



## **FAST FACTS: Strategies for Understanding and Parenting Adopted Teens**

Many adopted kids seem to have more than their fair share of issues when they reach the adolescent years. Some youth can suddenly turn on the family/caregivers who adopted them. Why is that? As self-awareness begins to grow adopted children can begin to struggle with the who and why of their adoption —even kids who were adopted at birth. Feelings of abandonment by their birth mother can burst to the surface and add to an already emotionally charged adolescence, fueled by a search for meaning, belonging, and validity in their life.

Many adopted children question their true identity during the teen years. This can appear to the adoptive parents as a shocking lack of appreciation or even a temporary hatred of them. These parents often ask: "What have we done wrong?" or "Did I/we cause this?" In most cases they have done nothing wrong!

Unlike other teenagers, adopted teens have the added burden of figuring out who their birth family was, what happened, and why they were given up. This change often surprises adoptive parents by the intensity of the struggle with (and within) their adopted teen. It is important to realize that no amount of love and nurturing might have prevented the problem. This is the time for you to be present as they struggle with these inner questions. Most teens work through this phase after a few years and come out on the other side unscathed, if the adopted family can stick with them, set limits grounded in their values and love them unconditionally through the challenges.

### **Tips and Parenting Techniques for Adolescence**

As your adopted teen is working through the challenging developmental tasks of identity and independence, your role becomes balancing CONNECTION and LIMIT-SETTING. Connection includes time spent together laughing, working, cooking, and eating, having common interests, or focusing on their interests, and reconciliation after having to implement consequences. Reconciliation is equally important to limits and consequences as it is a time to teach your adopted teen that you will remain in a relationship with them regardless of how many times they make choices that are outside your values and expectations.

As the parent of an adopted teen your task is to set loving and consistent limits to help them make informed decisions and to keep them safe. So, as a parent it's important to remember you are not trying to control them; you are just trying to pave their way. Effective limits convey your values and expectations while holding your teen responsible for their choices.



At its core, this is about embracing your role as an [authority in your teen's life](#). For the rest of their life your adopted teen will have to learn to respect authority whether it's a teacher, a boss, or the laws of the country. As the authority at home, it's crucial to be clear with yourself about your expectations and values so that they can be clear to your teen. What do you expect of them and why? How have you communicated those expectations? And how do you hold them accountable? Setting limits and expectations is especially important with adoption. Limits give all kids a sense of security.

## 10 Tips for Setting Limits

Not every adopted teen needs extensive limits and consequences. But rules and guidelines are part of life. If they don't respect you, they may have difficulty respecting authority in general. Know that, with any changes, sometimes things can get worse before they get better. Change can cause some upheaval, but that's the key to moving forward.

1. Keep rules simple and straightforward. Rules are most effective when they are few and focused on teaching concepts like safety, respect, hygiene, privacy, etc. The consequences of not following the simple rules should be straightforward and ideally well known. For example, a teen could be grounded with no phone for one week if he fails a class, nothing more. For adopted teens with a history of abuse, the term "rules" could possibly trigger abuse memories and it might be helpful to instead refer to it as "house guidelines."
2. Shorter, time-limited consequences are more effective. With shorter groundings and other restrictions, it's easier for your teen to connect it with the original reason for the consequence in the first place. It also gives you more leverage because when the next situation happens, you'll have something to take away. Remember, the goal is not for them to make no mistakes; it's to help them to make informed decisions. If the consequences are quicker, your teen might have more opportunity to make a different choice. Shorter consequences are like spraying your cat when he jumps up on the counter. You don't need to soak him. He gets the message that what he's doing is unacceptable.
3. Don't physically engage with them. One of the hardest parts of setting limits is that it can become physical. So many adoptive parents engage in a tug of war over a phone or bar the door when their teen threatens to leave, or even stand in front of the car if their teen tries to take it without permission. These scenarios downgrade your status in your teen's mind (regardless of who "wins" the conflict). One of the most important ways to sidestep physical confrontations is to state expectations and consequences ahead of time. That way you remove that shock which can lead to an instinctual fight reaction. (The human brain will fight if it perceives something getting in the way of the resources for having its needs met. In adolescence, this can mean phones, time with friends, etc.) Also, it's helpful to have another plan in place. For example, if your teen refuses to give you the phone, then you'll disconnect their phone from your account until they give it up, which is when their consequences will begin.
4. If possible, use consequences only for concrete behaviors that can be proven. For example, adoptive parents will often say, "I don't care what grades she gets as long as she puts her best effort in, and she's not doing that!" This is very murky as proving whether your teen made her best effort is ambiguous and can frequently lead to arguments and hurt feelings. Specific grade goals are more concrete and don't leave as much room for interpretation.
5. Don't ask them how or why. Sometimes parents will ask their teen, "How could you do this?" or "What were you thinking?" then proceed to tell them why what they did was faulty judgment. This can come across as overly critical. Additionally, rarely can any of us articulate "why" we took any certain action – so it can cause an automatic defensiveness.
6. Anger has its place. When your teen says or does something that doesn't warrant consequences but that you feel is offensive or entitled or hurtful, as a parent you are handed an opportunity to role model appropriate anger. It is a human emotion and needs to be able to be expressed in safe ways. Anger can be effective in emphasizing your

point. For example, if your teen said, "I couldn't care less what you think," you could absolutely respond, "That really makes me feel angry. I don't deserve to be spoken to this way." The important point to remember is that your feeling of anger does not always require you to impose consequences.

7. Reserve statements of love for reconciliation. Often, when parent give consequences, they'll also say, "I love you." It may seem counterintuitive but it's important to keep verbal love out of the process of giving or enforcing consequences. Some adopted children come from abusive homes, and it is common for an abuser to say, "I'm doing this because I love you." By keeping verbal love statements out of consequences, you can avoid triggering that history of abuse. A strong belief as a parent is "I discipline my children because I love them." Holding this belief will allow you to be loving while you hold the limit. When you are holding a limit, you are working to ensure the adopted teen's neural pathways are learning that authority can be safe. Save talking about your love until after the situation is over.
8. Strive for consistency. Being consistent in what you expect and how you hold them accountable gives you credibility and helps to establish new behaviors, habits and strong neural pathways. For example, if you've decided that curfew is important, you need to respond the same way, every time. This will help your teen have security in your relationship.
9. If they bring up the adoption, don't get derailed. Sometimes you'll be setting a limit of some kind and your teen will say something that refers to their adoption, such as "I knew you didn't trust me" or "Why don't you just kick me out? Everyone else has." It might be tempting to engage in an in-depth conversation about adoption issues, but that's inadvisable.

For example, you might say, "Yes, that's what you're feeling, and we can talk about that at another time, but I'd like to make sure we're clear on your grounding." When you convey this, you're sending two messages: "Don't use your adoption to justify or deflect from responsibility" and "It's such an important topic that it deserves its very own conversation, not to be thrown in at the last minute." When the issue regarding the limit is over, make sure you calmly circle back to their adoption comments and offer open space to discuss the subject.

10. Be savvy, not sneaky. Sometimes parents feel that their teen is up to something but can't put their finger on exactly what it is. Or they know but they can't prove it. Generally, your intuition is usually correct. When you don't address it, your teen may perceive you as clueless and will lose respect for you. You can respond in a direct but respectful way, perhaps saying something like, "I think you've been taking money out of my wallet. I can't prove it, but that's what I believe." They will probably deny it but knowing that you're onto them may result in a behavioral change.

Being savvy is different from being sneaky. Parents sometimes secretly monitor their teen's texts or Facebook profile or search their room. Or parents ask their teen something to catch them in a lie saying, "I just wanted to see whether he would tell me." Sneakiness is faulty role modeling. Your teen respects you less because you're not being forthright. Like you, they can also tell when you're up to something.

Being more upfront will prioritize integrity. For example, you could just tell them that their bedroom is fair game and will be searched periodically, or that there will be random checks of their cell phones to make sure everything is appropriate and within guidelines. Your teen may not love it, but they will appreciate it. It continues to develop trust.

## **Resources for families and workers**

Tip Sheets:

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/parent\\_teenager.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/parent_teenager.pdf)

[https://www.aap.org/enus/Documents/hfca\\_guidance\\_foster\\_kinship\\_caregivers.pdf](https://www.aap.org/enus/Documents/hfca_guidance_foster_kinship_caregivers.pdf)

Stages of Development:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Stages-of-Adolescence.aspx>

<https://www.adoptionstogether.org/blog/2019/03/28/adoption-and-the-teen-years-understanding-adoption-and-adolescence/>

Six Themes for Adopted Teenagers:

<https://www.holtinternational.org/pas/newsletter/2018/12/05/six-themes-for-the-adopted-adolescent/>

How to set limits and rules:

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/types-of-rules-kids-need-1094871>

<https://www.verywellfamily.com/examples-of-household-rules-for-the-entire-family-1094879>

Connecting with teens:

<https://www.mothermag.com/connecting-with-teens/>

<https://www.todayparent.com/family/activities/canadas-best-winter-festivals/>

<https://theartofsimple.net/teenconnect/>

### ***Information presented by:***



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She is trained in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), rostered in Child Parent Psychotherapy (CPP), and certified in Trauma Focused – Cognitive Behavior Therapy. As an approved Clinical supervisor privately, she is deeply committed to training and teaching other therapists and professionals to assist children and their caregivers in healing the impacts of trauma at any age. Amber brings the use of humor to presentations and invites others to be able to be lighthearted with difficult subjects.

To learn more about Foster Adopt Minnesota and our efforts to ensure  
each child will have a permanent family,  
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