



## Is It Grief? Why Challenging Behaviors May be Signs of Grieving

Most every adoptive parent has been through it. You've done all you know how to do to make your child feel secure and loved. You've gone to training, read all the right articles and books, made well-informed decisions and sought out help when you needed it. And it paid off. Your child is doing great in school, has lots of friends, seems happy and well-adjusted. Then, out of nowhere, your child begins exhibiting behaviors you haven't seen in months, years, or maybe ever. Suddenly, after so much progress, it feels like your child's behaviors are angry and out-of-control. Both you and your child are at a loss to understand what's going on. What happened?

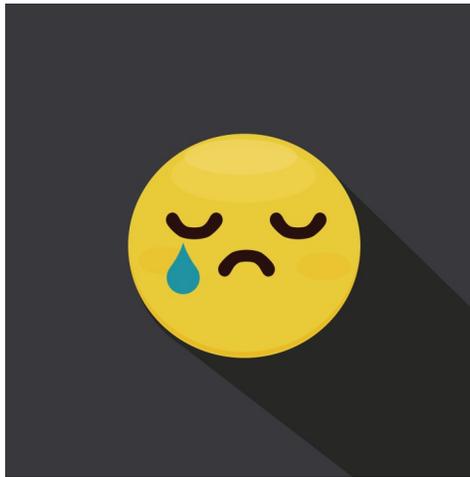
If you're like most parents, you start second-guessing your parenting and wonder where YOU went wrong that your child is suddenly struggling. This is especially true if you adopted your child at a very young age or your child has been with you the majority of his or her life.

Before you start blaming yourself, it may be helpful to remember:

1. Even under the best of circumstances, there is a trauma element to adoption that may be impacting your child's

behavior.

2. Children may grieve the losses surrounding their adoption many times throughout their lives.



Certainly, there can be any number of reasons why a child or youth may be acting out, but absent a precipitating factor or obvious trigger, it may be helpful to consider that your child may be grieving. For many children, adoption is an "ambiguous loss." This is a term used to describe a loss where there is uncertainty or confusion associated with the loss that doesn't allow for

closure. Take, for example, a loved one who goes missing. Without having answers to what happened to your loved one, it is impossible to have closure. For the child who has been adopted, there is an awareness that biological family members are "missing." The unanswered questions grow as the child reaches each new developmental stage, triggering the stages of grieving over and over again.

Although the stages of grieving are universal, not everyone moves through them in the same order or with the same intensity. The process may look very different for each child, depending on current age, age at adoption, the degree of trauma, or level of awareness. For example, a child adopted through foster care

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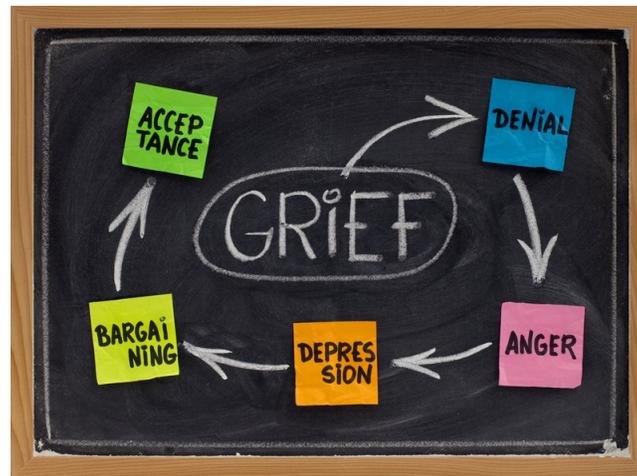
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who has vivid memories of the removal from the birth family may experience the stages of grief differently than the child adopted in infancy who grew up celebrating his adoption story. What is important is that we understand both have experienced loss -- and that we are able to recognize when our children are grieving that loss.

So what are the stages of grieving?

- **Shock/denial** - Denial is a defense mechanism where there is either a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept facts. This may be more apparent with the older youth who believes he will eventually be returned to the birth parent(s).
- **Anger** - In this stage, your child may be angry with him or herself, angry with you, or angry with birth parent(s). He may begin pushing you away with tantrums, lashing out, swearing, physical aggression, or other destructive behaviors.
- **Bargaining** - This is the “If/then...” stage, where a child struggles to regain a feeling of control in the midst of the helplessness and vulnerability of loss. “If I’m really good, then you won’t abandon me, too.” In this stage, a child may feel guilt or blame.
- **Sadness/Depression** - “Why bother trying if you’re just going to abandon me, too?” “I must not be lovable if my mom picked drugs over me.”
- **Acceptance** - “Everything is going to be okay. I am loved and safe.”



Feelings of grief and loss can surface at any developmental stage or when triggered by life events. Know that even children adopted at an early age who have no conscious recollection of their birth parents may experience symptoms of profound loss, especially as they approach their teen years and are developing an identity. Other common triggers may include:

- Puberty
- Holidays
- Birth of a new child in family
- Graduations
- Contact with birth family
- Transitions such as a new school or home

- Death of a loved one or family pet
- Break up of a relationship

There are a variety of behaviors that may indicate that your child is grieving, especially if the behavior is out of character for your child. They include:

- Defiance
- Self-harm
- Physical and verbal aggression
- Property destruction
- Drug/alcohol use
- Sexually acting out
- Regress to behaviors that are not age appropriate
- Tantrums
- Poor hygiene
- Bedwetting/soiling
- Obvious negative attention getting behaviors
- Expressions of guilt for being rejected by parents
- Fear and anxiety about being taken

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- away
- Distrustful and deceitful behaviors

Again, there may be a variety of factors at play that could result in the behaviors listed above. Either way, your first impulse as a parent may be to let your child know unequivocally that these behaviors are unacceptable and you will continue to issue consequences as long as the behaviors continue. If your child is grieving, however, chances are taking away a favorite toy or video game will do little to create a more peaceful home. The good news is that there are strategies you can employ to help effectively alleviate the behaviors - regardless of the reason behind them. The most important road to healing and secure attachment for a child who is grieving loss involves being patient and understanding in helping your child process what he or she is feeling.

### Tips for Parents

- Know it's not your fault - grieving is a natural process for all children who have been adopted
- Reassure your child as often as possible that he or she is wanted and valued
- Reassure your child their loss is not their fault/absence does not mean rejection
- Be forthcoming with age appropriate information regarding his/her adoption
- Acknowledge child's loss - let him or her know it's normal and okay to feel what he or she is feeling
- Give your child permission to grieve without feeling guilty
- Don't take it personally - your child's feelings of loss are no reflection on his or her relationship with you
- Celebrate your child's dual heritage - biological and adoptive
- Know that your child needs to grieve his

or her loss; it is a process that may reoccur over his or her lifetime

- Find a therapist who specializes in working with children who have experienced trauma and loss
- Take care of your own emotional needs so you can be fully present to support your child

Yes, grieving may be a lifelong process for the child who has been adopted. Regressive and out-of-control behaviors can be a difficult but natural part of that process. By giving a name to what your child/youth is feeling, being honest and open about his or her adoption story, providing a safe space for your child to express feelings, and allowing him or her to grieve without guilt or shame can go a long way toward healing.



### Resources

- [Effects of Separation and Loss on Children's Development](#)
- [Grief Speaks](#) (giving voice to grief and loss)
- Child Welfare Gateway: [Helping Adopted Children Cope with Grief and Loss](#)



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