

The adopted family

*Information and guidance for adoptive parents
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Introduction

Three small books with the titles «You and me», «Into the world together» and «Interaction, independence and co-operation» have now been produced as a source of inspiration and help in the development of positive interaction between children and parents. These books try to show how positive experiences shared with children can be reinforced and developed in many everyday life situations. In addition to these books, which all parents will find useful to read, we have wanted to produce a supplement with particular guidance for adoptive parents.

But surely adopted children are just like all other children? And surely adoptive parents will experience the same challenges, joys and sorrows as all other parents? To this we have to say that living with children is mostly the same whatever way they came into the family. All the same, becoming a parent by adoption will be different in many aspects from becoming a biological parent. Adoptive parents have a «different kind of pregnancy», during which they have to prepare themselves for taking on a number of factors biological parents do not have to contend with: the child has usually lived for a shorter or longer period with the first set of parents who both genetically and psycho-socially will have had an influence on the child's further development. The child generally comes from a different culture and hence in appearance alone usually differs from the parents. The adopted child will have experienced separation from close providers of care, and may also have started life with negative experiences with regard to malnutrition and lack of stimulation, in some cases also physical or psychological neglect.

A start to life like this will put extra demands on the parents and will bring about particular challenges in their interaction with the child. When faced with these challenges, parents of an adopted child seldom have role models in their closest family. Adoptive parents must themselves go out actively and seek other people's experiences, this may be in adoption associations, discussion groups or the literature.

All experience shows that adoptive parents are very interested in acquiring this kind of information, and this book goes through the particular areas where parents of an adopted child need to learn new skills which may not be required of biological parents. The book indicates phases in the child's development which may be especially challenging and situations where a number of adopted families will need to seek outside advice and assistance.

Meanwhile, it is important to point out right at the start that adopted children are not a homogenous group. Although they have all had a particular start to life, they will develop differently as children, young people and adults. It is important to remember this difference when the children in this book are referred to by the general term «adopted children».

It is also important to emphasise that most of the adopted children who grow up in Norway seem to get on very well. However, it is the problems related to being and having an adopted child we are primarily dealing with in this book. This does not mean that everyone will experience the problems described here. But children do need security, care and support throughout their childhood. This book is meant to be a source of inspiration and help to develop positive interaction between parents and children in adoptive families. The themes that are dealt with can be gone through individually. They can also be used as a basis for exchanging experiences and viewpoints in a group of adoptive parents.

1. Some general words about adoption

Adoption or long-term fostering are familiar phenomena with long traditions in society. Up to about 30 years ago, adoption in Norway was synonymous with adoption from within the country's borders. There were many Norwegian children who could not grow up with their parents and who were given up for adoption.

Today there are just a few Norwegian born children who are adopted. The development of new forms of contraception and better social and economic circumstances for unmarried mothers has reduced the number of children who are available for adoption. Since the 1970s it has become more and more usual to adopt children from a different ethnic background. Apart from step-child adoptions, adoption in Norway today is almost synonymous with adoption from overseas.

Adopting children has for a long time been considered an acceptable way of creating a family. The authorities and adoption associations have put a lot of work into ensuring that children are placed in good and loving homes where the parents respect the child's background and individuality. At the time adoption from overseas started, the population of this country was fairly homogenous in terms of ethnic origin. Today this is no longer so; society is now much more multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. This will affect the childhood conditions for children adopted from overseas in different ways.



The role of the adoptive parents

Is adopting a child the same as giving birth to a child? This is a question many adoptive parents both ask themselves and are asked. It is quite natural for adoptive parents to compare their parental role with the equivalent role for biological parents, because this is the circumstance most people know best and is most usual. There are also many similarities between giving birth and adopting a child, particularly perhaps the joy and excitement of having a child. But there are, at the same time, quite major differences between adoptive and biological parenthood. Adoptive parents do not have the same experiences of pregnancy and birth, and they do not pass their genes on to the child. On the contrary, they receive a child from a different culture with an unknown genetic make-up. It would perhaps be better if adoptive parents recognised to a greater extent that there is a difference, as it would then be easier for them to talk openly about their child's background and origins.

In fact, research shows that recognition of these differences creates the best basis for providing good developmental conditions for adopted children. In this way, openness between the parents and the adopted child becomes one of the corner stones of emotional closeness and genuineness in the interaction between them. However this does not mean that adopting a child is not an equally great experience as giving birth to a child. It is just a different experience which many adoptive parents feel is equally strong as giving birth. A statement from a mother who has both adopted and biological children illustrates this:

«It has been just as great an experience for me. The structure around has of course been quite different, but you have the same feeling as you have when you have given birth to a baby. I have no doubt in my mind that you actually physically and psychologically give birth to the child the moment you get him or her. You actually feel it the moment you know that it is your child you are holding in your arms.»

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 95)

The adopted child's start in life

Like all other children, the adoptive child likes to be told about how he or she started life. Thinking about herself as little, listening to Mummy's and Daddy's stories about her, is fun and exciting. Whether or not adoptive parents have concrete information about the child's start in life, they can still tell stories about her birth and early life. It can be a positive thing to reflect that everyone has been through a biological birth.

Modern infant research tells us that even immediately after birth, the child is capable of establishing contact and bonding to close providers of care.



The child is completely dependant on having providers of care who meet his need to establish and maintain social interaction. In this interaction, the child follows carefully the adults' eye movements and gestures, and gradually the child responds to his mother's or father's reactions with movements and gurgling noises. The child can also pause, turn his head to one side and rest from the demands of this contact, wait for a response from the adult, and then continue the interaction. These seeds of communication start growing right from the first days and

continue through the whole of the first year of life.

After a while, the child is able to recognise the voices of her mother, father and other close providers of care. She can also recognise smells, and it has been proven that even newly born infants prefer the smell of their own mother's milk to others'. The familiar voice, smell, way of being held and comforted all help to give the child a sense of security. The child experiences that providers of care keep coming back, and in this way they are predictable. It is through this first contact that the child gets a growing sense of self-worth which plays a part in establishing identity. The predictability of care will also give the child a feeling of continuity, that things are linked together: «When my tummy hurts and I cry, that kind voice comes, the one that gives me milk and comforts me.» The child begins to expect that something will happen after a particular event: «When Mummy talks to me in that high, loving voice, it means she is going to pick me up and change me.» From an early age, the child makes an active effort to understand events, people and sensory impressions in meaningful connections. The adult helps the child in this process, and in this way stimulates the child's ability to understand the world around. The understanding of time, of concepts like before and now, are also linked to the experience of continuity.

To begin with, the child cannot differentiate between the different feelings that arise inside him. It is through co-operation with a caring person that the child learns to distinguish hunger from the unpleasant sensation of a wet nappy, for example. By naming, explaining, giving attention and care, the adult helps the child get to know his inner needs and outer demands. Some children eat too much, wet themselves, hurt themselves and do not cry because they have not learnt to recognise their own body signals. They do not actually feel that their stomach is full or that they are going to urinate and so need an adult to help them. The adult could say for example: «What do you think your tummy says now? Listen carefully and see if it has had enough food», «You have had two glasses of juice, -feel whether you need to go to the toilet now». Even children of the age of ten can have difficulties listening to their own body signals. This may be because they have been more interested in understanding what is around them and adults have not helped them perceive and understand their own body signals.

Many children can seem fussy, inquisitive and noisy because they do not have a clear understanding of how the world around them works. They put all sorts of strange things into the first post box they come across or play intensively with the car's windscreen wiper. Parents are often quick to correct this by saying something like: «Don't do that!». If instead we do things together with the child, like bending down and trying to peep into the post box, or carefully trying to find out how the windscreen wiper actually works, we can give the child a positive response to her curiosity. At the same time we can show that there is meaning and logic in the thing she is interested in.

What happens when contact with the biological mother is broken?

Most of the children adopted from abroad are still small when they come to their new parents. But there are also a number of children who are somewhat older when they come. Although these children have some common characteristics, each one is a unique individual with his or her own experiences with early providers of care. Some of the children may have lived with their biological mother for a few months or years, others may have been separated from their mother immediately after birth.

Separation from his mother or from other care-givers can affect an infant, even though he seems to have got over the experience and has become attached to other care-givers. Research shows that babies as young as six months show signs of disturbance when they are moved from the people taking care of them. We also know that even very small children react to changes in their surroundings, sounds, smells, rhythms. What happens when the familiar smell of mother or other providers of care, the familiar, comforting voice is no longer there? Or if the smell and voice have come and gone arbitrarily, without taking consideration of the child's signals? Or if it has never been there at all,

but has been replaced by ever changing smells and voices, perhaps also from other children, whom he cannot establish contact with? Then the child will feel confused. He can become apathetic, dejected, or may actively try to fill the emptiness around him with constant movements, crying and restlessness. The world is no longer predictable, it may even be frightening. The child does not understand these changes and this can create fear and confusion.

Both young and older children can have difficulties understanding why their mother or other early care-givers are no longer there, even though the care they have had has not been satisfactory. In an attempt to understand why this separation took place, children right down to pre-school age can feel they are responsible for what has happened. The child can believe that there is something about her that has led to the circumstances around the adoption and for that reason, she may feel bad and inadequate. Young children often start with themselves when they try to understand the world around them. The adopted child will therefore have a need to find her own explanations for why she was adopted. Children and parents will approach this theme in different ways at different ages and in different life situations.

When outside circumstances create pain in the child, he may also protest and refuse to accept what is happening with him. This can result in adults finding him difficult and they may react negatively to his behaviour. It is easy to get into a vicious circle of negative attention. The child keeps hearing: «Don't do that!» and is often told off or given another form of punishment. The child's difficult reactions and behaviour may be a way of drawing the attention of the people around him to the fact that something is hurting. Feelings like fear, inadequacy, guilt and shame may be hidden behind a facade of anger, violent reactions and motor unrest. It is important to remember that these reactions can also be a sign of vitality and strength, and not least a hope of being heard, seen and accepted once and for all. The challenge lies in helping the child find other ways of expressing pain and frustration.

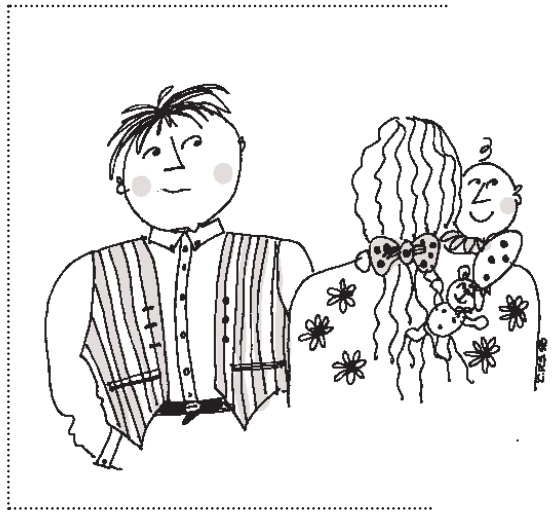
The first attachment

Attachment means that one, two or several people establish an emotional bond between them. They «bind» themselves together. This bonding ensures security and safety for defenceless offspring in both the animal and the human world. In the longer term, confidence in other people is developed. Confidence is a fundamental condition for all learning and socialisation. If the child has managed to become attached, she will develop confidence in other adults and a feeling of self-worth. This will give the child greater psychological strength so that she is able to endure adversities and external stress factors.

Attachment grows along with the social interaction between parents and children. Newly born babies often start this interaction the moment they express discomfort. When the mother or other givers of

care respond to this and meet the child's needs, the child usually calms down. Satisfaction gives a feeling of well-being and security which increases the bonding with the person who meets the child's needs. Although this is something we can see most clearly in babies, it is a circle which repeats itself throughout life.

It is important that the adult is aware of the child's needs by trying to give them substance and helping to satisfy them, whether they are physical, like hunger, or psychological as when a child tries to get an adult's attention. The older the child is, the more initiatives parents must take to establish positive



interaction with the child. Parents and children must find situations where they can enjoy something together and share their enthusiasm with each other. Showing interest and following the child's focus of attention, repeating the baby's gurgling noises, putting a name to something the two-year old is pointing to, or sharing a sense of wonder with a six-year old create a circle of contact and interaction.

A typical situation with a baby consists of parents chatting to him and comforting him when he cries, giving him food, changing his nappy or taking away anything that upsets him. The parents then continue to talk and smile to the baby who gradually begins to respond with smiles and sounds. When a two-year old cries when Daddy goes to work, the circle is completed when his mother comforts him and tells him that Daddy will be back later. She takes him to the window to wave, hugs and kisses him, asks if he would like to play and he is happy again.

As the process of attachment takes place over a long period of time, the child and her parents will respond differently at different stages during this period. A baby will respond by being more attentive, returning eye contact and sometimes letting herself be consoled. The parents respond by meeting her demands, enjoying her presence and being delighted in her development. The pre-school child responds by following the parents' advice and accepting the limits they set. She will gradually be able to venture out into the world, but will at the same time check that her parents are still there. Signs that the attachment process is taking place are the child playing in an appropriate way for her age, that she is relaxed, cheerful and reacts in a natural way to pain and satisfaction. The parents will still show interest and pleasure in their child, set limits, give her comfort and praise. The school child will show positive bonding by showing that she is satisfied with herself, gets on satisfactorily at school, expresses feelings adequately, accepts limits, seems to be developing a sense of conscience and has

satisfactory contact with her peers and adults. Parents will on their part pay attention to the child's efforts at school and her out of school interests, will praise, support and comfort her and give her tasks and responsibilities suitable for her age.

We can furthermore see signs of attachment in the child's ability to be in physical contact with others, as well as having eye contact and engaging in positive social interaction. The feeling of being good enough, and being able to take pleasure in achieving one's own goals is characteristic of children whose bonding is developing in a positive

direction. The parents' responses also come to expression in their ability to respond to the child's initiatives to interaction and bodily contact. They also come to expression in the parents' ability to show pleasure in the child, to be able to praise her and accept behaviour which expresses dissatisfaction, joy and independence.



A child being emotionally attached to his parents also means that he loves them, depends on them and feels loved by them. This kind of bonding will again result in the child identifying with his parents and wishing to copy his parents' norms and behaviour. The child will gradually be able to explore the world around while he maintains eye contact with his parents. He can be apart from his parents, fully knowing that they are still there.

Children who have experienced a positive attachment to one or more people, will find it easier to become attached to new providers of care. But even children who have moved frequently or have been in overcrowded children's homes will be able to become attached to their new parents. However this may mean that the parents have to give more attention, acknowledgement and reassurance that they love the child, than they perhaps expected.

So what happens if a child has not managed to develop strong enough bonds with the adults who will control her and show her the way forwards? If a child has not established a satisfactory attachment with her care-givers, an imbalance between dependence and independence can develop. She may have difficulties accepting limits and norms and she may dislike physical contact. The child may be clinging with her parents as well as uncritical in her contact with other adults. Some children can also make themselves unavailable for physical contact and create distance between themselves and all adults. Children with unsatisfactory attachment may also be rather unaware of their own inner needs or outer demands from their surroundings. This results in the child showing less socially adapted behaviour

because she has not learnt to interpret the expectations and signals from close, adult providers of care.

In these situations, one must work systematically to help the child, so that he is given the security he needs despite previous rejections. This is why it is so important that the child and the parents have a good opportunity to get to know each other and that everything is arranged to encourage the best possible bonding between them. Through play and other social forms of being together, the child can experience physical and psychological contact with his adoptive parents.

3. The first stage of family life

The first meeting between parents and the child denotes the end of a long period of waiting. The previous history of the parents begins the moment they decide to adopt a child and ends when they meet the child. It used to be usual for children to be fetched with an escort which was usually comprised of persons connected to an adoption association. Today parents usually fetch their children themselves from the country they were born. Getting to know the child in his original surroundings will have a beneficial effect on the establishment of contact between the adoptive child and his parents and this may ease the transfer to a new environment.

The children who come to new families are very different both with regard to age and to expectations and preparations. Some have clear memories of what they have left behind in their country of origin, whilst others are too young to remember anything. Some children are well prepared for what they will meet in the new country, while others have not been given any information at all.

The first period of time in the family is very special. It is full of excitement, joy and expectation in connection with the new child who has arrived. The parents have waited a long time for the child and feel relieved and happy that they are parents at last. But of course this first

period also brings an number of challenges. The new child will, naturally enough react to her new surroundings, and these reactions may well be strong and puzzling. It is important that parents are well prepared for this, especially for the emotional reactions that may arise. It is natural for many children to find it difficult to adjust to a new country and a new family. The nature and extent of these problems will of course vary according to the child's age on arrival and her previous history. Meeting new faces, a new language, a new climate and a different culture



can have an overwhelming effect on the child. Some children develop sleeping problems, others have eating disturbances which can manifest as insatiable hunger or a strong reluctance to take any nourishment at all. Some children will be very clinging. They almost latch physically onto the new providers of care. This is illustrated by a statement from

the mother of a boy who was adopted at the age of 15 months:

«We couldn't get away from him. He slept between us for at least the first two years. He would wake up several times during the night and scream at the top of his voice. And it was tiring. I couldn't leave the room, couldn't go anywhere.»

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 112)

Parents are often better prepared for their child possibly having physical difficulties, than the more emotional reactions of adjustment. It used to be usual for many of the children to suffer from undernourishment and poor physical health. Recently, most of the children coming to Norway have had relatively good health. Some children can, however, be shown to be suffering from deficiency diseases which were not spotted straight away. It is therefore important that the child undergoes a thorough doctor's examination on arrival in Norway and that the child is followed up regularly if she shows any signs of physical problems.

The child's reactions

An adopted child has not only experienced the loss of his mother and other care-givers during the first year of his life. He may also have a background characterised by neglect, maltreatment, misuse of intoxicating substances and malnutrition during pregnancy or just after birth. The child may have been moved around several times, and he may have lived in an institution for shorter or longer periods. This does not necessarily follow that children with a background like this will have major problems. However one must reckon that such experiences will mark the child in one way or another for many years.

Children who have experienced abandonment, who have had several different people taking care of them and may have been given a poor standard of care, will react in different ways when they are adopted. Some children will feel threatened by being handed over to two new adults, and living alone with them in a big, unfamiliar house or apartment. They may feel it is difficult to feel sure that these two adults, the new parents, wish them well.

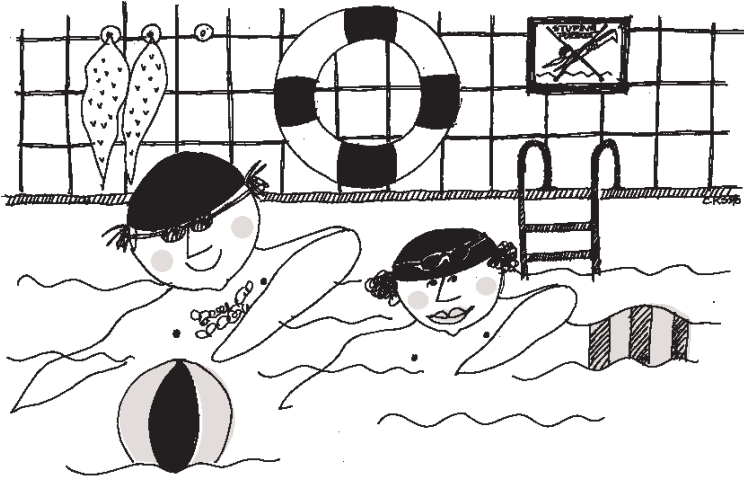
The child needs your care, but finds the situation both appealing and frightening at the same time. The child may then reject the parents' gestures of love and behave in a provocative, dominating or extremely reactive way. The child's early experiences can influence certain situations, making her more vulnerable but at the same time more defiant towards her parents.

The parents' reactions

It is not always easy to make a good response to your child's reactions. Many adoptive parents cannot understand their child's reactions because they are not aware of his past. Adults respond in different ways to rejection, clinging behaviour or indifference on the part of the child. Some find it easier to get to grips with this than others, and this will again influence the establishment of contact between the adopted child and his new parents. It is not easy to try to make contact with an adopted child and at the same time be met by highly provocative behaviour from him. The adult will often react in the heat of the moment by showing disappointment, anger and despair. These may be appropriate reactions. In fact many children who have been adopted from overseas find it easier to understand the adults' reactions if they are «visible». The child may find it difficult to follow the adult's reasoning and explanation due to poor language skills. Experiencing that adults too, including mother or father, can be angry, disappointed, yes even unreasonable, can be positive for pre-school-age children. But this depends on the adult and child sitting down together after the storm has passed and trying to talk about how they felt. The fact that an adult says he or she is sorry does not need to undermine his or her authority. If the adult is able to discuss his or her reactions with the child afterwards, this can be an example to be learnt from «anyone can go too far / make a mistake», «we can all misunderstand things», «it's easy to get hurt, angry, disappointed». A short, honest conversation about these matters can also help the child to put words to his feelings.

The fact that an adult puts words to his or her own feelings or reactions can help the child to put herself into another person's situation. The child may find it difficult to see things from another point of view because she has started life without being met in her attempts to establish communication or show her own feelings or needs to the adult then present. So it is important to talk openly with the child about happenings and situations in her life. These talks must, however, take place in «small portions» so that the child is not overwhelmed with words which require an intellectual understanding of her own behaviour beyond her level of maturity.

Just as exchanges of looks and verbal interaction are important for establishing contact with others, skin contact is also a way to interact socially. It is a matter of finding ways of being physically close with the child which feel good for him and for his parents. This kind of physical contact is easy to establish with young children. Older children may shrink from the touch of a gentle hand or may be uncritical in their physical closeness. Parents will then have to strive to find suitable forms of physical contact with their child. A child who has experienced physical or sexual harassment may be uncertain of what the adult wants of him. So it is important to give clear signals of what you like and accept as an adult. Parents must also make it clear that it is not the child they are rejecting when they dislike something the child does.



One activity which can promote physical contact and intimacy is swimming. Parents and children can come physically close to each other playing, laughing, screaming and catching each other in the water. It is important to spend lots of time with this kind of activity and not expect the child to quickly learn to swim. It may be this very helplessness of the child in the water which give the parents the chance to be affectionate, caring, to help and give a sense of security.

«Peepo!» and «hiding» games are also great opportunities for «being caught», especially if there is a «friendly monster» out who is looking for someone to «eat up / kiss / cuddle with». This can be a pretty wild and exciting game even for children who are themselves fairly violent in their behaviour. It is always important to remember that everyone in the family must take turns at playing the different parts.

Another good game is when one of the parents helps the child to hide. The other parent is told that the child is not there. Children love to see their worried mother or father looking for them! Especially if the child is hiding close to the one parent and they can exchange looks, body warmth and suppressed laughter with one another.

It gets easier after a while

The most important message to parents who are struggling with their child's adjustment problems is – it gets easier after a while. Children need different amounts of time to adapt to their new surroundings and gain the necessary sense of security to bond with their new providers of care. Of course this will vary according to the child's age and previous history. Children who have experienced several changes and have started life under the most unfortunate circumstances, will naturally enough present the most challenges. In some cases, parents may need professional help and guidance during this preliminary adjustment period. This may be a matter of getting some good pieces of advice about how to respond to extreme outbursts of anger and rage, what can be done to help children who find it difficult to get to sleep and how to deal with the child's enormous appetite. Some parents also need advice on how to relate to a child who has shied away from all forms of physical contact.

Several children react during the first period in ways which are not appropriate for their age. Some children can periodically be much more childish and immature in their reactions than is normal for their age. Parents need help and encouragement to put up with this kind of age-inappropriate behaviour, like exaggerated clinging or dependence, violent outbursts when he does not get his way, bed-wetting or extreme passivity. The situation is not made any easier by the fact that communication between parents and children also brings particular challenges. We will be describing the language development of these children at a later stage, as it has quite special characteristics.

Another important message to adoptive parents is to encourage them to trust their own feelings and reactions, so that they do not allow themselves be influenced by outsiders to push the child's development and maturation. A statement from a mother of a girl who was adopted when she was two and a half years old, and who was in very poor physical shape, can illustrate this:

«And I took her everywhere. And all these «know-alls» said she was going to be a clinging child for the rest of her life if I went on like this. We had an uncle who was a child psychiatrist and he also said that it just wouldn't work. But we had to trust the feelings we had then, that this was what she needed and that it was right. And I am convinced it was. Because once she felt secure that I was there for her first and foremost and that then there were all the others, she became really secure already at the age of 4 or 5.

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 114)



4. A new family comes into being

Adoption is just as much a question of parents being adopted by the child as the child being adopted by the parents. Sometimes this can be a process full of joys, but also of uncertainties. Will I be wanted and appreciated once and for all? A child who has experienced loss many times and parents who have not given birth to their own children can feel unsure of the extent to which they belong together.

Constant reassurance that they belong

Reassurances that the parents want to keep the child for ever and that he will always have them as his parents cannot be repeated too often. The child needs to hear over and over again that he is now part of a family and will be so for the rest of his life. Some parents may say «but we have told him this so many times». All the same we should keep on saying this same thing in many different ways. The child needs to hear this message many times before he is able to «assimilate» it.

When the child really realises that she is part of the family, she will also be able to bear it when Mummy is disappointed or Daddy is cross or upset. For this does not mean that her mother and father do not love her or do not want to keep her. They want this very child. The adopted child will find out that everyone can be worried, angry or provoked when they are not feeling quite secure. It is important to generalise, so that you can show the child that her reactions are also normal for a little person who feels insecure and under pressure. Indeed, this would be frightening for a big person. This does not mean that we accept the child's reactions.

When we have a baby in the house, we try to adapt the surroundings so that the child is comfortable. We are particularly careful with the temperature, we avoid through-draughts and loud noises. On the other hand when an older child is adopted, even if the child is only two years old, we expect him to adapt to our routines, our food and our rhythms. We are often unaware that this can cost the child a great deal, and that he may use a substantial amount of effort and energy. Sometimes this can be difficult for parents to see and understand, because most children are so vital and physically active.

When a baby is born, but later also, parents try to find similarities between themselves and their child. People often say things like: «He's got my nose and my ears», «Look, she's got Grandma's smile», «Doesn't he look like uncle Tom when he's cross». This is how parents all over the world naturally include the child in the family.

However it is difficult to find similarities with an adopted child because she in fact has a quite different genetic heritage and an ethnic background which may be very different from that of the adoptive parents'. All the same, the child needs to be «drawn» into the family to

You can pretend that the child is born and is lying next to Mummy while Daddy is saying how proud he is. After a while, these experiences become part of the joint memories the child and parents own together.

feel that she really does belong. This a long progress which needs time. One way of reinforcing this process is for parents and the child to create an imaginary past together. In the world of imagination and dreams anything is possible! The same is true of play. Parents and children can therefore play act many situations which they could have experienced, for example that the child was crying, wanted food, sat on a lap and was comforted. In the world of play, many situations which they could have wished were different can be taken up afresh.

A child also likes to hear that he runs like Daddy, is inventive like Grandpa, and loves ice cream, forest walks and dogs like Uncle Martin. Or that she is good at singing like Aunt Klara, tidy like Grandma and loves animals like Mummy did when she was little. It is even more effective if these comparisons are accompanied by a good, amusing little anecdote with an inbuilt message: «Now you're one of us, part of our family».

The importance of time perspective

It is important that you share some of your own upbringing with your child. Tell him episodes from when you were a child; this could well be an episode when you «put your foot in it», did something wrong. You can embroider it a bit, preferably to your disfavour! Children love to hear that their parents have been little and even better that they were a bit naughty. Many adopted children who are struggling with disquiet and violent reactions feel that they are naughty, even bad! Some may really wonder whether their parents would have wanted them if they had known they were so difficult.

A child who has not been sufficiently appreciated or who has been abandoned, can easily feel inferior or bad. His desperate efforts to get attention from a disinterested adult can easily develop into negative fussing and clinging, which again increases the chance of rejection and correction. It is therefore important to get across to him that «we can all do things wrong», and that we did too. He can then find he has a child-friend in his parents. This may help him feel less lonely in a world of well brought up and perfect people, amongst whom he feels he is the only one who does anything wrong.

Many adoptive parents struggle to find a position where they are close and warm and at the same time can set limits. Those who adopt children who are over two years old can in particular have the experience of getting a little person who has different habits, is obstinate, distant and angry. A child can challenge her parents in ways they could never have imagined.

Praise, praise, praise

We adults are strange creatures! We use lots of energy telling our child what he does wrong or what he should have remembered or done. But are we equally good at telling our child when she has done something she should? Probably not! This is a shame, because it would save us a lot of trouble later. We could give many examples here: you can even make some fun out of it by having a little celebration of the event.

To someone who forgets to do their little household chores:

«Oh! What a joyous moment, just think my own daughter has remembered to throw out the rubbish just like I asked her! That's wonderful!»

It is important to stimulate the child's development and give the child self-confidence by showing him what he can do.

«I must say you've become very good at counting – remembering the telephone number – closing the fridge door – sharpening your pencil before you start writing.»

«Goodness, how WONDERFUL that you remembered to wipe your feet - wash your hands – flush the toilet.»

To someone who has no energy:

«Your legs really have got stronger! Just think you've managed to walk that far to fetch your ball!»

5. Growing together as a family

Getting to know one another after the arrival of a new child is a process for all families. In the same way, the adopted child, the new siblings, and the parents must adapt to each other despite major differences in temperament, personality and not least appearance.

Differences in temperament

As is the case with biological children, parents can experience great differences in temperament between themselves and their child. Temperament is hereditary to an extent. Children who are adopted are often children who have survived against all odds. There is quite a high mortality rate among young orphans in children's homes. Their sadness may lead them to give up on life. The children who have come to Norway have not given up. They often show with rather violently reactive behaviour their hope of being seen and heard at last. They are often children who are full of life.

Many children also come from other parts of the globe where people are more vociferous, play louder music and express themselves dramatically. Then they come to Norway, to nicely brought-up families, where people sit down together and talk calmly about things, are quiet and polite, aim for harmony and order in their affairs. On the other hand other children may have been used to quiet surroundings with little stimulation and hence react to all the sensory impressions they are confronted with.

Mastering new social situations

As a result of his earlier experiences in life, an adopted child can have problems mastering new social situations. This is particularly the case when the adults' attention needs to be shared with many other children. He can easily feel insecure, abandoned to himself and that he does not have the protective confirmation of the adult. Other children may have particular difficulties in a kindergarten or school situation. But when the child is at big family parties or large gatherings, like in church, for example, he may well also feel overwhelmed by all the unfamiliar people he meets and all the rules that need to be kept.

Agree on a «secret language» as a support for your child in stressful situations.

Sometimes the child may react violently, lose control and «spoil» the occasion both for himself and for others.

In situations like this, it may help your child to stay in control if you go through what went wrong last time: «Do you remember when your cousin Mari was christened and you were so worried in the church?»

Tomorrow we are going to your big brother's end of school party. How can we find out that you are worried so that we can help you?» They can agree that her father will squeeze her hand twice, ask her to sit on his lap, whisper «remember what we talked about at home» or agree to go out into the fresh air before the child loses control and loses face both to herself and to everyone else. In this kind of situation, parents can provide support for the child who still has poor self control. It is important to provide the child with this kind of support so that she will be able to master new social situations. Adults must sometimes be extra careful to provide their child with that extra little boost of attention and confirmation to help her function appropriately for her age in social situations. If the child has felt unappreciated by adults in the first years of her life, this will place extra demands on the new, close persons in her life; first and foremost her parents, but also her teachers, the leaders of her out of school activities and other adults.

*Two steps forward
and one step back.
Allow your child to
also go backwards
in his development.*

How old is the child?

As a result of unavailability of complete information, it is often difficult to establish the age of children adopted from overseas. In uncertain cases, a doctor can make a closer evaluation of the child's age. This is done by taking an X-ray of the child's hand, evaluation of his dental status and growth curves, as well as a psychological evaluation. However it has been shown to be difficult to carry out these kinds of tests before the child has been in the country for about two years.

If it is shown that the given age of the child cannot possibly be reconciled with later findings, you can apply to the local registration offices to change the child's date of birth. There is, however, a defined procedure for this. Establishment of an adopted child's age can be of significance with regard to school-starting age and also if the child shows signs of early puberty. This may become apparent in that a child who has been somewhat undernourished physically, has a marked period of growth after coming to his adoptive parents. It is as though the child's body, undernourished as it is in loving care and nurture, suddenly experiences a kind of short circuit when care security and closeness are encountered. The child begins to grow very fast and the body «misinterprets» this as a sign that it is time to start puberty. Once puberty starts, the amount of time the child has left to grow becomes limited. The younger and shorter a child is at the start of puberty, the shorter his final height will be.

— and how many «ages» does the child have?

All of them! Even if the chronological age has been established, we must reckon on the child having many others. Children who are adopted after the age of four, may perhaps manage to master most practical things like getting dressed, combing their hair and making their bed. Precisely because it requires so much courage and strength to survive loss, the child can bank on managing by herself, she literally takes her life into her own hands. But what may have been good, subconscious choices at the age of two, may make life difficult for her later. Adoptive parents dream of taking care of and fussing over the little child who is coming to them, but they may find that the child can manage most things by herself. Some parents feel this is sad, almost a loss: «here comes a deeply longed for and desired child who doesn't seem to need us». This kind of apparently dependent behaviour can meanwhile hide a marked need for care and contact. Maybe a bit more time is needed before these needs can be expressed.

There are differences in the values different societies want to cultivate in children. Likewise with children's behaviour which may vary widely as one crosses national and family borders. In Norwegian society, independence and self-sufficiency are two important qualities which are stimulated through a child's up-bringing. Children are expected to dress themselves, wash themselves, tie their shoe laces and make their own packed lunches much earlier than further south in Europe. Many adopted children who came at the age of two, three and upwards, can do these things. There are examples of two year olds who can change their own nappy, three year olds who can make their own bed, four year olds who can cross very busy roads and take themselves off on long trips by themselves. Mastering these skills at such an early stage may have taken place at the cost of other important experiences for the child. The challenge that faces their parents is to give them the possibility to find again something of what they lost in their earliest childhood. A seven-year old who has washed his hair himself for a long time and would like to continue doing so, can after a while like his parents to do it. But it may take time before he gives his parents the chance.

Some children need to learn to accept help and care and to thus become dependent on their parents. This means that the child needs to go back to earlier developmental stages and become more childish than would be expected for her physical age. Even a child who has learnt to eat with a knife and fork may enjoy being fed a bit by her parents. At the same time as parents take the opportunity to let their child go back in age in some situations, they must also support their child in moving on in an age-appropriate development: the same six year old who was «fed for fun» at the end of dinner, can help to lay the table and peel the potatoes herself the next day.

Some children find it easy to make contact with adults and like to sit on the laps of people they do not know very well. Here it is important to remember that a child may appear confident towards other people

when he is actually indiscriminating in his form of contact. He is striving to become attached to his new parents. After a while he may again become very clinging and childish.

The child may want to pretend that she is a baby, follow her mother everywhere, have a lot of body contact, be hugged at any time and any place, and she may ask for help with things her parents know perfectly well she can manage herself.

Some children have periods when they suddenly start talking baby language despite the great progress they have made with language. This can seem frightening and provocative to the parents and others who are close to the child. It is important that the parents try to meet the child's longing for dependence and a sense of belonging. Parents are children's close care-givers and they are to meet the child's primary needs for food, comfort and sleep.

The child's incipient attachment to his new parents can make him more vulnerable and emotionally unstable. The child will go out into the world, but the new home base still does not feel solid and secure enough. It can also seem frightening to be so emotionally interested in and dependent on the two new, adult parents.

Play

Play is a natural element of human development. It takes place in reality - here and now - and at the same time deals with happenings taking place in an imaginary world. When two children play «cops and robbers», the game is taking place in reality. At the same time the events are taking place on an imaginary level «as if they were real». Therefore the game is not bound by the consequences the events could have had if it had all been «real» reality.

Children can learn by trial and error in play. They can test out destructive forces, magical solutions and dream that they have incredible strength and power. Play gives children the power to be the one in charge, to experience independence and autonomy: it is he who is driving, she who is a doctor checking someone's throat, he who is Mummy or Daddy, she who is in charge of the



teddy bear, her friend or her parents. A child can decide anything in play and any mistakes that are made do not have the same consequences as they would in everyday life. In play there is a dimension of

spontaneity, creativity and ingenuity. The child knows that this is play, «let's pretend», and decides herself whether something is to be part of the game or not.

Children have an inherent ability to play. The ability to play is developed early in a child's life if circumstances allow it. The «peepo» game where a baby covers his eyes and makes the world vanish and come back at his will, is perhaps the earliest form of children's play. When a child keeps throwing his spoon or his little rattle on the floor, he is playing. Through play, the child learns to gain control over the fact that things and people can disappear according to his own will. But in order that this game develops in a positive, carefree way, the child needs the interest, confirmation and sometimes participation of an adult. Parents, but also grandparents, siblings and others can give the child attention and show interest by following the course of the game.

A number of children can have problems with play for the very reason that they have not had the opportunity to learn to play in a creative way. Play can create anxiety in children, because overwhelming feelings of pain may be aroused during the course of the game. Children who have experienced serious trauma, can be found to have a repetitive form of play where they repeat again and again their traumatic experiences, without showing any sign of finding creative solutions which can help them out of the situation. When children play violently in their kindergarten or at school, this can create problems for the other children. The child may lose control and hit «really» hard, or may be particularly dominating towards the other children.

Play is of key significance for the child's intellectual and emotional development. Through play, the child is able to create situations which are similar to ones he has experienced, so that he can take them on as «his own» in a new way. Many adopted children find it easier to play with younger children. This gives the child the opportunity to revert to earlier stages of development and hence have the chance to do things again. When he is playing with younger children, the adopted child does not need to stretch himself to master activities his peers can manage much better. This is a question of taking a step back in order to be able to move on more securely in his development.

Some children who have been adopted from overseas mature at a later stage than their peers in a number of areas. It is important that parents and others who have contact with the child (district nurse, pre-school teacher, teacher) accept this and do not pressurise the child to master more than she can manage at the time. The child should follow her own tempo in terms of intellectual, emotional, motor and social development. At the same time, the adopted child should of course also meet situations which give her the opportunity to show age-adequate mastery.

When the child wants to be in control

Both research reports and clinical experience show that the reason parents seek guidance in their interaction with their pre-school or school aged adopted child is often that they find their child controlling and dominating towards his surroundings. The behaviour of some children can be particularly difficult. Spending time together with other children may at times be problematic if the child always wants to be in charge and pays little attention to other children's needs. As has been mentioned before, undesirable negative behaviour can be a means of communication and be an expression for something the child feels is unbearable and difficult. The challenge here is to try and understand what the child's behaviour is really expressing.

Some parents say that their child wants to decide everything from clothes, food to bedtimes. At first these reactions can look like defiance and lack of willingness to co-operate on the part of the child. But the child's actions can be understood on the basis of her earlier experiences. A small child who has lost a lot and has moved many times will often reach a point where she needs to be in control. Perhaps the child subconsciously chooses this kind of behaviour «to sort out her own life» and save herself further suffering. A child who has been left several times to herself with a great deal of space around her, may now fill this space herself with her own activities to avoid the former terrifying sensations of sadness. This is the child's way of mastering her life situation.

These reactions can be demanding and challenging for adults and particularly for the parents, who have the daily care of the child. The child needs help to gradually let go, needs to be reassured that now he has a mummy and daddy who are looking after him because he is still a child. At the same time the child is growing up and needs support in the process of becoming more independent and self-assured. This requires a fine balance where there must be room for give and take.

The child's own story

Even when the adopted child is integrated in a new family, she still has her own story. There are big differences in what parents know about each child. Some children even know the names of their biological parents and siblings. Others on the other hand have to live their whole life in uncertainty about who their biological parents are. There is quite simply nothing written down about them because they were found without identification papers. It can be difficult for a child to accept that she will never be able to find out anything about her own background. But children who do have information about their biological parents can also experience uncertainty and have more questions than there are answers for.

Many adoptive parents are surprised when they discover the curiosity other people have towards their children. Both the parents and the child may be asked about things they had not expected to have to

answer. Some adults can ask delicate and sensitive questions over the head of the adopted child, for example questions about the child's biological parents, the costs of adoption, and any difficult experiences the child might have had, etc.. It is not easy to deal politely with questions like this and both parents and children need to prepare appropriate counter reactions. For one thing, you do not need to give an answer to everything you are asked. It can also be useful to practice a fictitious conversation, where the child is asked about his background

Remember to tell your child how long you were waiting for just her. Tell her again and again that you love her.

by someone he does not know. You can also change parts so that the child is the one who asks questions. In some situations it can be important for the child to have his own story at hand which may not include all the details of family intimacy. At the same time he must also learn to answer «I

don't want to talk about that...» «I don't want to answer any more questions» or «I don't want to tell you that». He must be allowed to set limits for questions from strangers.

Parents and children can reflect together what circumstances lead to a mother giving up her child for adoption. In some cases there is documented information about the actual circumstances in a concrete case of adoption, but in many cases there is little information. But although we know about poverty and exclusion, we cannot know the pain a mother feels the moment she has to take the step of giving away her child for adoption. Neither can we know the thoughts and dreams she had for her child and his future. But we can talk about this together and build the conversation on general knowledge about the situation in the country the adopted child comes from.

The child's fantasies about her biological parents

Adopted children can have different fantasies about their biological family. Some fantasise a great deal, others are less concerned with such thoughts. A number of children have concrete memories and remember members of their family, while others do not have any memories of this kind. It is important to help the child find meaning in the circumstances that led to her being separated from her biological parents.

The need to «find out» about their own background varies with age. A young child may be quite happy knowing that he was «in another mummy's tummy», and then he was fetched by his new parents. An older child may need repetition of these themes in different way. It is important that the child is given background information which is appropriate for his age and level of maturity. It is easier to provide this kind of information while the child is little. The younger the child is, the easier it is to fantasise with him about his birth and the first period of his life. It can be useful to remember that a child can think about a

biological mother even if he was very young when he left his mother.

Whether or not there is any information about your particular child, we adults know enough about the milestones in a child's first years. So we can «tell» the child how he or she babbled for the first time, crawled, took her first steps and kept falling until her legs were strong enough to carry her. Told as a kind of «fairy story all about you» this gradually becomes part of the child's own story.

Out of the family and into the world of school

All children have to go to school to learn basic skills within different subject areas. Learning in the fullest sense is a continual process which starts at birth with the establishment of the first interaction between the child and the adult provider of care. This process can be inhibited or disturbed by various factors. It is the quality of the child's first relationship to another person that is the strongest influence on the child's curiosity and openness towards new experiences - which is again a fundamental prerequisite for learning.

Children who have been adopted from overseas usually get on well at school, but their start in life means that some of them are vulnerable when it comes to learning. Some children have not had sufficient early bonding with an adult which gives them a poor starting point for learning. Other children react with behaviour which is reminiscent of children with Minimal Brain Dysfunction (MBD). This is often characterised by poor concentration, lack of stamina and attentiveness in situations where circumstances demand these qualities. These children tend to react impulsively and hyperactively. They may also have problems with motor skills and show a lack of patience and motivation when it comes to solving tasks.

Once children have arrived in their new families, their conditions will improve for the better for most of them. The new families usually provide stable and secure frameworks around the child's development. The best basis for good development of the learning process is provided by arranging circumstances to enable the best possible bonding between the child and his parents.

When the conditions of life before adoption have been especially traumatic and long-lasting, and the bonding with the biological parents has been insufficient or superficial, this will increase the possibility of inhibition of the learning process. A number of adoptive parents must therefore reckon on facing a situation where they will need to put a great effort into counteracting this kind of inhibition in their child. If the child's adjustment difficulties seem very extensive, the parents should seek advice with professionals. A number of parents are loath to contact the support services. This may be due to several circumstances. Many hope that the adjustment difficulties will pass over after a while, and indeed they do in most cases. However, many people can have a need for good advice and support in what can often be a demanding preliminary period. Some parents think they should be able to master the situation. They have been through a process of approval and they have themselves chosen to go through with the adoption. Many feel, therefore, that it is a sign of failure to seek help from others when problems occur. Here it is important to come with

the reminder that many children have lived through years of problems before they came to their adoptive home and that this makes it inevitable that the process of adjustment will be difficult. It is therefore quite natural that these children will have a number of problems as they grow up which will require professional help.

Learning and speech development

Communication, language and learning are closely inter-connected. Children adopted from overseas form an interesting group when seen from a linguistic angle in that all of them have had a break in the natural language learning process. These children have to learn a new language and most of them also lose their first, original language. Norwegian will be the new mother tongue for these children and it will have to function just as well as Norwegian does for Norwegian-born children.

The social and emotional interaction between parents and children forms the primary basis for the development of communication and language. The child's innate ability to learn language cannot develop if she does not have at least one adult to help her. A particularly important step in the development of language is being able to take part in a conversation where the child learns to take initiative, responds to contact and waits her turn. It is of utmost importance that language-related interaction is started at an early stage as this sets the child up in a good communicative process.

As has been mentioned earlier, many children who have been adopted from overseas have lived in an environment which has not been stimulating for the development of interaction with an adult provider of care. Some have spent most of this early stage in a children's home with few adult employees, few opportunities to play and a limited outdoor area. As well having had little adult contact, some children have also had poor opportunities for actively exploring their



surroundings in this important pre-language phase. Neither have some children had linguistic responses to their actions from adults. This is important, indeed essential for the development of concepts which, again, are the basis of cognitive thought.

The first introduction to language

Parents should be particularly aware of their child's special linguistic situation and prepare themselves to accommodate their child in the best possible way. Much can be done to set the right conditions for an all-round and fundamental development of concepts and language. These preparations should even start before the child comes into the family. When you adopt from overseas, it is a good idea to learn a few words and phrases in the child's original language so that the first stage of communication can be established more easily.

Adopted children will react in different ways when they come to Norway, according to their age and previous language development. Some stop talking altogether, others use a marked degree of body language, and some of the eldest children continue using their original language. Common to all of them is that they learn spoken Norwegian very quickly.

It almost seems as if these children have «had to» catch up with the linguistic lead of their Norwegian peers. People around them may be charmed by the child's apparently sound command of everyday communication. However, in spite of this, some children may not have a deeper understanding of language, which may not be discovered until the child is older and particularly when he starts school. Is it possible that this very forced language learning could be part of the explanation for the lack of deeper understanding of concepts in the child's language?

It is important that parents do not allow themselves to be dazzled by this successful spoken language, but give the child the opportunity to gain concrete experiences with things and occurrences so that basic concepts can be developed over time.

Let the child feel different objects, find out how heavy and long they are and how they are used. It is more important to take the child out into nature and give her an experience of animals, insects, vegetables etc., rather than just reading about them.

Many parents, who adopt a child whose first language is one that is used in Norway, try to arrange for the child to keep his original language. Experience has shown, however, that even in cases where the child has had Spanish as his first language and there were relations who could talk Spanish with him, it has been difficult to maintain the original language. Many parents have told of children who have actively opposed using the original language. They use body language instead and learn Norwegian words and expressions very quickly. This can be a step in the bonding process in the family and may also be a desire to forget earlier experiences in the country of origin. If attempts

to keep up the child's original language are unsuccessful, parents should accept that the child is actually changing his original language and is taking on Norwegian as his mother tongue. Most children who are adopted from overseas become monolingual, so it is important that they master their new mother tongue as well as Norwegian born children.

Kindergarten or not?

Many parents would like their child to go to kindergarten to have a better opportunity for social and linguistic interaction with other children and adults. A statement from the mother of a boy who went to kindergarten when he was small emphasises the significance of this:

«He has become secure with other adults. The fear and insecurity which used to be so apparent has almost disappeared. This has in turn led to a blossoming of his imagination and has made him much more spontaneous than he was before.»

(Dalen & Sæterdal, 1988, p. 53)

Some parents would like to be able to send their child to kindergarten so that the child does not become too attached to them and hence become too dependant, as this parent couple have expressed it:

«As she was a deeply longed for child, we were worried that she would become too dependant on us and we on her. So it was good for both her and myself that I started working again. She met others whom she also came to trust and I developed a more natural relationship towards being a mother.»

(Dalen & Sæterdal, 1988, p. 53)

Whether or not an adopted child should go to a kindergarten or not and if so, the point at which he or she should begin, must of course be weighed up with other considerations, like the length of time the child has been in the family and the child's level of maturity and sense of security. However it is important that the child has spent long enough in her new family before she is given to other people to be looked after. She must have time to build a secure platform in the new family. When parents are considering when to start their child at kindergarten and how much time she should spend there, they must listen more carefully to her signals than they would need to with a Norwegian born child of the same age. The same applies to the length of time needed to introduce her to the new people at the kindergarten and to adjust to the new surroundings. It is important here to remember that all children need time to become familiar with new situations, and this is even more the case for adopted children who have experienced many changes in their lives.

Many adoptive parents have applied for postponement of their

children's school starting date. These have particularly been cases of children who were adopted around the age of six or seven years, and who have had major adjustment problems. In many of these cases it has been right to let the child have an extra year at home or in kindergarten. Some of these parents let their child begin at the right time, but found out later that this decision had not been the right one, as this mother tells:

«She started school when she was 7 1/2 years old, but she had to stop school after six months because we found out that she wasn't ready for school. This was on the advice from her teachers who said that she wasn't ready. She didn't manage to follow the lessons, so they found out that it wasn't any use for her to start school yet. I had actually realised that she wasn't ready, because I compared her with the other children when they were at that stage. We waited until the following autumn, and then she was just able to cope. She was 8 1/2 when she started in the first grade.»

(Dalen & Setersdal, 1992, p. 152)

Other children have matured early and have been older than their given age. Higher up in the school, these children have fallen out of step with their classmates. After 1997, all children will start school the calendar year they turn six. This may mean that children who are quite old when they are adopted will have to leave home and kindergarten life at a time when the adjustment process is still going on. In order to counteract unfortunate consequences of this, it is important that the transfer to school is well prepared for and that the content of the first year of school is adapted to the particular needs of the adopted child.

Starting school

Starting school is a milestone in every child's life. The transition from home to school is particularly great for some children. Other children, who have spent a few years in a kindergarten will find the transition easier. These children are used to getting on with other children and have had practice in relating to social rules. For all children, however, school is the first meeting place with formal demands for intellectual performance.

Although the traditional concept of school readiness no longer exists in the Norwegian school of today, and emphasis is placed on the principle of adapted teaching, the schooling in most first grade classrooms still requires mastery of a number of basic skills. Some children who have been adopted from overseas have not yet reached the level of functional maturity of a Norwegian-born six or seven year old when they start school. These children can hence find that they cannot master the tasks they have been set to solve. Even though the teacher tries to adapt the demands to the child's situation, he may himself experience that he does not manage things in the same way as the other children in the class. He becomes critical of his own perfor-

mance, and these feelings can be reinforced at higher class levels where comparison with others becomes increasingly important.

Poor language skills can create vicious circles

Language difficulties in some children adopted from overseas become more obvious further up the school. Although most of these children have a good command of spoken language, many of them lack a deeper understanding of a number of key, everyday words and expressions. These deficient language skills make it difficult for them to follow the teaching in school. The mastery of language in a school situation requires the ability to follow the teaching in class and understand messages given to the whole class. In addition there must be a sound understanding of the abstract concepts the teaching is building on. When these foundations are lacking, the consequence will be a lack of understanding of the content of the various subjects. It will be particularly difficult for these children to follow verbal teaching, understand the text in text books, retell a chain of events and formulate themselves in writing. In everyday speech, the child can exploit situation-independent and non-verbal language, so language difficulties are not discovered until there is the need for a more abstract understanding of language. It is not, therefore, unusual for language difficulties to first become apparent at a later stage of schooling, as this mother expresses here:

«He arrived in the spring and started in the first class in the autumn. We thought it was going extremely well and that he was learning very fast, but then it came to a standstill. It must have been in second or third class. It was as though a curtain came down. He also talked less at home. He sort of withdrew into himself.»

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 153)

A child's language problems are easily confused with reading and writing difficulties in Norwegian born children as this mother describes:

«There were periods when we thought she was dyslexic, as she seemed to read so badly. Then a few years passed. But she wasn't dyslexic, and we thought maybe she needed glasses, but the doctor said we couldn't expect her to be able to read Norwegian fluently. After all she hadn't been here for more than a few years.»

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 158)

Many adopted children are given special teaching at some time during the course of their years at school, but this does not seem to have been completely suited to these children's particular learning difficulties. This is primarily due to the fact that the school has had little experience with adopted children and so not much has been known about

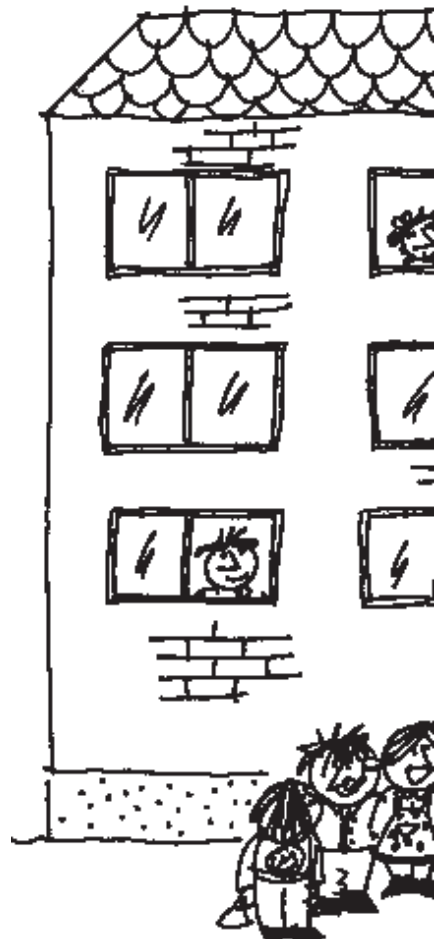
adopted children and learning. As more and more children from overseas have been coming to Norway for adoption, a better understanding of their particular situation has been developed and there is now more expert insight into these children's learning difficulties. Some of these difficulties seem to be connected with a rather incomplete concept and language development which particularly affects subjects like Norwegian and mathematics, but has a secondary effect on other subjects also.

Today, parents and schools are better equipped to understand the emotional and language situation of children who have been adopted from overseas, so learning difficulties can to an extent be prevented and met in a better way.

Performance at school and self-image

Although the teaching at school should be adapted to each individual pupil's particular needs and situations, many pupils, including those who have been adopted from overseas, will still experience failure in school. In the case of adopted children, the experience of insufficient achievement will increase further up the school where comparison with others becomes increasingly important for all pupils. This kind of permanent feeling of non-achievement in terms of school expectations can threaten the child's self-image which can again have an inhibiting effect on the child's ability to learn.

The connection between school performance and self-image is, however, dependent on the extent to which performance at school is considered important in the pupil's environment. Parental expectations of good school performance which are not met, have the most negative effect on the child's self-image. It is important to be aware of this because a relatively high number of adoptive parents have some form of higher education and many of them have done well at school themselves. Where there are also biological children in



the family, these may also have done well in school subjects. These parents will of course want the adopted child to do just as well. Wishes of this kind can easily become expectations of good school performance. When these expectations are not met, this can create a feeling of defeat in the child and the parents may feel disappointed.

It is important to remember that many adopted children get on well at school both in terms of school work and the social aspects of school life. At the same time we know that a number of them struggle with their school subjects and that some develop learning difficulties which result in inconsistent and low school performance. This group has a special need for adapted teaching, and many are entitled to special education.

To prevent and rectify learning difficulties among adopted children, it is important that parents, pre-school teachers, teachers and special educationalists work together to continually develop new insights and experiences in how these children learn and develop.



7. Adoption and identity

The experience of remaining the same in different situations and having a continuity in life is a cornerstone in every person's development of identity. Having identity means that a person recognises aspects of himself in different situations and life conditions. It also means that a person can place himself in relation to past, present and future.

Who am I really?

Many children and young people struggle with identity problems during their childhood and adolescent years. The development of identity in adopted children can be particularly difficult as adoption represents a break in a person's continuity. Questions like «To what extent have I been formed by my biological heritage and how much by my environment?» will be of key importance.

In cases where parents and children do not differ from each other in terms of ethnic origin, it may be possible to keep the fact of adoption a secret. This is not usually possible with adoption from overseas. There the differences are too obvious, and the adopted child will comment on the fact herself. In many ways, these obvious differences are a good starting point for natural discussion of the adoption relationship and about similarities and dissimilarities. But even though there is an open and direct dialogue around the adoption relationship, other aspects of the child's experiences can be talked about all the same. A number of the older children can also find it difficult to talk about the fact that they are adopted, as a 19 year old has expressed:

«It's difficult to talk to my parents about the fact that I'm adopted. If I talk too much about it, I get afraid that I'll hurt them. Otherwise I can talk about most things with them, it's just this I think is difficult. They look on me as their daughter».

(Dalen & Setersdal, 1992, p. 214)

At some point in their lives, all adopted children will have to integrate their awareness of two sets of parents: the ones who gave birth to them and were not able to keep them, and the ones who wanted them and could not give birth to them. This can be a painful process where the child gradually builds up an awareness of both having been chosen and meanwhile at a different point in time having been rejected. This insight can be emotionally threatening and many people believe that it is not until the age of 11 or 12 that a child is mature enough to understand the depth in this. During this period, the child may be particularly vulnerable and may have strong feelings of loss and grief. It can be difficult for parents to know how to deal with this grief which tends

to intensify during the teenage years. Even parents who have had an open and close relationship with their adopted child, will find that the child's feelings around the adoption relationship can become as intense as one adoptive mother describes:

«She would lie and cry in the evenings, and she said maybe she had a mother who was alive and she wondered whether she had brothers and sisters, etc.»

(Dalen & Setersdal, 1992, p. 214)

The teenage years are particularly challenging

The teenage years are a period of transition in any person's life. Another word for this period is «adolescence», a word which comes from Latin and means «to suffer», «to experience pain». This can be useful to remember when we are dealing with the painful process many teenagers experience as they develop from children to adults.

Puberty is a period characterised by rapid physical, intellectual and psychological development. The continuity of the child's development is broken by smouldering sexuality which brings about dramatic changes in his or her body. Meanwhile interests are being directed towards new goals in terms of recreational activities, clothes or the opposite sex. The gang, the group of friends becomes increasingly important, and the teenager is dependant to an even greater extent on being accepted by his peers. His parents' values may be put to one side. These young people choose their own, personal pathways.

Teenagers are unstable. They can behave and feel very independent and grown-up, and the next moment they can seem childishly demanding. They can develop highly moral theories full of altruism and the desire to help their fellow human beings. Meanwhile, they can seem self-centred and egotistical, showing little consideration for others and can even appear manipulating towards their parents.

Adolescent problems are relatively usual with most teenagers, but can be more complicated for adopted children and their parents.

The adolescent period is a time when unprocessed happenings from the past reappear, particularly on the themes of separation, independence and rejection. It would seem that the teenage period is especially demanding for those who are adopted. All young people have to separate psychologically from their parents and later separate physically from them. The adopted child has two sets of parents and is hence faced with a more complex task. They have to complete their separation from their adopted parents and at the same time undergo a psychological separation from earlier providers of care whom they have not had contact with, at least not since they were very young.

Young people may struggle with feelings of loyalty and protection towards their former care-givers and at the same time feel angry towards them. This will not always be conscious. On the contrary, these conflicting emotions may be expressed in violent reactions and

anger towards the adoptive parents or the child herself. So this can be a particularly difficult time for the adoptive family.

It is not only the teenagers who may feel a threat of another separation from their parents, as they have experienced earlier. The adoptive parents may also feel a threat of losing their child, and they may be afraid that the young person will not care for them in the future. Many young people can be very hard on their adoptive parents during this period. Some are serious in their threats of leaving home. It is again important to see these reactions in a wider perspective. The seventeen year old living in an institution or a bedsit with little contact with his family, may end up as a pleasant twenty three year old who actually enjoys going home to his parents a couple of times each month.

One of the challenges facing teenagers is the recognition of earlier feelings of pain, vulnerability and anger as well as their need to be loved. These teenagers have to learn to accept that their biological parents were unable to take care of them, and despite this, learn to become adults instead of remaining small and dependant. Teenagers have to learn to take care of themselves both physically and psychologically and to experience that any problems they are now facing do not need to lead to a reliving of old «wounds». The young adult needs to get into contact with his own resources and should be able to go to people in the family or their circle of friends, who can provide help and support when things seem difficult.



Adoption from overseas and ethnic identity

Apart from the fact that they have been adopted, children from overseas also have to relate to the fact they look different and to their country of origin. The child's relationship to her own ethnic identity will of course be influenced by other people's reactions and behaviour towards them, but will also be affected by the general attitude towards immigrant and refugee groups in Norway. Questions about being the same and being different will have a central place during this period, and the problems will pile up for some people.

Having an appearance which is markedly different from most of the other young people of the same age, can easily be an additional difficulty for young people at puberty, as this girl expresses:

«When I was fourteen, fifteen, I had a lot of complexes. I began to be interested in boys and wanted to look like everyone else, but I couldn't. So I was prejudiced about myself. I didn't like myself. I made myself difficult and I looked for problems.»

(Dalen & Setersdal, 1992 p. 227)



Research shows that most twenty year-olds have a good relationship with their adoptive parents, even when there have been major conflicts in the teenage years.

Young people who have been adopted from overseas are also different when it comes to their relationship with their cultural background. Some show great interest and get very involved in the country and culture they come from, as in the example of this girl:

«I've thought a lot about the fact that I am from Vietnam. I don't know anything about my background. I have seen pictures from there at a Vietnam party, and I have met some nuns who have been there. I am very interested in books from there - stories. I am very interested in hearing about the country.»

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 233)

Other young people show little or no interest in their country of origin and almost feel embarrassed when their parents and others expect them to be interested in their background. A statement from a girl of twenty reflects this kind of attitude:

«No, I'm not very interested in Vietnam at all. I think the others have been more interested. I don't really want to go there. Actually I don't really like them asking, for I feel they expect me to say that I'd like to go there. I don't know what to answer.»

(Dalen & Sætersdal, 1992, p. 234)

It can be difficult for some young people who have been adopted from overseas to relate to immigrant and refugee groups in Norway. A number of them feel most connected with Norwegian young people and very much want contact with the Norwegian youth groups.

Meanwhile, young people who have been adopted from overseas do not want to dissociate themselves from others with a different ethnic background. This can cause major problems for those whose ethnic origin is the same as the largest immigrant and refugee groups in Norway. When these young people who have been adopted from overseas are out by themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, they may be met by similar reactions to those met by immigrants and refugees. Many have also had discriminatory reactions from others. Parents can prepare their children for the reactions they may meet through open discussions of discrimination and racism.

Many young people try to overcome situations like these by going out with Norwegian born-young people, dressing like them and making it known very quickly that they speak fluent Norwegian. In this way they are also expressing a desire to reinforce their Norwegian identity. Others choose to lie low, as this girl describes:

«...I try to avoid a number of things, and try to pull myself together and it's got better. Maybe I'm subconsciously a bit afraid of being spoken to if I go out alone. The times I've been spoken to have mostly been when I haven't been with others.»

(Dalen & Setersdal, 1992, p. 258)

Parents must help their child to develop positive feelings for their native country and their ethnic origins, because pride in and awareness of one's own background is an important condition for the harmonious development of identity. In some cases it may be appropriate to let the young person visit his country of origin so that fantasies and dreams can acquire a more concrete content. The young person can go back to his original roots and may in some rare cases have the opportunity to meet his biological mother. But this may not be a good solution for others. Parents must listen to the young person's signals and react appropriately according to the child's age and emotional maturity. Adoption associations can help parents with advice on the possibilities for travelling back to the country of origin, and they also arrange group trips to certain countries. A booklet has recently been published which is directed to adopted young people who are interested in «going back to their roots». If you would like a copy of the leaflet, please contact the adoption associations.



Special advice to adoptive parents

Research on adoption and adoption from overseas gives us cause for optimism with regard to these children's integration in society. Most of them get on just as well as children who have been born and raised in their biological families, and the number who develop psychological problems is at the same level. However, adopted children do need help and support as they are growing up - from their families, their community, society at large and in some cases from professionals.

When should the family seek professional help?

Although most adoptive families cope well, some will need guidance during particularly difficult periods. Many parents have struggled for far too long with problems which may have been connected to the adopted child's difficult start in life.

If the difficulties are of such a nature that the family wants further help than can be offered by relatives and friends, other adoptive parents or the adoption organisations, it could be appropriate to contact:

The local children's clinic

Here there is a doctor and district nurse who know a great deal about children's development and who can give advice and guidance. The clinic's services may not, however, automatically be suitable for the particular problems of adoptive parents and they may be referred elsewhere to people who have competence in the exact area where help is needed.

The educational-psychology service

The educational psychology service («PP-tjeneste») is part of the whole support service covering kindergarten and school. The educational psychology service gives practical advice and help to children, parents and school and kindergarten staff. This may be related to learning difficulties, behavioural problems and children feeling unhappy at school or kindergarten. The service also plays a key role in the arrangement of services for disabled children. The evaluation of the need for special education is also the responsibility of the educational psychology service.

The child and youth guidance clinic (BUP)

The child and youth guidance clinics can provide help to families with children aged 0 to 18 years. Parents with problems like long-term aggression, restlessness and concentration difficulties, frequent tantrums and eating and sleeping disturbances can seek help here. The clinics offer discussion groups with the whole family or treatment of the child combined with advice to the parents.

The children's clinics, the educational psychology service and the child and youth guidance clinics can evaluate whether a child with particular difficulties should be referred further and can help the parents find the appropriate services available.

The importance of keeping in touch with other adoptive families

As was mentioned at the beginning, living with children is mostly a similar experience whatever way the child has come into the family. So it is important that adoptive parents have contact and exchange experiences with all types of parents to gain a realistic picture of the variety of challenges, joys and sorrows that will always be a part of living with children in a family.

All the same, many adoptive parents find it difficult to share with others the particular areas which are different in an adopted child's upbringing. They are often afraid of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. Some special experiences adoptive parents have can easily be underestimated or blown up into questions about the actual adoption relationship.

Experience has shown that having contact with other adoptive families over time is of great value as the child grows up. Being able to exchange thoughts, experiences, indeed even feelings of aggression and disappointment with other parents in the same situation can be an inestimable support.

Some parents have already met each other, before their child arrives, in discussion or parent preparation groups and continue to keep in contact through the years as their child grows up. Others join parent groups when the child reaches an age when the challenges increase and the need for contact with other adoptive families becomes apparent. These groups can provide adoptive parents with increased understanding of the particular demands on them at the same time as they are a social network where families can find support and understanding.

Adoptive parents can get information about these kinds of groups if they contact the adoption organisation that arranged their adoption at the time - either centrally through the secretariat or through a local branch. Parents can also seek advice from the curator connected to the three adoption associations, by telephoning one of the secretariats.

The need to learn new skills

Living with one or more adopted children in the family means that you must be able to tolerate people being different.

Adoptive parents may need to learn some new skills in order to help their child. These skills include: openness about the adoption, patience in the face of regression and rejection during the first

bonding and adaptation stage, knowledge about any particular school subject problems and learning difficulties, and greater respect for the adopted child's striving for a securely based identity. Parents of children who have been adopted from overseas will often have to deal with discrimination and racism. They must moreover help their child to tie up the loose ends between the country they were born in and the country they are now living in so that he or she can develop and blossom as the person he or she is - born abroad and brought up in Norway, with roots and loyalties in both countries.

Reading list

Books on adoption:

Adopsjon av utenlandske barn: A collection of articles and reports elucidating several aspects of adoption of children from overseas. Universitetsforlaget 1995.

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