

Adoption Syndrome

By Nikki Meredith

When I was a child, I thought adoption was magic. One of my cousins was adopted and I would secretly study her features, which were so unlike the rest of the family's. Her sandy hair, blue eyes and milky skin, I knew, had been contributed by some unknown, mysterious source. To my eyes her whole family was encircled by a golden halo. That my aunt bestowed love on an unrelated child placed her close to sainthood since I was not at all sure my parents would have put up with me had I not been of their blood. And I knew my cousin was special because her parents said she was.

"A lot of children who come into this world aren't really wanted," my aunt told her, "but we wanted you from the very beginning. We chose you."

Some version of the chosen-child story has been told to adopted children through the ages, but now this and other aspects of the adoption experience are being denounced by some revisionists who say pretty stories have glossed over the realities of adoption for too long.

"It is a burden to be chosen. Its very specialness isolates one," writes Betty Jean Lifton in *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience* (Dial Press, 1979). According to Lifton, who is herself adopted, this feeling of isolation, along with problems of identity and an impaired sense of self, leaves many adoptees with a feeling of never having been born — of having a hole in the center of their beings. The fact that adoptive parents, and to some extent adoption workers, often do not understand the intrinsic existential dilemma of adoptees — and in fact try to cover up problems by insisting that adoptive families are not different — heightens their anguish.

THE TRUTH IS THAT adoptive families are *not* just like other families, say the three co-authors (Arthur Sorosky, Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor) of *The Adoption Triangle* (Anchor Books, 1984), and the insistence that they are leads to confusion and unhappiness. They write, "Adoptive parenthood is different from biological parenthood and requires an understanding and an acceptance of the differences.

For individuals involved in this lifelong process it is an all too real and complex phenomenon that can be the cause of many problems."

Understandably, this message has not been generally welcomed by adoptive parents, many of whom are still trying to untangle their feelings about the increasing tendency for adoptees to search out their biological parents. Many adoptive parents are especially offended by the presumption that adopted kids have a special vulnerability. "I think a problem is being made of something that isn't," says a Mill Valley adoptive mother. "If you want to, you can define anything as a problem."

The "defining" of this problem dates back to at least the 1960s, when various mental health professionals began reporting that a disproportionate number of adoptees were coming in for psychiatric treatment. Since then, similar findings have continued to trickle in but there has been little sound, methodical research. For every study claiming that more adoptees than non-adoptees have emotional problems, another concludes they don't. Research obstacles include the unreliability of statistics on how

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many adoptees there *are* (estimates usually range from 2 to 5 percent of the general population) and the varying definitions of the term itself — "adoptees" can include children who were adopted at birth, children who spent years bouncing around foster homes and children adopted by stepparents.

Besides the lack of statistics, "political" considerations also impede systematic research, says David Kirschner, a psychologist in Long Island, New York who treats many adopted children. Recently an associate of Kirschner's wrote to local social service agencies asking them to cooperate on a project researching the psychiatric problems of adoptees. "We didn't get one letter back," he says. "There is considerable denial about this issue and a lot of people don't want it examined."

One of the few agencies that do keep statistics on adoptees is the Coldwater Canyon Hospital in North Hollywood, which treats preteen and teenage patients. Psychologist Richard Sherman says that at times, adoptees represent as much as 50 percent of Coldwater's hospitalized population. Some experts challenge the significance of such numbers, pointing out that adoptive parents are predominantly middle-class and therefore much more likely to seek professional help for their children. But David Kirschner counters that most of the adopted kids he sees are referred by the probation department. "It is not only the parents who say these kids need help — they are

in serious trouble at school or with the law." He estimates that about 10 percent of this hardcore group are adoptees.

WHILE THE NUMBERS debate continues, some observers — many of them adoptees themselves — say that numbers are irrelevant because many suffer quietly. Adoption, they say, is troubling by definition, and statistics are not essential to demonstrate that.

"I've known too many adoptees and too many birth mothers not to believe that something isn't amputated in that initial separation," says *Adoption Triangle* co-author Annette Baran. A specialist in counseling adoptive families, Baran recently told the *Sun* that "all adoptees, at some point, feel as if someone dumped them no matter how it's sugar-coated. It doesn't always have to be pathological — it's just there. If you're strong you cope, if you're not you don't."

One who for whom it was always "just there" is Cathie Visse, 37, a San Rafael school teacher. Says Visse, "I couldn't pinpoint it but I didn't feel quite comfortable when I was growing up — there was something missing." Because she had a happy childhood and considered herself well-adjusted, she didn't connect these feelings with being adopted until much later. "When I gave birth to my son and it didn't take care of that missing feeling, I started to

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think about searching for my biological mother."

The process of finding her birth mother and meeting her, which Visse did last summer, generated intense emotions and a review of her early years. In retrospect, she realizes that "I always battled with self-worth, and part of that had to do with the initial rejection. It is there with adoptees, no matter how much they are loved."

Adoptive parents, eager to believe that their love is enough, tend to discount their child's feelings of rejection, says Pam, the mother of an adopted 22-year-old. After spending her adolescence in and out of juvenile hall and suffering bouts of bulimia, her daughter is still in hand-to-hand combat with life, says Pam. "When we adopted Molly, we believed that our love could make everything right. In the beginning, adoptive parents feel all-powerful; we feel we're so wonderful we can make up for that first rejection. But in a way, we never can. It took me years to look at it objectively, but let's face it — the woman gave her away. That's the bottom line. That's real."

Adopted kids aren't the only ones who have a shaky start in the family, says Annette Baran. The adoptive parents are also at a disadvantage, one that is often not acknowledged. "In the old days we thought that if we gave them the children they [couldn't] produce, it would essentially make them 'fertile' — but adoption doesn't resolve infertility, it accentuates it. All couples would rather have their own children. Adopted kids are second best, but no one ever says that." Before parents can accept their adopted children, adds Baran, they must reconcile their own hardship: "They have to first 'mourn' the loss of the children they will never give birth to."

Infertile couples who don't resolve those feelings, and who go on to adopt, may then feel tentative in their role as parents, says JoAnn Whittington, a San Rafael psychotherapist and adoptee who has counseled many adoptive families. Whittington says that when as a part of normal development, adopted children begin to push for their independence, insecure parents may react by setting too many limits — or too few. Some parents are also threatened by their children's natural curiosity about their birth parents,

and unintentionally convey the message that it's a forbidden topic.

PART OF ANY examination of adoption is the debate over heredity versus environment. There is a school of thought that heredity is by far the more important factor — a theory that coincides nicely with claims that adopted kids have more problems, since



Ed Smith
JoAnn Whittington, a psychotherapist and herself an adoptee, counsels many adopted families.

some studies suggest that women who give up their illegitimate children may have a higher incidence of genetically transmitted mental illness. Also supporting this theory are studies showing that mismatches of temperament, intelligence and personality cause problems between adopted children and their "incompatible" families.

Marshall D. Schechter, a Philadelphia psychiatrist who has done research on adoption and is currently testifying in the Baby M trial, told the *Sun* during a recent phone interview that there is such a thing as a genetic mismatch. Said Schechter, "Until recently, we have not given enough importance to the genetic code in which bonding takes place."

Of course, if a blood relationship were required for

compatibility between two people, the institution of marriage would be in worse shape than it currently is. Even so, many members of adoptive families — and those who observe them — believe that hereditary factors do influence family "fit."

"I can think of dozens of families where friction was caused by the fact that the children were so dramatically different from their parents," says author Baran, who recently helped an 18-year-old girl with a history of learning problems find her biological parents. "She was raised by middle-class intellectual parents who invested considerable energy and great sums of money into turning her into an achiever," says Baran. "But all this adorable kid wants to do is lie on the beach and listen to rock 'n' roll."

While that complaint has no doubt been voiced by plenty of "natural" parents, this particular girl found meeting her own birth family a revelation. Her mother and father, who are still together, have had three other daughters who are "exactly like her," says Baran. "The other kids not only look like her and laugh like her, they have the same learning disabilities."

Cathie Visse says that some of the displaced feelings she had growing up with her high-powered parents were explained when she met her biological family. "There are vast economic and educational differences between the two families. My [adoptive] father is a professor of economics while my birth mother comes from a poor immigrant family. Seeing how different they are makes me understand why I may have felt a little out of place, but it also makes me appreciate the opportunities my adoptive parents gave me." (This conclusion is apparently reached by most adoptees who find their birth parents, and studies say that the kids are indeed better off than they would have been staying with their birth parents.)

Another "genetic mismatch" was between Ann and her adopted daughter, Susan. "I'm much more of a believer in heredity now than I was when we adopted her," says Ann. "Susan is so different from us. She's always six jumps ahead of me and has much more social poise. I'm very shy but she can walk into any room and be comfortable." Susan, who is now attending college back East (she insisted on an eastern education), has always gravitated toward the

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"rich and famous." Says Ann, "I think Susan might have preferred being raised in a family that had a high social standing in the community. In fact," she adds, laughing, "she doesn't know it but that's the kind of family she started out in."

GIVEN THAT ADOPTED children sometimes find themselves in "incompatible" families, what ultimate effect does this have on their lives? JoAnn Whittington recently completed a research project comparing the psychological characteristics of adoptees and non-adoptees. Her subjects, drawn from the general population, ranged in age from 18 to 60; the adopted subjects had all been adopted before they were six months old. Based on what she acknowledges is a small sample of 69 (26 adoptees, 31 offspring from intact birth families and 12 whose birth parents were separated), Whittington concluded that many adoptees demonstrate a syndrome she calls a "pseudo borderline personality." Their lives center around dependence on others and a fear of abandonment, and their symptoms mimic those of the "borderline" personality. (In psychotherapy vernacular, a "borderline" personality exhibits aggressive and self-destructive behavior, depression and withdrawal, hostility, and a tendency toward "splitting" — seeing himself and others in terms of good or bad, loving or hateful, and helpful or hurtful, instead of the combinations of those qualities that most people actually possess.)

The reason this pseudo borderline personality would manifest itself in adoptees, says Whittington, is that the adoptee experiences in reality what the borderline experiences "intrapsychically." Both share the experience of early abandonment and subsequent over-attachment. The borderline is usually subjected to *one* parent who, by turns, is rejecting and engulfing whereas an adoptee is abandoned by

one set of parents and then "rescued" by another.

Because of gratitude to his rescuers, the child often feels pressure to deny his negative feelings about adoption in order to protect the adoptive parents. "Kids always protect parents," says Whittington, "and in order to belong to the adoptive family, the child is asked to deny a part of his reality even though he knows it exists. The 'real' parents are the parents he doesn't know anything about — the parents he can't touch. The parents he *considers* real he can touch but [they're] somehow not real. Everything is upside down and confusing."

The anguish adoptees feel often doesn't surface until adolescence, a time when many begin to "act out." According to Coldwater Canyon Hospital's Richard Sherman, adolescence can be a particularly bad time for adoptees because it is another time of separation. "The early loss was so overwhelming that when they try to separate from their adoptive parents in adolescence, they go back to that original grief process. Essentially they are dealing with two separations at once."

IF THEY'RE SO TERRIFIED of separation, why do some adoptive kids seemingly *provoke* their adoptive parents into rejecting them? They are, in effect, daring their parents to abandon them, and the behavior becomes part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Says David Kirschner, "They test their adoptive parents . . . and keep pushing until what they feared will happen *does*, and the parents kick them out."

Kirschner acknowledges that many non-adoptees exhibit the same rebellious behavior, but when adopted kids are in therapy, he says, it becomes clear that the underlying motivation is related to the adoption. Many, for example, act out behavior they attribute, in their fantasies, to their birth parents. "A lot of adopted girls who act out sexually have the fantasy that their mothers were promiscuous."

Another recurring issue is that of responsibility. "Many adoptees I see say they hate responsibility," says Kirschner. "Those same kids will also talk about

how they think their first mother was not responsible, saying, 'Otherwise she would have kept me.'"

While most adoptive parents will concede that adoptees sometimes have problems, they are rankled by the commonly used term "adopted child syndrome." Betty Jean Lifton, who used the term in a *New York Times* story a year ago, says she received a lot of objections from adoptive parents and adoptees. "No one likes the word 'syndrome.' I know it upsets a lot of people but I think it's good to use the word. Otherwise no one pays attention and these problems have been swept under the rug and ignored for too long."

Although Whittington's definition of "syndrome" differs from Lifton's, she concurs that it is important to stop denying the problem. The current lack of understanding often results in misdiagnosis and improper psychotherapy, according to Whittington: "Many adoptees are diagnosed as borderlines, and if you treat an adoptee the same way you would treat a borderline, he will get worse. The treatment of choice for a borderline is progressive confrontation with reality. But you can't do that with an adoptee. If you confront an adoptee who sees herself as all bad or her parents as terrible, by pointing out how many areas she excels in or how wonderful her parents are, you are only confirming what she already knows — that what she feels isn't real."

"Instead, you need to say, 'Yes, there is something in your life that's wrong. You have to come to terms with the fact that you are adopted.' And, 'Yes, you do have two families and of course you're afraid of being rejected — it's real, it's historical.' You make them feel the link, you help them fill in the data."

Although her clients are often curious about their family background, Whittington discourages them from searching for their birth parents before they're 18, and believes 22 is an even better age — and then only after a year of therapy. "Teenagers are not emotionally prepared to handle the results — it's too cataclysmic. It takes a lot of time to put the pieces together."

Before starting a search, says Whittington, adoptees should join a support group, and, if possible, have backing from their adoptive families — otherwise the guilt can be overwhelming. “It’s very important to promote health and healing in the family while the search goes on.”

WHILE THEY CRITICIZE many adoption practices, most experts approve of the trend toward “open” adoptions. The degree of openness varies but most include at least one meeting between the adoptive and birth parents before the birth. This meeting reassures the birth parents (who in many cases play a role in *choosing* the adoptive parents), and it arms the adoptive parents with information and pictures they can later share with their children. Also, many birth mothers now leave letters for their children explaining why they’re giving them up.

Because this phenomenon is so new, no one knows whether it will be an improvement in the long run. But the consensus is that reducing the secrecy and minimizing the mystery is a good idea all around. However, continued contact between the two families as the child grows up is carrying the openness too far, says Whittington, who also disagrees with the common practice of telling children that they’re adopted as soon as they can understand the words.

“Parents usually tell children when they first can talk, which is around two, partly because they want to be sure a child isn’t told by someone else first. But telling a child at two creates a possible intrapsychic dilemma. It’s better to wait until a child has obtained ‘object constancy’ — that is, the ability to create and sustain an image of the parent when the parent is no

longer there. The reason peekaboo is so much fun for a two-year-old is that when you’re behind the handkerchief, he really doesn’t know you’re still there. Telling a child at that stage that he had another mommy who gave him up is too confusing. By the age of four or five, when he can hold onto a mental representation, he is better able to integrate the information.”

When to tell children they’re adopted has been a continuing source of anxiety for parents and of controversy among therapists. There is still no consensus. Lifton tends to agree that kids should be told later rather than earlier. She writes in *Lost and Found*, “Parents should obviously tell the child when they themselves feel most comfortable about it, but if the child has not brought up anything about how babies are born by the age of five or six, they might broach the subject along with how babies are adopted.”

Whittington believes that memorabilia from the birth parents — pictures and letters, for example — should be withheld until the child is older, perhaps until he is 18. She says that when children know those things will someday be available to them, their curiosity wanes. But parents should be open and discuss what they do know with their children even if the reality is not pleasant. “Kids can handle the truth — it’s always better than not knowing and filling in the blanks.”

The reason adoption has been “intrinsically difficult,” according to Whittington, “is that people didn’t know what was going on. It can be great — the best of all possible worlds. A child needs a home and a home needs a child. Both are giving and both are receiving.”