Adoption and Life's Milestones

Identity, Connection, and Growth: what adult adoptees want social workers and families to know

Renée Murphy and Angela Christianson · Families Rising 2026 · adopteeresearch.org

Three things to remember

- **Adoption doesn't finish in childhood.** It comes back across a whole life, and a lot of those moments are predictable.
- **Kids stop asking about their adoption to protect you.** Bring it up first, and bring it up more than once. Keep bringing it up.
- **Wanting to search doesn't mean something went wrong at home.** 14 of the 15 adults in our study searched, including the one with the happiest adoption.

Moments you can see coming

Days on the calendar	Birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, adoption day, holidays
Big life changes	Starting school, puberty, moving, leaving home, a first serious relationship, having a baby
Things between people	A new sibling or placement, a breakup, a parent getting sick or dying, contact from birth family
Things that make them notice	A family tree assignment, a genetics unit, a TV show, a friend's DNA kit, meeting another adoptee
The body and health	Medical forms with blanks, a new diagnosis, looking in the mirror and not seeing anyone

Coming up for us in the next few months: _____

What you might see

- **Fine on the outside, guarded inside.** Good grades, no trouble, and nobody knows what they're carrying.
- **Leaving first.** Ending friendships suddenly, pushing you away before a move or a change, picking a fight before a visit.
- **Earning their place.** Always helpful, apologizing frequently, anxious when there's nothing to do.
- **A hard time every year with no clear reason.** The birthday, the holidays, the same month every year.
- **They stop asking.** Quiet about adoption doesn't mean done with it.

Words that keep the door open

Instead of	Try
“You're so lucky.”	“What's being adopted like for you right now?”
“Why do you want to know?”	“I'm glad you asked. Let's see what we can find out.”
“But we love you.”	“Tell me more.”
“Your birth mom must have loved you very much.”	“What do you wonder about her?”
“Tell me about your family.”	“Who are the important people in your life?”

When it lands wrong, go back: *“I've been thinking about what I said when you asked about your birth mom. I don't think I said it well. Can we try again?”*

For foster and kinship families

- **Don't make them choose.** Kids can love more than one family, and loving one doesn't take anything from the other.
- **Hold on to the story.** Life books, photos, names, letters, medical information, and the reasons for each move. They will want these later.

Where to find other adoptees

Adoptees Connect: peer support groups across the U.S. **Adoptee Mentoring Society:** adult adoptee mentors for young adoptees. **Research:** adopteeresearch.org