

In Search of Identity

If your teen starts talking about a birth parent search, be supportive while preparing her for all possible outcomes.

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TAGS: [Birth Family](#), [Teens](#)



Has your teen asked to meet his birth parents?

Many adoptive parents become fearful or anxious when the topic comes up, worrying that the stability of their family life will be threatened. But for most teens, a desire to [search](#) (or simply to gather more information) does not mean that their love for — or attachment to — their adoptive parents is diminished. It’s part of a normal developmental process that’s unfolding now.

A Teen’s Inner World

Searching for one’s sense of self, or identity, is the job of all adolescents. But for those who are adopted, the task is more complex: “How can I know who I am without knowing where I came from?” they often ask themselves, and “How will this affect the person I wish to become?”

Teens who express a desire to find their birth parents have most likely already begun an “internal or intrapsychic” search. This means that they’ve started to think more intensely about aspects of their adoption story, wondering who their birth parents are, how they may be [similar](#) (or dissimilar) to each of them, or why they were placed for adoption. They also may be scared of “opening” their adoption and of the emotions and uncertainty this may unearth.

If your child has brought up the notion of a birth parent search, do your best to help her explore her thoughts and feelings. (It’s often difficult for teens to bring up the topic of birth parents because they don’t want to seem disloyal or hurtful.) Beginning a dialogue — and

respecting what your teen has to say — can ease her worries, especially if you convey that you'll be supportive and understanding.

Once you begin a discussion, you may find that the desire to search is actually just a quest for information, or a way to express sadness, anger, or confusion. Even though your child wishes to know more about the circumstances of her adoption, she may not be asking for a face-to-face meeting now.

On the other hand, if your teen wants to search, enlist professional support from a therapist who has experience with adoption-related issues. Adolescent adoptees should prepare for all of the possible search outcomes, including rejection by a birth parent, learning that one has died, realizing that there's a disparity between fantasy and reality, or — in the best-case scenario — building a relationship with and integrating the birth parent into their lives.

Families will also need help in setting appropriate boundaries with a birth family, as well as in guiding their teenager through the search-and-reunion process.

Talking Points

When talking with your teen about his desire to search, steer away from questions that begin with "why." Teens may become defensive in response. Instead, use open-ended questions, such as:

1. If you were to meet your birth parents, what would you like to ask them? What do you want to know?
2. What do you imagine they are like? What are you hoping to find?
3. What do you think your reunion will be like?
4. How do you think they might feel about your desire to meet them?
5. What do you think your relationship will be like once you meet?
6. How can we help you?