

Understanding the Adoptive Family Life Cycle

“Adoptive families have a different cycle of development than other families,” said Cheryl Griffin, CSSMV Program Manager for Counseling and Community Services. “We help adoptive parents understand that adopted children have their own developmental tasks. And as they write their life scripts, it can lead to unique challenges for the family.”

Adoptions today are not all in the traditional model of only infants or placements from foreign countries. Three-quarters of adoptions are domestic, and many involve older children. CSSMV works with many traditional adoptive families, but also with foster parents who are applying to adopt a child in their care, or grandparents or other relatives raising children. The opioid crisis has led to many children being displaced or shuffled from family to family.

Griffin said that some parents delay telling children they were adopted, but she recommends that adopted children be told the truth early and in terms they can understand at their age level. “Today’s parents are much more open to not hiding things, so it is more prevalent and accepted to be up-front about adoption,” said Griffin. “The essential emotional environment parents communicate is empathy, acceptance, and security: ‘I understand you.’ ‘You’re ok.’ and ‘I will help you feel safe.’”

If children do not know the truth, they may substitute fantasies, some of which can be exaggerated and even harmful. However, the truth needs to be appropriate for their stage of development. Throughout the cycle, parents must continue to build trust with the child.

Parents also need to remember that if and when a child desires to search for a



connection with his or her birth parents, it is not a rejection of the adoptive parents or a sign that their efforts are not appreciated. Children need to know about their past to better affirm their present and future.

The adoptive family life cycle goes through several stages. At age 3-7, children do not really understand what “adoption” means. Descriptions about a baby coming from mommy’s tummy, but in their case, a different mommy, can help let the child know he or she joined the family differently but in a positive way.

By age 7-9, children are learning to see themselves in regards to time - past, present, and future. They may be timid or have anxieties because their stories are different than those of other children.

Around the age of 9-12, children may have fantasies about being rescued or having other siblings. They may be thinking “what if I had a different life.” It is important that parents and children continue to have open dialogue about issues they might have.

By age 12-16, all children are facing normal teenage identity issues. Families may see increased conflict and ambivalent loyalties. Children may express anxiety or anger or a desire to search for birth parents.

Adoptive families have some unique challenges, and CSSMV’s counselors can help.

Parents must reassure them that they are safe and loved unconditionally.

“We find that most of our families seek help at varying stages of development,” said Griffin. “There may be a turbulent period and then we don’t see them for a while as things are going smoothly. Then as they enter a new phase, issues may surface and we help them again. Some common signs of trouble include behavioral acting out, academic problems, mood swings, or depression.”

As they get older, adopted children may have more challenges in fitting into the social narrative that surrounds them. “Our staff is dedicated to empowering kids to feel good about their stories,” said Griffin. “We understand that these families have unique challenges, and we’re here to help both parents and children on their life journeys.”

For more information about services for adoptive families, call CSSMV’s Dayton Counseling Center at (937) 296-1007.