of other children.

Depending on the birth mother's health and the circumstances of her pregnancy, some adopted children may have preexisting medical or developmental issues. This is especially likely for children adopted from foster care or from other countries. (Of course, many families knowingly adopt children with special medical needs.)

Your child should have a thorough medical evaluation as soon as he or she joins your family. Some parents who have identified a child they hope to adopt will have a doctor look over the child's medical records before adoption. This helps prepare for any special medical needs the child may have. Important information includes possible alcohol or drug abuse by the mother during pregnancy, diabetes during pregnancy, any complications during delivery, and, if available, family history of genetic (inherited) disorders. Information on the biological father's medical history may be helpful as well.

Children adopted from other countries—especially from developing countries—may need to be screened for certain health problems, including hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis, parasites, and syphilis. They may also need repeated or new vaccinations.

How do adopted children and their new families adjust to each other?

In general, families and adopted children adjust well. Older children, children adopted from foster care, and other special cases may need more time to adjust. Responsible adoption agencies will usually assess your family's ability to handle the child and help integrate him or her into your family before finalizing the adoption.

What should I tell my child about being adopted?

The truth! Children should be told they are adopted as soon as they are old enough to understand.

- If the child is of a different race than the parents, the child will notice this difference at a young age—in fact, you may want to start talking about adoption sometime after age 2 or 3. Otherwise, discussions about being adopted should take place sometime after age 5 or 6. Certainly by the teen years, children should know the truth about their adoption.

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- The information should be repeated, at a level your child can understand as he or she grows and develops. It is completely normal for adopted children to wonder about their birth parents, about why they were placed for adoption, and other questions regarding their history. They may even imagine that their birth parents “gave them up” because of something they did wrong.
- Parents should be aware of their own feelings related to being adoptive parents. For example, it is normal for toddlers to “push away” from their parents, as a sign of becoming more independent. Adoptive parents shouldn’t interpret this as rejection any more than birth parents would.
- Other issues will come up as your child grows and develops. It’s sometimes hard to tell how much these problems are related to being adopted, rather than just the normal stress and strain of growing up. Adoption issues may be a focus of attention during adolescence, especially as teens “try on” new identities. Some of these identities may resemble your child’s birth parents—or how he or she imagines them to be.

By the teen years, your child should know the whole story about his or her adoption. Be truthful, even if the truth is difficult to tell and hear. Some children have had traumatic experiences before they were adopted, especially if they were adopted at an older age. In these situations, counseling may be helpful for your child and family.

Are there any special issues related to cross-cultural adoptions?

Especially with the rise in international adoptions, many families have adopted children of other racial or ethnic backgrounds. The racial difference may be obvious, even to young children.

Many parents of international adoptees look for ways of letting their child remain in touch with his or her racial/

ethnic identity—for example, through language, cultural and religious activities.

Parents may hear some insensitive comments regarding the racial differences. As they get older, the children may be the targets of racial prejudice. Be prepared to discuss these issues with your child, including strategies for handling rude or racist comments.

Adoptions by gay or same-sex couples are increasingly common and accepted. Studies suggest that these children have no more social or emotional problems than other children.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- You are considering adopting a child and have questions about mental or physical health issues.
- You have just brought your adopted child home. An initial medical examination and screening is especially important for children adopted from foster care or from other countries.
- You need advice on helping your family and child adjust to their new situation. Talking to a mental health professional or counselor may be helpful.
- You have questions about your child’s health and development (whether he or she is adopted or not!).

Where can I get more information about adoption?

Our office may be able to put you in touch with adoption resources and support in the community.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides a wealth of adoption-related information and resources. Online at www.childwelfare.gov/adoption.