

Attachment 3

Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency

From Adoptalk 2019, Issue 2; Adoptalk

By Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Allison Davis Maxon.

Retrieved from <https://www.nacac.org/resource/seven-core-issues-in-adoption-and-permanency/>

Adoption, foster, and kinship care are important resources for addressing the needs of children in crisis. The majority of adoptions today originate from foster care and kinship caregiving which typically means the child has suffered trauma and/or neglect. Families built through foster, kinship care, and adoption represent bitter sweet forms of family building as they incorporate the joys and pain of both loss and gain. All members of the adoption/permanency constellation—which include adopted persons, birth/first parents, permanent parents, and extended family—experience lifelong intergenerational losses and complexities. How and when individuals are affected by both the positive and challenging issues of adoption and permanency depends upon many factors. These variables include personality, temperament, developmental stage at the time losses and/or trauma occurred, support systems, numbers of attachment disruptions, ongoing access to kin, and whether there is open and honest communication between constellation members.

Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency are experienced by all members of the constellation and include the following:

- Loss
- Rejection
- Shame and Guilt
- Grief
- Identity
- Intimacy
- Mastery and Control

Awareness of these Seven Core Issues and the challenges and their accompanying tasks can help constellation members better understand how the experience of adoption/permanency has impacted their life and relationships. In addition, it allows constellation members to use this unifying lens to better communicate their own core issues and better understand other constellation members' core issues. A parent's understanding of the Seven Core Issues enables them to better address the complex challenges and feelings their child may experience throughout various stages of

development. This article provides an overview of the Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency and how they may affect the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of each constellation member throughout their lives.

Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency

The Seven Core Issues were first introduced in the 1982 article “Seven Core Issues in Adoption” by Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Deborah Silverstein. Regardless of how a constellation member experienced adoption—whether losing a child, adopting a child, or being adopted—these lifelong complexities impact the lives of individuals and families. In 2019, Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Allison Davis Maxon expanded the Seven Core Issues to include all forms of permanency, as well as the additional impact that attachment disruptions and trauma has on constellation members. Regardless of your experience—whether you were adopted, fostered, or parented by an extended family member; whether you adopted or fostered an infant, child, or youth; whether you adopted from an agency, attorney, facilitator, or from another country; whether the adoption was open, semi-open, or closed; whether the loss of the child occurred voluntarily or involuntarily for the birth/first parents—these lifelong core issues will have an impact.

Loss

Loss begins the journey. It is crisis and/or trauma that create the circumstances that lead to the necessity of adoption and permanency. The crises of an unplanned pregnancy, rape, incest, poverty, addiction, divorce, mental illness, war or a country’s crisis that results in refugees, natural disasters, epidemics, and cultural biases leads to the displacement of children. Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency, which include loss, rejection, shame/guilt, grief, identity, intimacy, and mastery/control, are created through the disassembling and creating of a new family system. Loss began the journey for all members of the constellation and is the unifying issue that binds them together.

For birth/first parents, adoptive/foster/kinship parents, and people who are adopted, involvement with adoption/permanency is typically associated with an initial loss and many secondary losses that continue to affect constellation members throughout their lives. There are ambiguous losses that impact all members of the constellation which are vague and may be described as a feeling of distress and confusion about people who are physically absent but psychologically and emotionally present in their lives.

For birth/first parents, adoption and permanency means the loss of a child whom they may never see again and the loss of their parenting role. Adoptive parents may have experienced the loss of not giving birth to a particular child, failed fertility treatments, and dreams of raising a child with whom they are genetically connected. People who are adopted lose both their birth/first families; siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. They may lose cultural, racial and ethnic connections and/or their language of origin. If they are adopted as older children, they may also lose friends, foster families, pets, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings.

Losses for constellation members may include:

- A family member; the family tree is permanently altered
- The loss of their familial tree that includes a history, culture, and lineage
- Vital physical, genetic, mental health, and historical information
- Safety, love, and protection of one's birth/first parents
- Societal status and being part of the norm
- Their original role in somebody's life
- Power over their life's circumstances

Rejection

Constellation members' core losses are most often experienced as a form of social rejection. Rejection is a perceived loss of social acceptance, group inclusion or a sense of belonging. Rejection can be real, imagined, or implied. People get their most basic needs met through human connectedness; being rejected or ostracized from a person, family, or community can leave an individual feeling a deep sense of abandonment and isolation. People describe feelings of unworthiness, being of little value, and a fear of future rejection.

Constellation members may personalize their core losses in order to gain a deeper understanding about what happened to them and what role they may have played in those events. In an unconscious attempt to avoid future losses and to regain control of their life's journey, the individual may assume the responsibility for the loss, believing that if the rejection was their fault, then they can change or act

differently and avoid future rejection. Rejection is felt in a person's body as discomfort and physical pain.

Feelings of Rejection may include:

- Increased sensitivity to any further rejection; large or small
- Subsequent losses being experienced as rejection
- Questions such as “Why me?” or “What did I do or not do to deserve this?”
- Children believing the crisis was their fault due to ego-centric thinking
- Feeling judged, unwanted, different, “less than”, or “not good enough”

Constellation members may anticipate rejection, provoke rejection, and/or defend against further rejection.

Shame and Guilt

Rejection leads to feelings of shame and/or guilt. Shame and guilt impact an individual's self-esteem and self-worth and may create anxiety. Shame is maladaptive, while guilt is generally an adaptive emotion. Shame relates to self, guilt to others. Shame is the painful feeling that one is bad and undeserving of deep connections and happiness. Guilt is a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime or wrong, whether real or imagined. Shame is about “being” (I'm bad) and guilt is about “doing” (I did something bad).

When shame is intensely experienced from infancy through the formative years, an inner critic is developed that creates a negative or harsh view of the self, caretakers and the world. Shame greatly impacts self-esteem. Shame leaves a person believing that their core self is “less worthy” than other people. These beliefs increase anxiety and may lead to defensive behaviors. Shame and guilt discourage people from thinking of themselves in a constructive or positive way. It can limit individuals from loving and receiving love as they do not feel worthy.

Guilt develops from our earliest parent-child attachment experiences. Guilt is a learned social emotion. Consistent, secure and healthy primary attachment relationships allow the child to experience and internalize the attachment figures' values and beliefs upon which a conscience develops. The conscience allows for guilt to be felt and develops as the child internalizes the primary attachment figures' voices, actions and images, which are subsequently carried within an individual for the rest of their lives.

Family members, religious institutions, and societal expectations have long created shame and guilt that impact birth/first parents and extended family. Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents can also experience shame and guilt from those same sources.

Children impacted by foster, adoption, and kinship caregiving often experience both shame and guilt ongoingly as their understanding of what happened to them unfolds developmentally over time.

Shame and guilt have long been created by the secrecy attached to adoption and permanency. Secrecy has been used as an element of control over constellation members in the name of privacy.

Constellation members may experience shame and guilt when:

- Attachments have been broken
- Relational trauma, violence, abuse, and neglect occur
- Stigmatizing words and labels are used
- Parents withhold important information from the child, adolescent, or adult
- People are lied to, manipulated, coerced or important information is withheld
- Professionals and “systems of care” criticize or demean (intentionally or unintentionally)

Grief

The profound losses that created feelings or fears of rejection, which led to the emotions of shame and guilt, must be grieved. Adoption and permanency losses are too often left un-named, un-acknowledged, and un-grieved. The losses may be difficult to acknowledge and mourn in a society where these forms of family building are seen as problem-solving events that benefit everyone. The culture perceives these families being formed as a solution to several individual’s problems; a child needs a family, a parent can no longer parent, and new parents are created. This may be perceived as a “gain” for everyone, rather than an event to which loss is integral. Because of this point of view, it may be difficult to accept, discuss, and express the emotions connected to grief.

Acknowledging loss and making room for the “work of grief” is essential to any healing process. In today’s culture, there are few models for healthy grieving. People live in a “quick fix” society where individuals are expected to get over things rapidly and simply move on. Children are not taught how to cope with loss. Grieving is important because it allows people to speak their truth and express their feelings.

Grief is universal. However, it is experienced as a personal and highly individual process. A person’s grief process depends on many factors including: personality, gender, culture, temperament, religious and/or spiritual beliefs, coping styles, life

experiences, the age the loss occurred, the nature of the loss and an individual's support system. Everyone grieves according to their own timeline and in their own way. There is no recipe or prescription to shorten the process or make the suffering go away. It illuminates a truth in an individual's life. Grief is about acceptance, patience, adaptation, forgiveness and endurance; it changes you.

Grief for constellation members is complex as they have experienced a profound loss that changed the trajectory of their life. In the re-arranging of family trees through adoption and permanency, parents are grieving unborn children, children are grieving as their understanding of what happened to them unfolds, and birth/first parents are grieving the loss of their baby/child that they hope is alive and well.

Constellation members may experience grief when:

- The original separation occurs
- Anniversaries of the loss or crisis occurs
- Subsequent losses that require more adaptation occurs
- Someone asks a question that triggers the feelings of loss
- Memories surface in connection to the crisis, loss, or person lost
- A child/teen's understanding of adoption and their story unfolds
- Search and reunion occurs

Identity

If constellation members have acknowledged and identified their losses, examined feelings or fears of rejection, become aware of any issues connected to shame and guilt, and addressed their grief process, they have the opportunity to build a cohesive identity that includes their adoption and permanency status. As a life-altering event, adoption/permanency affects an individual's identity. The pursuit for self-identity is at the heart of the human journey. All individuals are on a quest to understand who they are, where they fit and share their stories with others to better understand themselves. Stories that are broken due to historical or personal events can make it difficult for people to understand and express who they are and solidify their life's narrative.

Identity formation begins in childhood and moves to the forefront during the teenage years. Gaps in identity may be more pronounced when a child starts school or has a family-oriented classroom assignment (e.g., creating a family tree).

If you are adopted, you may have experienced adoption-related identity issues throughout your life and you may feel as though your identity is incomplete, as if you

are missing some pieces to your puzzle. Your birth/first parents are your genetic parents, but they aren't parenting you. You were born into one family and became part of another family from whom you learned values, religions, traditions, family stories, and views of the world.

If you were adopted and lack genetic, medical, religious, cultural, ethnic, racial, and other historical information about your birth/first family, you may want answers to questions that would help form your identity, such as why your birth/first parents placed you, what became of those parents, if you have siblings, and whether you resemble your birth/first parents or extended family.

Adoptive, foster and kinship parents may not feel like the “real” parents or feel entitled to be the “real” parents. Birth/first parents may be unsure of their role in their child's life since they are not actively parenting the child day to day. People who were parents are no longer the “everyday parents” and people who did not give birth become “everyday parents.”

The losses in adoption and permanency create complexities and additional tasks for all constellation members that need to be addressed in order to achieve a healthy identity.

Constellation members may experience identity issues when:

- Tweens and teens are forming their identity
- Children feel insecure or angry and say, “You're not my real mother/father”
- Search and reunion occur
- Personal or intrusive questions are asked
- Medical issues arise
- People ask, “Are those your real children?”, “Are those your real parents?”
- People ask the birth/first parent, “How many children do you have?”
- Birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day create questions about one's connections

Intimacy

Intimacy requires an individual to know who they are and what they need in relationships and believe that they have value. Individuals' most primary motivation is the drive to belong and learn how to get their emotional needs met through human connections. Intimate attachments provide the network through which all social, emotional, physical and psychological needs get met. Intimate attachment relationships require trust, respect, acceptance, empathy and reciprocity.

If individuals have acknowledged their core losses, noted where, when and with whom rejection surfaces, addressed feelings of shame and guilt, taken time to grieve, and have embraced their identity, they are able to offer an authentic self in an intimate relationship. Identity and intimacy are linked; as a person clarifies and re-clarifies who they are, their ability to relate to others, forgive others, embrace others, and trust

others is enhanced. If the earlier core issues have not been addressed, an individual may not know themselves well enough to know what they “really need” or what they have to offer the other person in an emotionally intimate relationship. All constellation members have been impacted by a core loss that changed their identity, which may lead to intimacy challenges.

Constellation members may experience intimacy challenges when:

- They have experienced relational trauma, multiple moves, and attachment disruptions
- They have experienced abuse, violence and neglect
- An adoptee lacks genetic, ethnic, and racial mirroring
- They lose an intimate connection to a child they were parenting
- They lose an intimate relationship with a partner and/or family members
- The crisis of infertility, invasive medical procedures and sex on demand in order to conceive, impacts the couple’s sexuality and their relationship
- Professionals and the courts intrude into a person’s most intimate and personal decisions
- People ask intrusive questions about infertility, your child’s story, or the loss of your children

Mastery and Control

All of the unidentified, un-named, unacknowledged and un-grieved losses can create intense feelings of powerlessness and loss of control. Mastery over one’s life circumstances has been lost at some point by all members of the constellation. Everyone lost some power and control because of a life crisis, with the infant/child losing the most as they had no input into the decision that changed their life trajectory. For adoptees, the early loss of control that moved them from one family tree to another resulted in the ultimate loss of power and control. Traumatic losses and multiple attachment disruptions are a repeated assault on one’s need to feel empowered, secure, valued, and connected. The desire for power and control over one’s life unfolds through each stage of development and throughout adulthood.

Human beings need to feel in control to feel secure. The loss of control can have a long term impact on constellation members. Birth/first parents may emerge from the adoption/permanency process feeling victimized and powerless.

Adoptive/permanency parents have lost control of over when, how and whom to parent. Adoptees and/or children in foster care had no choice about being adopted or fostered and must cope with the haphazard nature of how they joined their particular family. They may wonder, with all the families in the country that are looking to adopt or foster, “How did I end up in this family?”

The ultimate goal for all members of the constellation is mastery, which is a regaining of power and control over one’s life. Every human being needs to feel powerful. Power is a strong component of resilience. Feeling empowered gives a person the ability to have an effect on others, feel that they have authority and rights, be hopeful and create change.

Mastery is a hard-earned proficiency. The achievement of mastery in various aspects of one’s life is a process, a journey, which includes adapting, learning, self-awareness and forgiving.

Constellation members may experience a loss of power and control when:

- Major life decisions about who will parent the child are made by courts, social workers, and others
- Infertility, genetic factors, and life circumstances force a decision whether or not to parent and how to become a parent
- The courts terminate parental rights
- An infant/child/teen is repeatedly moved from place to place
- A new birth certificate is issued and the child’s name and birth information is changed

Constellation members gain a sense of mastery when:

- Their own core issues are acknowledged and addressed
- They can identify their strengths, needs, and value to themselves and others
- They clarify what they were able to control and not control
- They can forgive themselves and others for decisions/mistakes that were made
- They can acknowledge other constellation members’ losses, challenges and pain
- They clarify the lessons that they have learned and take the time to celebrate their accomplishments, their resiliency, strengths, and gains

The Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency triggers such depth of emotions that the authors recognize that there is no way to put into words the feelings that all constellation members experience over time and no words that truly reflect each individual constellation member's unique experience. This article is a brief introduction to the *Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency*. The book includes a more thorough exploration of the Seven Core Issues along with tools and interventions for healing.