

Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler

Children ages 3 to 5 are limited in how much they can understand about adoption. Like all young children, adopted children are naturally curious and may ask many questions. They are also growing and changing rapidly. As their abilities develop, so will their understanding of their place in their families and communities. These early years are a good time for you to start talking about adoption in a positive and relaxed manner. Beginning this practice sooner rather than later will help set the stage for open communication and healthy development as your child grows.

This factsheet is designed to help you understand the impact of adoption on your preschooler's development and provide practical strategies to build a warm and loving relationship with your child based on honesty and trust. This factsheet can serve as a reference during your child's preschool years.

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ADOPTION AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

It is important to understand the typical developmental tasks and needs of preschoolers, as well as how adoption-related experiences may affect them. This will help you better meet your child's needs, promote a closer relationship, and identify and address any potential developmental delays.

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Preschoolers don't need special classes or expensive toys to learn and grow. Simple everyday interactions, such as singing, talking, touching, rocking, and reading, can help create a bond with your child and support healthy growth. Being aware of key milestones and typical behaviors that can surface in young children can help you better understand your child's development and emotions. The following resources offer positive parenting tips, information on safety and health, and more.

- ["Adoption: Developmental Ages and Stages"](#), a webinar from the Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation
- [Preschoolers \(3-5 Years of Age\)—Developmental Milestones](#), a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) webpage
- [Preschooler Development](#), a National Library of Medicine webpage
- [Understanding Developmental Stages](#) and [Adoption and Developmental Stages](#), two sections on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website

EFFECTS OF EARLY EXPERIENCES ON DEVELOPMENT

Children's brains grow rapidly during the first years of life and are shaped by their experiences, both good and bad. When the brain is stimulated in positive ways, connections related to those experiences form (for example, talking and singing with and reading to your child helps develop the connections related to language). Negative life experiences—such as maltreatment, involvement with the child welfare system, and institutionalization—also impact brain functioning and are risk factors for cognitive, emotional, social, health, and developmental delays. They may also cause sensory-processing issues, where children can be either sensory seeking or sensory avoiding as a means of calming their nervous systems.

GAPS IN DEVELOPMENT

Children who spent a lot of time in an institution and/or who experienced maltreatment may not have learned how to communicate well or express their feelings. Young children in institutional care (e.g., orphanages) are at risk for delays in mental, social, and physical growth. They also may have challenges processing sensory information or with balance and movement. If this was your child's experience, your child's developmental age may fall short of his or her chronological age, and it may be helpful to think of your child as being younger. This reduces expectations that can frustrate a child or damage his or her self-esteem.

While access to your child's background and medical history is essential, detailed information is not always readily available for a variety of reasons. For help in retrieving important details about your child, consult Information Gateway's [Obtaining Background Information on Your Prospective Adopted Child](#) and [Providing Adoptive Parents With Information About Adoptees and Their Birth Families](#).

If you notice significant delays, loss of previous skills, or extreme behavior, contact your child's doctor. You should also report if your child has excessive reactions to touch, light, sounds, and motion. A medical professional can help assess your child's development and determine if serious delays exist. Under Federal law, a young child who might have a physical, sensory, mental, or emotional disability is guaranteed the right to an assessment. If your child receives Medicaid, screening is free through the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment program. If you disagree with your professional, seek a second opinion or press for further testing.

If your child is found to have a disability, he or she might be eligible for early childhood special education. This can include speech therapy, occupational or physical therapy, and counseling. Some services can be provided at home, while others may be offered at a child development center. For information about early developmental and behavioral screening, visit the U.S. Department of Education's webpage [Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive: Promoting Early Developmental and Behavioral Screening](#).

For more information, see the [CDC webpage on developmental disabilities](#) and the Information Gateway webpage, [Postpermanency Services for Children With Disabilities](#).

BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS

Preschool-age adopted children, like all young children, may wrestle with a host of behavioral and mental health issues that impact their behaviors and emotions. Understanding the experiences and emotions behind the behaviors can help you respond appropriately and, in turn, help your child. It is important not to take these behaviors personally but also to understand that how you react to a child's behaviors and emotions can cause them to escalate or calm down. This section explores some of the experiences and conditions that can trigger certain emotions or behaviors.

ADOPTION-RELATED LOSS AND GRIEF

Without the proper interventions or counseling, children who experience separation from their birth parents may feel an unresolved sense of grief that can persist into adulthood. Even children adopted as infants will experience grief about the loss of their birth parents and a potential life with them. These feelings may recur as they age, particularly at milestones in life, even when the adoption was a positive experience. Unresolved grief can affect a child's emotional and mental development.

Children adopted as preschoolers often feel sad or angry about their separation from the people they remember. This may include birth family members, foster parents, and/or brothers and sisters. Young children may experience grief and need to mourn and work through loss. You can help your child by answering questions honestly, accepting their feelings, and helping

them remember important people in their past. It is important to accept sadness as a normal part of a child's coming to terms with adoption, and you should avoid rushing him or her through it. If, however, your preschooler seems sad or angry much of the time, seek help. Extreme behaviors or moods (control issues, withdrawal, apathy, extreme fearfulness, poor appetite, aggressiveness) may result from unresolved grief or may be signs of untreated trauma. If your child shows these behaviors, look for an adoption-competent therapist or counselor who specializes in young children. Ask other adoptive parents for recommendations whenever possible. In many cases, anger and difficult behaviors subside in time, after children have vented or worked through their emotions.

Learning to be comfortable with your own feelings about adoption and why you chose to adopt (e.g., infertility), and being honest about your sadness over missing out on your child's earliest experiences, can help to create a positive and significant bond with your adopted child. You may acknowledge your own sadness by saying something like, "I'm sad, too, that I didn't get to be with you when you were just a little baby, but I'm happy that your birth mother (and father) had you and that you came to live with me, and now we can always be together."

CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT

If your child experienced early neglect or abuse, that experience could limit his or her physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Often children can catch up to peers, but in some cases development is permanently affected. Children whose

Related Information Gateway Resources

- [Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists](#) (Factsheets for Families)
- [The Impact of Adoption](#) (Factsheets for Families)
- [Helping Adopted Children Cope With Grief and Loss](#) (webpage)

early lives are harsh and/or unpredictable may not be able to develop the trust needed for healthy coping skills. Sexual abuse can have an especially negative impact on young children by altering a child's understanding of appropriate roles and relationships. Physical abuse and harsh physical punishment may affect how a child responds to discipline.

TRAUMA

Trauma is an emotional response to a stressful experience (such as child abuse, neglect, institutionalization, and multiple placements) that threatens or causes harm. Depending on individual temperament, resilience, and the nature of the trauma experience, trauma can overwhelm a child's natural ability to cope and interfere with physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health and development. Some of the signs of trauma in preschool-aged children include irritability (fussiness), tantrums, startling easily or being difficult to calm, repeating traumatic events in play or conversation, and delays in reaching a variety of milestones. See Information Gateway's [Helping Children Address Past Trauma](#) webpage for related resources.

Helping Children Overcome Trauma

Trauma can have a significant sensory impact on young children and affect their behaviors and how they relate to others. Harmony Family Center, a Tennessee-based agency offering evidence-based therapeutic services to children and families, created a [developmental timeline with specific sensory interventions](#) (pp. 51–59) that parents and caregivers can use based on a child's developmental stage, behavior, mood, or needs. For example, if the child appears tired or underresponsive, a hand massage or music and movement games might help. If the child appears fidgety or unfocused, activities such as "wheelbarrow walks," deep-breathing exercises, or blowing bubbles might help. If the child is kicking, hitting, or throwing objects, activities such as running, throwing appropriate items (e.g., beanbags), stomping on rubber stress balls, or playing with water balloons can help redirect things. These are just a few of the several behaviors and moods and proposed sensory interventions that are included. Below are some additional resources:

- [Harmony at Home](#) is another Harmony Family Center tool that shares practical tips and activities to help with parenting challenges (e.g., a trauma-responsive approach to challenging behaviors, sensory regulation, therapeutic parenting for traumatized children, story-time suggestions).
- [Pathways to Permanence 2: Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma and Loss](#) is an eight-session curriculum from ACT: An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare Professionals developed by Kinship Center, a member of Seneca Family of Agencies in California.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics created a [trauma guide](#) that includes links to helpful resources such as [Parenting After Trauma: Understanding Your Child's Needs—A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#), a factsheet that discusses the impact of early trauma and how to help your adopted child cope, and [When Things Aren't Perfect: Caring for Yourself and Your Children](#), a factsheet for parents that explains how early experiences can affect children emotionally and physically and impact behaviors and health.

Trauma exposure may not always be obvious. Ask your adoption professional if a trauma screening or formal mental health assessment was done, and request one if not. Discuss the availability of trauma-focused treatment. Be sure an adoption-competent practitioner is used. See Information Gateway's [Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists](#) for more information.

INSECURE ATTACHMENT

Children who have experienced separation from their family, multiple placements, institutionalization, maltreatment, and/or involvement with the child welfare system may also exhibit problems that reflect a lack of healthy attachment to a caregiver. This can affect social and emotional development, including difficulty with social relationships, struggles with emotional regulation, aggression, low self-esteem, and depression.

You can use knowledge of your child's history and developmental needs to help enhance his or her attachment to you. Making time to offer your child undivided attention, nurturing, and physical closeness can help build attachment and trust. This is particularly important for children who have experienced traumatic life events because positive, healthy relationships with supportive and loving caregivers increase the odds of recovery.

[Nurturing and Attachment](#), an Information Gateway webpage, and [Attachment Issues With Adoption](#), a section on the Creating a Family website, provide additional information.

ADOPTION-RELATED FEARS AND FANTASIES

Young children who have already lost one home might be very fearful of losing another. This may lead to increased insecurity. Fears may take the form of sleeping or eating difficulties, nightmares, separation difficulties, nervousness, or increased allergies and illnesses, but there are ways you can build your child's physical comfort level and emotional security. As a means of self-protection to stave off additional hurt or loss, children may also push parents away or severely test limits to see if parents will reject them. Most children are unaware they are doing this. There are several steps you can take to curb this self-defensive behavior:

- **Build a safe environment.** Install nightlights, buy soft cuddly clothing, prepare favorite foods, and give your child extra attention. Try to keep important toys and clothes from your child's past. Establishing consistent routines and rules will also help your child feel safe and secure.
- **Let your child know that you will always be there.** Reassure your child that your family and home are permanent. If your child was

adopted past infancy, he or she may experience separation anxiety. When you leave the house, make sure to point out that your departure is temporary. Offer something of yours, like a watch or bracelet, to get back from your child when you return. This helps a child believe that you really will come home.

- **Acknowledge fantasies.** Many children fantasize about an alternate family life. Some children dream of a "real" mother who never reprimands or a father who serves ice cream for dinner. The fantasies of an adopted child may be more frequent or intense because another set of parents really exists. Accept your child's pretending or wishing without defensiveness.
- **Give your child permission to talk about birth family members and/or wonder about family they have not met.** You can even take the lead by saying, "I wonder whether your birth mom or birth dad likes peanut butter as much as you do" or "I wonder who you got your clear blue eyes from." Teach your preschooler that it is okay to care about both adopted parents and birth parents.
- **Introduce pets and/or encourage interaction with animals.** Interaction with animals can be very therapeutic. Something as simple as holding or petting an animal can help ease anxiety and loneliness. Pets can also help teach children the importance of trust and responsibility, as well as how to regulate emotion (if a child wants to pet a cat, he or she will learn to be calm and not scare the cat away). Children may also discover that once they are able to handle a pet, they are better able to manage their own lives. Monitor early pet experiences as some children may not know how to behave around animals, and this ensures the safety of both your child and the animal.

DAYCARE/PRESCHOOL ISSUES

Aside from parents and immediate family, school is often the most consistent and predictable part of a child's life. So, for children who may have experienced traumatic life events, such as child maltreatment, separation from loved ones, and/or multiple moves, a structured classroom environment that includes interaction with supportive adults can help children develop resilience and improve in other emotional, behavioral, and social areas. However, parents may need to help school staff be more aware of and sensitive to the needs of adoptive families. Certain assignments may be difficult for adopted children, such as bringing baby photos to school. Ask that adoption be included in materials and discussions. Consider donating appropriate picture books about adoption, and help teachers learn positive adoption language

DISCIPLINE CONSIDERATIONS

The purpose of discipline is to teach, reteach, and assist children in developing their own internal controls. Discipline should take into account your child's abilities, learning styles, and family history. There are many resources available to help parents learn and use positive discipline. This section provides information about a few specific strategies that may be particularly useful for parents of adopted children.

Parents with children who have been abused or neglected need to be especially careful. Physical punishment and threats of physical punishment should not be used as forms of discipline. See Information Gateway's [*Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect*](#) for information and resources on disciplining a child who has been maltreated.

ESTABLISH ROUTINES AND RULES

Young children thrive on consistency and routine. Routines and rules help children begin to organize their worlds and regulate their own emotions; they can be especially helpful for children whose worlds previously felt chaotic. Children are generally more cooperative and secure when they know what to expect.

Preschool children need just a few simple rules to promote child safety and family harmony. From the moment your child joins your family, establish the household routines that will ease everyday life. Routines for meals and bedtime are especially important. Be patient when explaining and demonstrating your rules and routines. Be cautious about varying the routines until you are sure your child is used to them and feels secure. For example, it might be in your child's and your family's best interests to decline a dinner invitation at another's family home until a routine is established.

USE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE REWARDS AND CONSEQUENCES

Children respond better to praise and positive attention and rewards than to scolding or correcting. Preschoolers love being told that they have done something well. Praise reinforces positive behaviors, and children will seek more chances for praise. Try to let your child know ahead of time of what the consequences of specific actions will be so they have a chance to choose the desired behavior.

Is your discipline negative or positive?

Instead of threatening, for example, "You can't go to the park tomorrow if you don't pick up your toys," do you try to motivate your child by saying "Why don't you pick up your toys so we can go to the park together tomorrow"? Can you think of another way to encourage your child?

Do you warn, for example, "No TV later if you're not quiet while I make this important phone call"? or do you encourage this way: "I need to make an important phone call. I know I can count on you to be quiet so we can watch TV later"? Can you think of another way to use positive encouragement?

Be sure to notice and praise *specific* behaviors. For example: "You did a great job waiting your turn" is more effective than "You're a good girl." In fact, nonspecific labels such as "good girl" may backfire with adopted children who were neglected or abused. Their self-esteem may be so low that they cannot believe they are good or worthy.

As preschoolers mature, they begin to see the connection between cause and effect. With this ability, they are ready to learn through both *natural* and *logical* consequences. Natural consequences occur without parental intervention. The natural consequence of leaving a toy outside overnight might be that it gets rusty or stolen. Logical consequences are determined by the parent. For example, a logical consequence of running into the street may be to come inside for the rest of the afternoon.

When using logical consequences, it is important to be extra sensitive to a child who has experienced poverty or neglect. For such a child, the loss of a toy might seem so tragic that it interferes with the lesson to be learned. Coach, explain, and give second chances. If your child was prenatally exposed to alcohol, he or she may have extra difficulty understanding the connections between actions and consequences. Work with a knowledgeable therapist or parent coach to develop an appropriate discipline strategy.

Use *Time In* Versus *Time Out*

Many parents and teachers of preschoolers like to use a brief period of isolation to help a child regain self-control. This is known as *time out*. For children who have developed a secure attachment to others, a few minutes of *time out* are often effective. These children don't like to be alone, and they will improve their behavior quickly so that they can rejoin the group. If you use *time out* for your 3- to 5-year-old, keep it short, and remain in sight of your child.

The *time out* method is not, however, the best approach for children who have been neglected, abused, or institutionalized. The main challenge in parenting these children is to help them form healthy attachments. In these cases, use the *time-in* method. *Time in* is useful because it avoids distancing kids from parents, playmates, and the rest of the family. When your preschooler's behavior indicates out-of-control emotions, take him or her aside and say: "Time in. You need to stay right here with me until you are ready to join the group." Keep the child physically close to you until he or she is calmer. If the child is extremely agitated, you may need to sit him or her securely on your lap. This will send the message, "You are having a hard time with control. I am here to help you." ([Taking a Time-In With Your Child](#), a how-to guide developed for parents by Rainbow Kids, an adoption and child advocacy group, offers useful tips.) Attending parenting classes or reading parenting books specific to adoption, attachment, or children exposed to trauma also will be helpful.

The Information Gateway website hosts a section on [Parent Education Programs](#) that offers helpful resources, and the Center for Parenting Education provides related articles, including "[Limit Setting vs. Discipline: What's the Difference](#)" and "[Consequences for Preschoolers](#)". See also the [Parenting Adopted Children With Challenging Behavior](#) webpage on the Creating a Family website. The Harmony Family Center shares practical tips and activities in its [Harmony at Home](#) resource to help with discipline challenges in children dealing with trauma (e.g., a trauma-responsive approach to challenging behaviors, sensory regulation, therapeutic parenting for traumatized children, story-time suggestions).

TALKING OPENLY ABOUT ADOPTION

Projecting an attitude of normalcy and comfort surrounding adoption will help your child explore his or her own feelings and fears. With young children, how you say something matters as much—or more—than what you say. Stay relaxed and matter of fact. Your tone of voice is important. Parents who tense up when the topic of adoption is raised may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. Similarly, keeping information “secret” implies that adoption is negative, bad, or scary. Remember, it’s okay if you don’t know the answer to your child’s questions—just be honest and tell them that—but it’s never okay to make up details about your child’s past. This section provides strategies to help you communicate effectively with your preschooler.

Preschoolers love stories. Chances are your child will want to hear their own adoption story—again and again. These years are a great time to practice approaching the topic comfortably and honestly. Preschoolers are limited in how much they can understand about adoption, so simple explanations will work best. Be concrete and use props, such as dolls, simple drawings, and story books. Remember that young children may not be ready to hear all the details regarding their adoption, particularly upsetting details relating to their early treatment or their birth family.

Keep it simple. Preschoolers generally feel good about having been adopted but may still have questions. At this age, they are beginning to question where babies come from. The most important idea for the preschooler to grasp is that he or she was born to another set of parents and now lives with your family. (Some adopted preschoolers have thought that they were not born.) You can help your child understand this idea using clear and simple explanations. (“Babies grow in a special safe place inside their birth mothers’ bodies.”) Don’t worry if they initially reject the explanation.

Word choice matters. Children this age are also self-centered and concrete in their thinking. They often blame themselves for life events. Language is an important consideration whenever discussing adoption, both with your child and in response to other people’s questions when your child is present. Tell the adoption story in words that will help him or her build a positive identity, calm fears, and understand his or her personal story.

How to Talk About Adoption

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING WORD CHOICES:



SAY THIS

- ✓ Birth mother/father
Biological mother/father
First mother/father
- ✓ Mother/father
- ✓ We could not have a baby *born to us*.
- ✓ Your birth parents had grown-up problems, so they could not take care of a child.
- ✓ They *made a plan* for you to be adopted.
- ✓ The child was adopted.



NOT THAT

- ✗ "Real" mother/father
"Natural" mother/father
- ✗ "Adoptive" mother/father
- ✗ We could not *have our own* baby.
- ✗ Your birth parents were not able to take care of you.
- ✗ They *gave you up* for adoption.
- ✗ The child is adopted.

[Talking About Adoption](#), a section on the Information Gateway website, offers several helpful resources. See also the article from Creating a Family, "[Talking About Adoption Part 1: Talking With 0-5 Year Olds](#)," which is the first of the four-part series, *Talking With Children About Adoption*.

CREATE A LIFEBOOK

A "lifebook" contains the background and story of your child's life. It is a sort of personal history book, where your child can collect pictures of important people, places, and events, as well as objects and other memorabilia that have a personal meaning and help answer, "Who am I?" See the [Lifebooks section](#) of the Information Gateway website for resources, tips, and samples.

SUPPORT BIRTH FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

When children have contact with their birth parents, siblings, or other relatives, it can have great benefits for the adoption constellation—the adoptee, the adoptive family, and members of the birth family. The child's best interests should always guide when and how contact occurs. Information Gateway's [Maintaining Connections With Birth Families in Adoption](#) webpage offers several related resources for establishing and preserving these important relationships.

HELP YOUR CHILD WITH POSTADOPTION CONTACT

Adoptive parents sometimes worry about maintaining relationships with the birth family (i.e., Will their child prefer the birth parent? Will the child reject the adoptive family? Can the child become confused about having two families?). As a result, adoptive parents may initially be hesitant to maintain contact. It is important to always consider the best interests of your child in these relationships and consult your adoption professional for guidance. Contact with the birth family helps a child develop his or her identity, build self-esteem, and feel more—not less—attached to the adoptive family.

Preschool-age children have limited understanding of their relationship to their birth parents (e.g., one little boy explained, "Susan is my *birthday mother* because she comes to my birthday parties.") Help your preschooler see that these other parents or relatives are an important part of their lives. Speak of them respectfully and comment on their positive qualities. Seeing that you value his or her birth relatives or previous caregivers will help your child feel better about him- or herself and closer to you. Children attach and bond with those who love and care for them daily, and relationships with birth families need not be threatening to adoptive parents. Information Gateway's [Maintaining Connections With Birth Families in Adoption](#) webpage provides related resources.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS IN RACIALLY OR CULTURALLY DIVERSE ADOPTIONS

In racially or culturally diverse adoptions, cultivating relationships with individuals from your child's background, and connections where possible and appropriate, may be particularly important in helping a child develop a positive self-identity. If your child has no known birth family member contacts, show your interest in trying to find as much information about your child's background as you can. If adopted internationally, help your child learn about his or her country of origin—its culture, history, language, native foods and manner of dress, and current events. Talk about the possibility of a future family trip there, if financially possible.

If your child is from a different race or heritage than you, help them to build relationships with individuals who share their background. This will help provide them with positive role models and build healthy self-esteem and identity.

Resources for racially and culturally diverse families are available on Information Gateway's [Adoption by Family Type: Racially and Culturally Diverse Families](#) webpage. See also Information Gateway's [Parenting in Racially and Culturally Diverse Adoptive Families](#) and the National Council for Adoption's *Adoption Advocate* issue on [Proactive Engagement: The Adoptive Parent's Responsibility When Parenting a Child of a Different Race](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources may be helpful for adoptive parents of young children:

- The [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#) provides resources for adoptive parents.
- The [National Council for Adoption](#) provides resources for adoptive parents.
- [Parenting Infants and Young Children](#) is an Information Gateway webpage that provides information and resources for adoptive parents of young children.
- [Parent Education to Strengthen Families and Prevent Child Maltreatment](#) is an Information Gateway issue brief that explores parent education.

- [Postadoption Services and Support](#) is an Information Gateway webpage that provides information and examples of postadoption services.
- [Support for Parents Who Adopt From Foster Care](#) is an AdoptUSKids webpage that focuses on understanding the emotional needs of children who have experienced foster care.

CONCLUSION

It is never too soon to help your child understand adoption and the role it plays in both of your lives while also increasing your comfort level with—and sensitivity to—potential related issues. The preschool years offer a valuable opportunity to nurture a parent-child bond based on honesty and trust. With a few adjustments, these early years can provide the foundation for healthy development and a warm and loving parent-child relationship.

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