Developmental Issues in Adoption

According to information from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, adoptive parents need to understand the adoption-related developmental changes that occur in individuals which impact on adoption adjustment, including:

- **Infancy:**
  - Children placed as infants generally develop attachments in much the same way, and with the same level of security, as non-adopted children; however, genetic vulnerabilities, adverse prenatal experiences, and adverse early pre-placement experiences can increase the risk of insecure attachments; the older the age at placement and the more severe the previous deprivation, the greater risk of attachment problems.

- **Toddler and Preschool Years:**
  - Most parents begin to share adoption information with their children during this time, and the children themselves begin to use adoption-related language; while cognitive immaturity prevents most children from understanding the meaning and implications of being adopted, their views of adoption at this time usually are quite positive.

- **Middle Childhood**
o As children develop cognitively, they become more aware of the meaning and implications of adoption, which in turn, increases their sensitivity to related loss; children often display ambivalent feelings about adoption at they attempt to cope with adoption-related loss; interest in one’s origins generally increases as well; adjustment problems associated with adoption typically begin to manifest themselves during this period

- Adolescent Years
  o Understanding of adoption, deepens, as does sensitivity to related loss; ambivalence about being adopted is common during this period; teenagers begin to integrate adoption into their emerging sense of self; there is often greater interest in one’s biological origins at this time, as well as initial thoughts and plans related to searching; adjustment problems continue to be seen in many adopted individuals

- Adult Years
  o The role of adoption becomes more stabilized for many people; interest in one’s origins continues and often leads to specific plans for searching for background information and/or birth family members; plans for searching often are triggered by life events such as leaving home, getting married, having children, and/or the death of adoptive parents
For more information on developmental issues in adoption, please see the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute “Policy Perspective: Adoptive Parent Preparation” available at
http://www.adoptioninstitute.org

For further information regarding this article, please contact Dr. Karen Kuehn Howell at the Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 12 Executive Park Drive NE, Atlanta, Georgia, 30329. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at
http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

The Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development is funded in part by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities