

Hearing the Call for Life Story Work with Young People

As the process and experience of fostering and adoption evolves over the years, there is a greater imperative for adoptive parents (as well as foster carers and kinship carers) to enable children entering adolescence to make greater sense and meaning of their lives. The transition through adolescence already presents all children with developmental obstacles and attachment-related challenges. The physiological, psychological, social and neurological changes encountered by adolescents can create a growing loss of control of what is happening to them. Therefore, it is all the more important that young people have the opportunity to experience their carers as wanting to be engaged with them. Being engaged, involves being curious and open to the day to day shifts of mood and trying to *make time* to be with the young child in order to try to maintain a sense of connection. The simple act of sharing food, taking a walk, sitting together on a car journey or sitting with your child before bedtime offers the possibility and understanding their 'inner world' and communicating that you continue to find them rewarding. In many ways, parents of adolescents sometimes need to be opportunistic by being alert to the cues and communications from their children that they need 1:1 time together. It is also often the case that children themselves may not be fully aware of needing time to 'plug in' and be connected with their parents. However, there are signs of pre-occupation and disregulation, such as:

- Behavioral issues at school
- Escalation of use of social media
- Expressions of anger that appear out of proportion to the situation
- Eating issues
- Overall avoidance or withdrawal
- Heightened levels of control
- Sleep disturbance

If as a parent you are able to understand and respond to behavioral cues, then it is important to hold in mind that behind the challenging behavioral responses listed above, one can assume that there will be a valid and legitimate issue driving the behavior.

Social networking is also creating immense challenges for adoptive families and as a rule of thumb, if adopted children are explicitly or implicitly picking up that conversations about their birth family are upsetting or 'out of bounds' it becomes only natural to explore one's identity through other means.

For many fostered or adopted young people, the issue of identity begins to force its way into the foreground of their thinking. The developmental shift towards greater autonomy and forming friendships with those out of the family can create a sense of wondering about one's birth family. It is almost as if the gradual move towards separation from the adoptive family elicits an anxiety or fear that can induce a 'counter-attraction' towards one's birth family. This unconscious pull may be a compensatory reaction that creates an inner sense of 'going to' rather than 'leaving from' (the need for family) and once again may be communicated through acting out or troubled behavior.

One could also speculate that there is a process of needing to resolve 'unfinished business' in relation to one's past in which certain thoughts, fantasies and wonderings continue to intrude upon the adolescent's mind.

Some adoptive parent today find themselves in situations with their teenage children in which subtle questions or statements convey a potential interest about their early life history such as:

" We did a project on our life stories at school today!"

" When was the last time Anne (the birth mother) wrote to me?"

" I've only just realized how many super heroes have been brought up by someone other than their birth parents"

" I had a dream about my birth dad last night....."

" It's funny that the film was made in Liverpool (where the child was born), I didn't think it looked like that"

All of the questions above may point towards an emerging interest for the adolescent in trying to piece together their past life and integrate it into their current life and experience. A task of adoptive parenting is to try to support children in their ongoing experience. It is the adopted person's journey to live with at least 2 families in their hearts and minds: their birth family and their adoptive family. Their story is that (in ways) they are forever part of their adoptive family and a part of their birth family. I have often been inspired by the depth of feeling and intuitive insight shown by young people I have worked with while exploring their life stories. It is important to remember that these difficult histories can offer immense insight into what (and why) the adolescent is feeling in their current lives. Often, parents can help their children to explore any wonderings or curiosity about their birth family by simply encouraging open expression. Many young people enjoy using creative media such as photography, i-tunes playlists, writing/poems, drawing and drama to in exploring their life stories. A number of young people I have worked with have made powerpoint presentations of their life history to show to their parents. If parents struggle with creative expression then there is always the option of contacting a social worker or therapist to further facilitate the process. However, parents may need to 'bear witness' and accept their child's explicit need to make meaning of their lives. It could be a necessary rite of passage!

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