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Middle School: Middle Steps!

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

by Jean MacLeod

The tween years (ages 8-12) 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 tween's 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 we 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 over 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 / Nightmares?
- Big fears over potential situations or imaginary monsters?
- Over-clinginess or extreme separation anxiety?
- Difficulties with making friends?
- Anxiety about change?
- Over sensitivity 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



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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 be triggering over-fearful or anxious present-day responses to new situations. Our adopted kids need to know the root cause of 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 their 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 tweenies wish to act with the same independence that their peers display, but if a child regularly deals with anxiety, then it is very 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 wants to attend a sleepover with her classmates, but is doubtful about 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 ("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.

Seemingly simple transitions, like dealing with a locker combination code for the first time, can be fraught with high anxiety for all students, not just adoptees. However, this universal middle school trigger will hit an intense, anxious tween twice as hard! The middle step to suggest in the locker-fear scenario is PRACTICE. Make a trip (or two) to



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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.

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!

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 towards 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.

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