

Middle School Middle Steps!

By Jean MacLeod



SHARING SECRETS are Jenna Fischer, left, and Hanna MacLeod, right.

Tweens enter into having responsibility for their own coping skills, and for their own behavior...

The tween years, from ages 8 to 12, are an adventure for everyone involved. Children are morphing physically, mentally and emotionally toward teenhood, and defining themselves with friends, school and family. In order to remain active participants in their older tweens' lives, moms and dads need to expand their previous parenting roles and morph right along with their new middle schoolers.

The biggest shape-shift for parents of a new middle-schooler is understanding, and helping their children understand, that tweens enter into having responsibility for their own coping skills, and their own behavior. Our sons and daughters can begin to tackle some of their personal roadblocks themselves. This doesn't mean that parents step back from our kids; conversely, we need to step up, but become more of a guide than a commander-in-chief. Our job is to assist our kids, who are lurching toward middle school, with the invisible middle steps that help our adopted children compensate for their "floaty" beginnings in life. It takes a strong foundation to build a strong tween or teen, and some of our kids need us to point out the steps to a successful construction — the blueprint is not always intrinsic in an adopted child.

In talking to other adoptive parents during the last 12 years, I've heard many of the same issues I was dealing with in my daughters, cropping up in other homes — and the hallmark of many of these issues was anxiety. Deep-seated anxiety, based on fear of loss and life-altering change, may be the scarlet "A" of international adoption.

Has your child experienced intense...

- Sleep issues and nightmares?
- Big fears about potential situations or imaginary monsters?
- Over-clinginess or extreme separation anxiety?
- Difficulties with making friends?
- Anxiety about change?
- Oversensitivity to discipline, or perceived criticism?
- Perfectionism?

Many of us with children now entering grades six through nine have managed to muddle through our kids' initial reactions to early-life trauma, or have worked to alleviate their adoption-related behaviors. We have

created solutions, or found therapeutic help, or kept our fingers crossed that the above issues would eventually disappear.

Many times these types of behaviors or emotional issues do seem to subside or go underground, but pop up again with a vengeance when an adopted child is under extreme stress. Stress, anxiety and difficulty with new school transitions often go hand in hand. Our evolved direction as parents of older tweens means we don't move to "fix" a scenario for our children going into middle school — it means we empower our children to face change.

Middle Step: TALK. Parents can help an adopted child understand that previous losses, and fear of loss, may trigger over-fearful or anxious present-day responses to new situations. Our adopted kids need to know the root cause of what they are dealing with — what is the real issue in an emotional reaction; what is really driving the behavior? Deborah N. Silverstein, LCSW, and Sharon Kaplan Roszia, MS, have identified basic

adoption issues that are experienced, to some degree, by every adopted person. The Seven Core Issues in Adoption — loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, mastery/control — are useful for an adopted tween or teen to be aware of, as these issues are often at the back of an adoptee's puzzling emotional response.

Change forces anxieties to the surface. Understanding the source of the anxiety is a tween's first step to coping with it. Revisiting adoption and validating a pre-adolescent's changing perspective on his or her own life-story provides another parent-child opportunity to talk about the long-term impact adoption may have on emotions, performance and relationships.

Middle Step: SUGGEST. Our adopted tweens wish to act with the same independence that their peers display, but if a child regularly deals with anxiety, then it is likely that a parent will need to provide some extra guidance for a tween on his or her path to individuation. If your tween desperately

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Resources

Beneath the Mask, Understanding Adopted Teens

By Debbie Riley, M.S.

Adoption-Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections

Edited by Jean MacLeod & Sheena Macrae, Ph.D.

Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-By-Step Guide for Parents

By Ronald M. Rapee (ed)

Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias

By Tamar Chansky

What To Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids

By James J. Crist, Ph.D., (for kids, grades 5-8)

Helping Children Cope with Loss and Separation

By Claudia Jewett Jarratt

"Seven Core Issues in Adoption" (from C.A.S.E.)

<http://www.adoptionssupport.org/res/7core.php>

"The Adopted Child's Changing View" (developmental chart from C.A.S.E.)

<http://www.adoptionssupport.org/res/timeline.php>

Adoption Parenting TWEENS listserv

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AdoptionParentingTwens/>

Note to Parents: In some adopted children, anxiety can be debilitating. If you have concerns about the intensity and duration of your child's anxiety, or if stress and worry are negatively impacting your child's daily life or social relationships, please seek professional care.

wants to attend a sleepover with his or her classmates, but is doubtful about his or her ability to make it comfortably through the night in strange surroundings, suggest a middle step. Allow your child to attend the pizza party that precedes the sleepover, but pre-arrange an agreeable pick-up time after dinner with your child and the adult host. Tell your child to blame you, saying "my mom doesn't allow sleepovers" or "we have plans tomorrow morning," so she can enjoy the party without apprehension, or loss of social reputation.

Middle Step: PRACTICE. Seemingly simple transitions, like dealing with a locker combination code for the first time, can be fraught with high anxiety for all students, not

Middle Step: SUPPORT. After talking and suggesting, our tween-parent job requires us to step back and simply support. Parents can positively reinforce a child's good use of middle step coping skills, and can invite a child to decide "what might work better next time" in other, less-successful circumstances.

The key to reinforcing genuine empowerment is in asking for your tween's own opinion and problem-solving solutions — and listening. Our kids know their fears and anxieties better than anyone; telling them what they should have done in a failed situation will be perceived as criticism, not as support.

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Adoption magnifies the typical issues of adolescence, and adds an additional spin to normal concerns. Savvy parents are sounding boards, resisting the urge for "helpful" interference, and can provide an empathic ear as their tween takes baby steps toward teen autonomy.

just adoptees. However, this universal middle school trigger will hit an intense, anxious tween twice as hard.

To avoid the locker-fear scenario, make a trip or two to the school after registration, and practice opening the assigned locker. Walk around the school and scope out the best paths to each classroom — many tweens have never had to change classrooms during the school day. Adoptees may find change especially suspect and difficult to deal with; consciously noting this can help them frontload with the coping skills necessary to survive the first days of a new school environment.

Practice makes permanent. Brainstorming middle steps together, and supplying some role play, allows a tween to enter and conquer new situations slowly and safely — and without unnecessary anxiety.

normal concerns. Savvy parents are sounding boards, resisting the urge for "helpful" interference, and can provide an empathic ear as their tween takes baby steps toward teen autonomy. Our kids need us more than ever, but they need us as the "middle man" — assisting their self-understanding, providing a think-tank for their own ideas, and standing ever-ready with our confident encouragement.

Jean MacLeod is author of "At Home in This World" and contributing co-editor of "Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections," is a freelance writer who has also presented workshops at the Colorado Heritage Camps, the Midwest Adoption Conference, the KAAAN conference, and for adoption support groups internationally. She is the mother of three daughters, two of whom were adopted from China. For more information, visit www.TheWriteMagic.com.