



## FACTSHEET FOR FAMILIES

January 2015



# Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler

Children ages 3 to 5 are limited in how much they can understand about adoption. Like all children of this age, adopted children are naturally curious and may ask many questions. They are also growing and changing rapidly. As their abilities develop, so will their understanding of their place in their families and communities. These early years are a good time for you to start practicing talking about adoption in a positive and relaxed manner. This will set the stage for open communication as your child grows.

This factsheet is designed to help you understand your preschooler's developmental needs. It also provides practical strategies to promote a warm and loving relationship with your child based on honesty and trust. Finally, this factsheet can serve as a reference for parents to revisit as their adopted child navigates the preschool years.

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**Children's  
Bureau**

## Adoption and Child Development

It is important to understand the typical developmental tasks and needs of preschoolers, as well as how adoption-related experiences may affect your child. This knowledge will help you better meet his or her needs, build a close relationship with your child, and promptly identify and address any delays.

### Preschooler Development

Preschoolers don't need special classes or expensive toys to learn and grow. Simple everyday interactions such as singing, talking, touching, rocking, and reading can help create a bond with your child and support healthy growth. The following are common characteristics and needs of preschoolers:

#### What preschoolers are learning:

- How to jump, hop, climb, ride a tricycle, throw a ball (large muscle development)
- How to color, draw, cut with scissors, brush teeth, dress and undress themselves, use forks and spoons (fine muscle skills)
- How to put words and short phrases together
- How to concentrate on a task
- How to recognize family members and friends
- How to name simple emotions such as happy, angry, sad, or scared
- How to express emotions in an appropriate way

#### How preschoolers think:

- They believe in magic and imaginary characters such as fairies, elves, and monsters.
- They believe that they cause life-changing events, that everything revolves around them, and that everyone shares their point of view.
- Their thoughts are often occupied by fantasies and fears.
- They give lifelike qualities to nonliving objects (children may believe that a stuffed animal has thoughts and feelings).

- They are literal thinkers and may not understand abstract concepts (children may think a child "put up for adoption" is literally put up on a shelf).

#### What you can do:

- Provide space, activities, and playthings to stimulate both large and small muscle groups.
- Provide chances to play and talk with others.
- Give them the opportunity to make simple choices (what to wear or eat). Narrow down choices to just a few things to keep them from being overwhelmed with options.
- Read to your child, and nurture an interest in reading by visiting libraries and bookstores.
- Teach appropriate social skills through words and by example.
- Model and talk about healthy ways to cope with emotions.
- Calm their fears. ("See, there are no monsters hiding under your bed.") Remember that you may not understand why they are afraid of some things, especially if a fear is linked to a past memory.
- Help them understand cause and effect. ("You went into foster care because your parents had grown-up problems that kept them from being able to take care of you, not because of anything you did.")
- If possible, when transitioning a preschooler into your family, use familiar foods, clothing, and blankets—little things that will help them feel comfortable and ease the transition.
- Be calm, patient, consistent, and predictable. Listen to your child, and be emotionally and physically available.

The National Library of Medicine provides a brief overview of the typical developmental tasks of preschool children: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002013.htm>

## Effects of Early Experiences

Children's brains grow rapidly during the early years of life and are shaped by a child's experiences, both good and bad. When the brain is stimulated in positive ways, connections related to those experiences form (for example, talking and singing with and reading to your child helps develop the connections related to language). Negative life experiences—such as maltreatment, involvement with the child welfare system, and institutionalization—also impact brain functioning and are risk factors for cognitive, emotional, social, health, and developmental delays. They may also cause sensory processing issues, where children can be either sensory seeking or sensory avoiding as a way to calm their nervous systems. The experiences described below sometimes contribute to delays or disabilities, but they do not affect all children in the same way:

**Poor prenatal care.** If your child's birth mother had poor prenatal care or nutrition, your child's physical or mental development may have been harmed. Prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs may damage a child's developing brain or lead to specific disabilities. In preschool-age children, prenatal alcohol- and drug-related impairments can cause learning disabilities and poor self-control and social adjustment. It may be hard to tell if a child's impairments are related to substance abuse or to trauma after birth.

**Child abuse or neglect.** If your child experienced early neglect or abuse, that experience could limit his or her physical, mental, emotional, and social development. Often children can catch up to peers, although their development takes longer, but in some cases, development is permanently damaged. Children whose early lives are harsh and/or unpredictable may not be able to develop the trust needed for healthy emotions. Sexual abuse can have an especially negative impact on young children by altering a child's understanding of appropriate roles and relationships. Physical abuse and harsh physical punishment may affect how a child responds to discipline.

**Institutionalization or multiple moves.** Young children in institutional care (e.g., orphanages) are at risk for delays in mental, social, and physical growth. They also may have challenges processing sensory information or challenges with balance and movement. Institutionalization or multiple moves from family to family may limit a young child's ability to form a healthy attachment to a primary caregiver. This can delay emotional and social development.

**Grief and loss.** Children who experience separation from their birth parents may feel an unresolved sense of grief or guilt. Even children adopted as infants will experience grief about the loss of their birth parents and a potential life with them. These feelings may recur over their lifetime, particularly at milestones in life, even when the adoption was a positive experience. Unresolved grief can affect a child's emotional and mental development.

**Trauma.** Trauma is an emotional response to a stressful experience that threatens or causes harm (such as child abuse, neglect, separation from loved ones, institutionalization, and multiple moves). While most children have some resilience, trauma overwhelms a child's natural ability to cope, and untreated trauma can interfere with a child's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health and development. Some of the signs of trauma in preschool-aged children include irritability (fussiness), tantrums, startling easily or being difficult to calm, repeating traumatic events in play or conversation, and delays in reaching a variety of milestones.

Parents should know that while the experiences outlined above can negatively affect a child's development, every child is different. Not all children will exhibit impairments or disabilities. For those children that do, there is hope. Parents can help their children build resilience (the ability to cope and heal) following negative life events with nurturing and support. Many children will catch up developmentally; some children will always have challenges.

More information on brain development is available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/impact/development/brain>.

## Gaps in Development

Children who spent a lot of time living with a family or in an institution and experienced maltreatment may not learn how to communicate well or to express their feelings. They may not have had chances to play with other children, take turns, or just have fun. If this was your child's experience, your child may be much younger in development than his or her chronological age, and it may be helpful to think of your child as being younger. This reduces expectations that can frustrate a child or damage his or her self-esteem. Your child may need time to "catch up" to children in the same age group in some skills, and most children are able to do so, particularly if parents are patient with their child and if they offer the guidance and experiences necessary for growth. Although parents might be uncomfortable allowing their child to behave in a younger manner, children must go back and learn what they have missed in order to grow. Also, if your child's first language is not English, there may be additional delays and challenges.

You can help your child overcome these developmental gaps by considering your child's developmental needs, rather than his or her age. Allow your child to learn at his or her own pace. Break tasks down into smaller, doable steps so that the child can feel a sense of mastery and accomplishment. This encourages progress.

The following are some examples:

- **Teach your child new ways to interact and communicate.** Use both actions and words. ("I am waiting for my turn to throw the Frisbee." "John showed his anger with words, instead of hitting.")
- **Teach your child about safety, privacy, and healthy family relationships.** Demonstrate appropriate behavior and explain. ("In this home we go to the bathroom one at a time," or "We don't talk to strangers.")
- **Use simple games and activities that help your child develop and coordinate all five senses.** Finger-paint in the bathtub with colored shaving cream, practice writing with foam rubber letters, play dress-up with multifabric clothing and accessories, identify toys and

point out their different characteristics (red, yellow, smooth, soft, big, small). Allow your child to play with "baby toys" designed for much younger children. A child cannot catch up without experiencing earlier developmental steps.

## Parenting to Build Attachment

Secure attachment—the strong emotional bond between child and primary caregiver that makes a child feel safe and loved—is an important and powerful influence that positively affects a child's brain development, social and emotional development, and self-regulation. Children who have experienced trauma (such as maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system) may exhibit problems associated with a lack of healthy attachment to a caregiver, including developmental delays, difficult social relationships, struggles with emotional regulation, aggression, low self-esteem, and depression.

You can use knowledge of your child's history and developmental needs to help enhance his or her attachment to you. Offer your child the kind of attention, nurturing, and physical closeness that he or she may have missed during early months and years. This is particularly important for children who have experienced traumatic life events because positive, healthy relationships with supportive and loving caregivers increase the odds of recovery.

### What you can do:

- Smile at your child often, make loving eye contact, and use frequent praise.
- Increase your physical contact (hug, hold hands, let your child sit on your lap, even lovingly apply a bandage to a small cut). Be careful to use "safe touch" with children who may have been sexually abused. (For more information, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway factsheet *Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-abused>.)
- Spend as much time with your child as possible. Consider reducing your work hours or taking a leave of

absence during the child's initial placement, if you are able.

- Allow your child to go back to an earlier developmental stage, such as rocking on your lap cuddled in a blanket. Play baby games like peek-a-boo, feeding each other, and pat-a-cake.
- Show your child how to play, how to have fun, and how to be silly.
- Establish regular routines, guidelines, family activities, and traditions.
- Plan future events to reassure your child that he or she will always be part of your family. Show your child where he or she will go to grade school, middle school, and high school. Talk about the future in your conversations (e.g., next Thanksgiving, next summer, on your sixth birthday).
- Help your child grieve losses. Talk about former caregivers, and look at their photos together, if available. Allow your child to feel sad and to miss people; it doesn't lessen your child's bond with you.
- Help your child remember his or her past with scrapbooks and pictures, but follow your child's lead. Some children may not always want to talk about their pasts or have pictures within view.
- Find ways to make eye contact playing board games across from each other, fixing hair, or face painting.

More information on nurturing and attachment is available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors/nurture-attach>.

## When to Seek Help

Children learn skills (talking, walking, kicking a ball, recognizing letters) at their own pace. Don't become alarmed if your child is slightly behind others his or her age in one, two, or more areas.

However, any child, adopted or not, may have a developmental delay or disability. This is defined as a *significant* delay in one or more skill areas. Some delays are present at birth while others become more evident as the child grows. Some delays (e.g., academic struggles)

are not noticeable until a child gets older. If you notice significant delays, loss of previous skills, or extreme behavior, contact your child's doctor. You should also report if your child has excessive reactions to touch, light, sounds, and motion. A professional can help assess your child's development and determine if serious delays exist. If you disagree with your professional, then be sure to seek a second opinion or press for further testing. For more information on developmental disabilities, see the following from the American Academy of Pediatrics at <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/developmental-disabilities/Pages/default.aspx>.

There are many things you can do if you feel that your child's birth family history or early experiences may put him or her at risk for developmental delays or disabilities:

- Talk to your child's doctor about the possibility of a developmental delay or disability. Choose a doctor who has experience with children who have been adopted or those in placement, if possible.
- Contact the placing agency to ask about postadoption services that may be available. It may be possible and helpful to retake preadoption trainings and review the materials you acquired during the adoption process.
- Contact your State's postadoption resource center or adoptive parent association. See the of the Adoption Assistance by State database (specifically, the question that asks, What types of postadoption services are available in your State, and how do you find out more about them?) on the Information Gateway website for more information, available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-assistance>.
- Seek support and advice from experienced adoptive parents of children similar to yours. Join an adoptive parent support group. (Access Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory to locate support groups in your State, available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/index.cfm?event=viewSearchForm>.)
- Ask for a professional assessment. Under Federal law, a young child who might have a physical, sensory, mental, or emotional disability is guaranteed the right to an assessment. If your child receives Medicaid,



screening is free through the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) program. For more information see, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/service-array/health/types-of-health-services>.

- Attend ongoing training on adoption and special needs.
- For children showing signs of trauma, ask the placing agency if a trauma/formal mental health assessment was done, and, if it was not, request one. Discuss the availability of trauma-focused treatment. Be sure an adoption-competent practitioner is used.

If your child is found to have a disability, he or she might be eligible for Early Childhood Special Education. This can include speech therapy, occupational or physical therapy, and counseling. Some services can be provided at home, while others may be offered at a child development center. For information about early developmental and behavioral screening for kids see the following link from the U.S. Department of Education at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/list/watch-me-thrive/index.html>.

It's important that you maintain a positive attitude and establish a tone of loving support and encouragement by showing you are willing to meet the child where he or she is developmentally. Recent research shows that nurturing environments and loving relationships can build resilience in children.

Child Welfare Information Gateway provides more information about postadoption services, health service locators, respite care, developmental and physical disabilities resources, therapy, and adoption preservation services on the Finding Services for an Adopted Child webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/services>.

## Talking About Adoption

Parents who project an attitude of acceptance and comfort with adoption are better able to help their children explore their own feelings and fears. With young children, how you say something is more important than what you say. Stay relaxed and matter-of-fact. Your tone

of voice is important. Parents who tense up when the topic of adoption is raised may send the message that something is wrong with being adopted. Similarly, keeping information "secret" implies that adoption is negative, bad, or scary. This section provides strategies to help you communicate effectively with your preschooler.

## Talk Openly With Your Child

Preschoolers love stories and will want to hear their own adoption story again and again. These years are a great time to practice approaching the topic comfortably and honestly. Preschoolers are limited in how much they can understand about adoption, so simple explanations will work best. Be concrete and use props such as dolls, simple drawings, and story books. Don't feel you have to cover everything at once; you and your child will have many chances to talk about adoption. Remember that young children may not be ready to hear all details regarding their adoption, particularly upsetting details relating to their early treatment or about their birth family.

Preschoolers generally feel good about having been adopted but may still have questions. At this age, they are beginning to notice pregnant women and wonder where babies come from. The most important idea for the preschooler to grasp is that he or she was born to another set of parents and now lives with your family. (Some adopted preschoolers have thought that they were not born.) You can help your child understand this idea using clear and simple explanations. ("Babies grow in a special safe place inside their birth mothers' bodies.") Don't worry if they initially reject the explanation.

Children this age are also self-centered and concrete in their thinking. They often blame themselves for life events. Language is an important consideration whenever discussing adoption, both with your child and in responses to other people's questions when your child is present. Tell the adoption story in words that will help him or her build a positive identity, calm fears, and understand his or her personal story.

Consider the following word choices:

| Instead of:   | Say:   |
|---|--|
| "Real" mother/father<br>OR<br>"Natural" mother/father | Birth mother/father<br>OR<br>Biological mother/father<br>OR<br>First mother/father |
| "Adoptive" mother/father                              | Mother/father  |
| We could not have our own baby.                       | We could not have a baby <i>born to us</i> .                                       |
| Your birth parents were not able to take care of you. | Your birth parents had grown-up problems, so they could not take care of a child.  |
| They gave you up for adoption.                        | They <i>made a plan</i> for you to be adopted.                                     |
| The child is adopted.                                 | The child was adopted.   |

More information on the use of language in adoption is available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/language>. Resources intended to help families talk about adoption are also available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/talking>.

## Use a Lifebook

A "lifebook" contains the background and story of your child's life. It is a sort of personal history book, where your child can collect pictures of important people, places, and events, as well as objects and other memorabilia that have a personal meaning and helps answer "Who am I?".

### What you can do:

- Start at the beginning of your child's story—with his or her birth, not with the adoption.
- Present facts simply, in ways that the child can understand.
- Where applicable, maintain contacts with birth family members, orphanage staff, and previous caseworkers and caregivers to gather photos and memorabilia for the book.
- If your child was adopted internationally, include visuals from his or her native country (postcards, woven fabrics, popular folk images, native cartoon characters).
- Allow your child to decide when and with whom to share this valuable book.
- If necessary, put aside sensitive information until the child is old enough to understand it.
- View the lifebook as a therapeutic process, not just a book. Chances are, your child's book may never be finished, but that is okay.
- It is possible that looking through the book may cause a child to become upset, particularly on special occasions when emotions are already heightened, such as holidays. Tuck books away for safe-keeping if they are upsetting your child. Pull them back out when you child asks.
- See the Lifebooks section of the Information Gateway website for additional resources, tips, and sample lifebooks, available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks>.

## Support Birth Family Relationships

"Open adoption" refers to maintaining contact between the child (adoptee) and his or her birth parents, siblings, or other birth relatives. Like not keeping adoption a secret, an open adoption can have great benefits for the adoptee as well as the adoptive parents and birth families. Many adoptive families choose to maintain some level of contact with their child's birth family members, although the degree of openness varies. In recent years, there has been a growing trend toward open adoptions and, today, an open adoption is more often the rule, rather than the exception. Adoptive parents often meet birth parents before the adoption, whether it is an infant adoption or an adoption from foster care. So, the question may not be, "Do you want to have contact with the birth family?" but "When and what kind of contact would be in your child's best interest?"

Families should consider the degree of openness that best suits their child's needs. In some adoptions, adoptive family and birth family members contact each other directly. Contact can vary from frequent to annual in-person visits and phone conversations, to the exchange of letters and pictures through the mail with no in-person contact. In other adoptions, information is shared through an agency, caseworker, or lawyer. Some families choose to share only medical histories and other background information without identifying information such as last names or addresses. Many families, in conjunction with their agency, work out a postadoption contact agreement with the birth families before the adoption. Families should learn more about the benefits of open adoption by working with their adoption agency and by reading and educating themselves about adoption issues.

The Information Gateway website includes a page on Open Adoption and Contact With Birth, which provides additional information and resources, including a link to the factsheet *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families*; visit <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-openadopt>.

## Helping Your Child With Postadoption Contact

Adoptive parents sometimes worry about relationships with the birth family. Sometimes their reaction to the idea of openness and contact is one of fear. (Will their child prefer the birth parent? Will the child reject the adoptive family? Can the child become confused about having two families?) Because of these fears, adoptive parents may want to limit contact. However, adoption experts note that contact with birth family members generally has a positive effect on children. Contact with the birth family helps a child develop his or her identity, build self-esteem, and feel more—not less—attached to the adoptive family. Like all relationships, these types of relationships may feel awkward at first. Sometimes an outside adoption expert, such as a counselor or agency social worker, can help everyone define and feel comfortable with their respective roles. Early meetings may need to take place at a neutral location, or initial contact may be by letter, email, or phone.

Preschool-age children have limited understanding of their relationship to their birth parents. (One little boy said, "Susan is my *birthday mother* because she comes to my birthday parties.") Help your preschooler see that these other "parents" or relatives are important. Speak of them respectfully and comment on their positive qualities. Seeing that you value his or her birth relatives or previous caregivers will help your child feel better about him- or herself and closer to you. Children attach and bond with those who love and care for them daily, and relationships with birth families need not be threatening to adoptive parents.

## Transracial/Transcultural Openness

While intercountry adoptions (also known as transracial or cross-cultural adoptions) remain mostly closed, there is a growing trend of openness across international borders. Open transracial adoptions may be particularly important in helping an adopted child develop a positive self-identity. Birth parents/relatives may represent the only tie to the child's race and heritage.

For internationally adopted children with no birth family member contacts, show your interest in finding as much information about your child's heritage as you can. Help your child learn about his or her country of origin—its culture, history, language, native foods and manner or dress, and current events. Talk about the possibility of a future family trip there, if financially possible. Ideally, your family also has ongoing relationships with people of the same race and heritage as your adopted child so that the child has positive role models whom the child sees on a regular basis. For more information see *Transracial Adoption* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/foster/transracial>.

## Social Media

Social media, which includes forms of Internet communication, such as social networking websites (like Facebook and Twitter), blogs, chat rooms, and photolistings—can be useful tools for supporting birth family relationships. Growing numbers of birth parents and adoptees are using social media to search for and contact each other. This evolving level of openness in adoption can have both positive and negative



implications. It means traditional “closed” adoptions (those that involve total confidentiality and sealed records) may become a thing of the past. Birth and adoptive families should understand that, in the age of the Internet, private information may not always remain that way. Also, parents should prepare their children, and, in turn, be prepared for their children to be contacted via the Internet by birth family members. Discuss safety and privacy concerns, as well as the importance of pacing contact.

These resources provide more information:

- *Untangling the Web: Internet’s Transformative Impact on Adoption*, is available on the Adoption Institute website at <http://adoptioninstitute.org/publications/untangling-the-web-the-internets-transformative-impact-on-adoption/>.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway’s *Searching for Birth Relatives* has a section on social media and searching, available at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-search>.
  - Additional information on this topic is also available on the Information Gateway Social Media in Adoption web section at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/social-media-adoption>.

## Help Children Cope With Adoption-Related Losses

Children adopted as preschoolers often feel sad or angry about their separation from the people they remember. These may include birth family members, foster parents, and orphanage “brothers and sisters.”

Young children, even those who have no conscious memories of their birth parents, experience grief and need to mourn and work through loss. You can help them by answering their questions honestly, accepting their feelings, and helping them remember important people in their past. Accept sadness as a normal part of a child’s coming to terms with adoption. Don’t deny your child this feeling or rush him or her through it. However, if your preschooler seems sad or angry much of the time, seek help. Extreme behaviors or moods (control issues, withdrawal, apathy, extreme fearfulness, poor

appetite, aggressiveness) may result from unresolved grief or may be signs of untreated trauma. If your child shows these behaviors, look for a therapist or counselor who specializes in young children and truly understands adoption. Ask other adoptive parents for recommendations whenever possible. In many cases, anger and difficult behavior subside in time, after children have vented or worked through their emotions.

Learning to be comfortable with your own feelings about adoption, why you chose to adopt (e.g., infertility), or missing out on your child’s earlier experiences creates a positive and significant bond with your adopted child. You may acknowledge your own sadness by saying something like, “I’m sad too that I didn’t get to be with you when you were just a little baby, but I’m happy that your birth mother (and father) had you and that you came to live with me, and now we can always be together.”

For more, see the Helping Adopted Children Cope With Grief and Loss Information Gateway webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/helping>. You may also want to read *The Impact of Adoption on Adoptive Parents* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/impact-parent>) and *The Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-adimpact>).

## Address Adoption Fears and Fantasies

Young children who have already lost one home might be very fearful of losing another. This may lead to increased insecurity. Fears may take the form of sleeping or eating difficulties, nightmares, separation difficulties, nervousness, or increased allergies and illnesses, but there are ways you can build your child’s physical comfort level and emotional security. Children may also push parents away or severely test limits to see if parents will reject them, as a way to protect themselves. Most children are unaware they are doing this.

## What you can do:

**Build a safe environment.** Install nightlights, buy soft cuddly clothing, prepare favorite foods, and give your child extra attention. Try to keep important toys and clothes from your child's past. Establishing consistent routines and rules will also help your child feel safe and secure.

## Let your child know that you will always be there.

Reassure your child that your family and home are permanent. If your child was adopted past infancy, he or she may experience separation anxieties. When you leave the house, make sure to point out that your departure is temporary. Offer something of yours, like a watch or bracelet to get back from your child when you return. This helps a child believe that you really will come home.

**Acknowledge fantasies.** Many children fantasize about an alternate family life. Some children dream of a "real" mother who never reprimands or a father who serves ice cream for dinner. The fantasies of an adopted child may be more frequent or intense because another set of parents really exists. Accept your child's pretending or wishing without defensiveness.

**Give your child permission to talk about birth family members and/or wonder about family they have not met.** You can even take the lead by saying, "I bet your birth mom thinks about you," or "I wonder if your birth dad had such clear blue eyes like yours." Teach your preschooler that it is okay to care about both adopted parents and birth parents.

**Introduce pets and/or encourage interaction with animals.** Interaction with animals can be very therapeutic. Something as simple as holding or petting an animal can help ease anxiety and loneliness. Pets can also help teach children the importance of trust and responsibility, as well as how to regulate emotion (if a child wants to pet a cat, he or she will learn to be calm and not scare the cat away). Children may also discover that once they are able to handle a pet, they are better able to manage their own lives. Monitor early pet experiences as some children may not know how to behave around animals, and this ensures the safety of both your child and the animal.

## Be Sensitive to Daycare/Preschool Issues

Parents often wonder whether they should talk to their child's teacher about adoption or the child's past. A good rule to follow is to share only the information needed to ease the child's adjustment and to keep your child and his or her classmates safe. Aside from parents and immediate family, school is often the most consistent and predictable part of a child's life. So, for children that may have experienced traumatic life events, such as child maltreatment, separation from loved ones, and/or multiple moves, a structured classroom environment that includes interaction with supportive adults can help children develop resilience and improve in other emotional, behavioral, and social areas. However, parents may need to help school staff be more aware of and sensitive to the needs of adoptive families. Certain assignments may be difficult for adopted children, such as bringing baby photos to school. Ask that adoption be included in materials and discussions. Consider donating appropriate picture books about adoption, and help teachers learn positive adoption language.

The Adoption and School section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website provides information for families and teachers on a variety of adoption-related school issues (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/school>).

## Discipline Considerations

The purpose of discipline is to teach, re-teach, and assist children in developing their own internal controls. Discipline should take into account your child's abilities, learning styles, and family history. There are many resources available to help parents learn and use positive discipline. This section provides information about a few specific strategies that may be particularly useful for parents of adopted children.

Note that parents need to be especially careful with children who have been abused or neglected. Physical punishment and threats of physical punishment should not be used as forms of discipline. See Information Gateway's *Parenting a Child Who Has Experienced Abuse or Neglect* for information and resources on disciplining a

child that has been maltreated (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/parenting-CAN>).

## Establish Routines and Rules

Young children thrive on consistency and routine. Routines and rules help children begin to organize their worlds and regulate their own emotions; they can be especially helpful for children whose worlds previously felt chaotic. Children are generally more cooperative and secure when they know what to expect.

Preschool children need just a few simple rules to promote child safety and family harmony. From the moment your child joins your family, establish the household routines that will ease everyday life. Routines for meals and bedtime are especially important. Be patient when explaining and demonstrating your rules and routines. Be cautious about varying the routines until you are sure your child is used to them and feels secure. Even school holidays with disrupted routines at home can be upsetting for a child.

## Use Developmentally Appropriate Rewards and Consequences

Children respond better to praise and positive attention and rewards than to scolding or correcting. Preschoolers love being told that they have done something well. Praise reinforces positive behaviors, and children will seek more chances for praise. Try to warn your child ahead of time of what the consequences of specific actions will be, for instance, "If you don't clean up your toys, then we won't watch TV," which gives the child a chance to comply.

Be sure to notice and praise *specific* behavior. For example: "You did a great job waiting your turn" is more effective than "You're a good girl." In fact, nonspecific labels such as "good girl" may backfire with adopted children who were neglected or abused. Their self-esteem may be so low that they cannot believe they are good or worthy.

As preschoolers mature, they begin to see the connection between cause and effect. With this ability, they are ready to learn through both *natural* and *logical* consequences. Natural consequences occur without parental intervention. The natural consequence of leaving a toy

outside overnight might be that it gets rusty or stolen. Logical consequences are determined by the parent. For example, a logical consequence of running into the street may be to come inside for the rest of the afternoon.

When using logical consequences, it is important to be extra sensitive to a child who has experienced poverty or neglect. For such a child, the loss of a toy might seem so tragic that it interferes with the lesson to be learned. Coach, explain, and give second chances. If your child was prenatally exposed to alcohol, he or she may have extra difficulty understanding the connections between actions and consequences. Work with a knowledgeable therapist or parent coach to develop an appropriate discipline strategy.

## Use Time In Instead of Time Out

Many parents and teachers of preschoolers like to use a brief period of isolation to help a child regain self-control. This is known as *time out*. For children who have developed a secure attachment to others, a few minutes of *time out* are often effective. These children don't like to be alone, and they will improve their behavior quickly so that they can rejoin the group. If you use *time out* for your 3- to 5-year-old, keep it short, and remain in sight of your child.

However, the *time out* method is not the best approach for children who have been neglected, abused, or institutionalized. The main challenge in parenting these children is to help them form healthy attachments. In these cases, use the *time in* method. *Time in* is useful because it avoids distancing kids from parents, playmates, and the rest of the family. When your preschooler's behavior indicates out-of-control emotions, take him or her aside and say: "Time in. You need to stay right here with me until you are ready to join the group." Keep the child physically close to you until he or she is calmer. If the child is extremely agitated, you may need to sit him or her securely on your lap. This will send a message of support without the need for a temporary separation. Attending parenting classes or reading parenting books specific to adoption, attachment, or children exposed to trauma also will be helpful.

Additional resources on discipline and child welfare are available on the Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/disc-abuse>.

## Summary

The preschool years are a good time for adoptive parents to increase their comfort with and sensitivity to adoption issues. These years also play an important part in creating a bond between parent and child based on honesty and trust. With a few adjustments, these early years can provide the foundation for healthy development and a warm and loving parent-child relationship.

As your child grows, you may find it helpful to view the Child Welfare Information Gateway companion publications *Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-school-age>) and *Parenting Your Adopted Teenager* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-teenager>).

For more information, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/stages>.

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