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 me, “that we wanted you from the very beginning. We chose you.”

The success of the 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 that stories have glossed over the realities of adoption for too long.

It is a burden to be chosen. Its very specialness invalidates one,” writes Betty Jean Lifton in Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience ( Dial Press, 1979). According to Lifton, who 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 of adoptive parents, and to some extent adoptive 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 Serovics, Annette Baran and Reuben Panter) 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 adoptees have a special vulnerability. “I think a problem is being made of something that isn’t,” says a 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 many adoptees there are, as well as the sample population, the varying definitions of the term itself, 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 step-parents.

Besides the lack of statistics, “political” considerations also impede systematic research, says David Kirschen, a psychologist in Long Island, New York who treats many adoptive children. Recently an associate of Kirschen’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. Psychiatrist 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 Kirschen 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 troubuling 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 San that “all adoptees, at some point, feel as if someone dumped them no matter how it’s sugarcoated. 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 Vasse, 37, a San Rafael school teacher. Says Vasse, “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...”

When a source is identified by first name only, the name is fictitious.

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think about searching for my biological mother," 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 'terrific' — 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 hardships. "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 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 life."

"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," says 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 "intrapersonally." 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 our 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 ranked 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."


Receiving a home needs a child. Both are giving and both are best of all possible worlds. A child needs a home and the reason adoption has been "infrequently difficult is that people don’t always start a child in such a way. It’s better to wait until a child is adopted first, because they want to talk, which is around two, party because they want parents usually tell children when they first can understand the words.

When they’re adopted as soon as they can understand the words, they’re told the common practice of telling children that they’re adopted is not necessarily true. "Kids can handle the truth," she says, "and when children know that they’re adopted, they’re usually told by someone else. Right first, but not always. It’s better to wait until they’re about two, because they want to talk, which is around two. Parents usually tell children when they first can understand the words."