

# Adoptive Family Group

AGAPE

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## RESOURCES:

- For a list of local and national resources, visit our website:
- [www.agapemeanslove.org](http://www.agapemeanslove.org)
- OR
- [www.theadoptiioncenter.org](http://www.theadoptiioncenter.org)

## WE WANT YOUR INPUT!!!

We want this to be **YOUR** group! If you have ideas for activities, topics of discussion, or anything else, PLEASE let us know! Call our Family Advocate, Kris Bowen, at (901) 634.8199 or email her at [kris.bowen@theadoptioncenter.org](mailto:kris.bowen@theadoptioncenter.org).

## Talking with Your Adopted Teen: It's Possible and Important

By Ellen Singer, LCSW-C (for NACAC—[www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org))

*Ellen Singer, an experienced clinical social worker, is an adoption specialist at the Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc. (C.A.S.E.) in Maryland. At C.A.S.E. she leads support groups for adoptive parents, offers trainings about adoption issues, and writes articles for parents and professionals. Ms. Singer is also an adoptive parent.*

Teens typically have an endless appetite for talking with friends, but when it comes to talking with adults or (even worse) parents, conversation often consists of one-syllable words, grunts, and eye rolls. When it comes to talking about adoption with some teens, parents might as easily climb Mount Everest. During adolescence, however, adopted teens need parental guidance, comfort, and support as much as ever, and parents must work to keep lines of communication open.

### Extra Challenges for Adopted Teens

Identity formation and separation are adolescents' two main developmental tasks. Teens explore and answer questions like "Who am I?" and "What are my beliefs and values?" when establishing their identity. Separation involves moving toward independence and personal responsibility—a prospect both exciting and scary that can evoke a "leave me alone, but don't leave me" response in teens. Adoption adds extra complexity to these teen rites of passage. Questions of identity raise unresolved thoughts and feelings about birth parents from whom teens must still psychologically separate. For some adopted teens, separation can also seem like rejection and independence like abandonment—emotions associated with the loss of birth parents. Adopted teens who cannot express these troubling thoughts and emotions to someone (a parent or therapist, for example) are at risk for potentially serious emotional and behavioral problems including depression, substance abuse, school failure, etc.



### Why Communication is Difficult

Parents who have trouble getting young children to stop talking may be stunned with the wall of silence and withdrawal that accompanies adolescence. Teens, though, have good reasons for keeping to themselves.

- **Teens may stop talking to create distance from their parents.** Distance helps teens feel separate and independent, and even children who used to share every thought with their parents may desire complete privacy. Parental attempts to communicate may fail because teens often perceive personal questions as intrusive.
- **Adopted teens may not be able to articulate what they are feeling—even to themselves.** Adoption-related issues can be some of the most emotionally loaded issues teens will ever face. They may experience sadness or anger without really knowing why.
- **Thoughts about birth parents may make teens feel disloyal to their adoptive family.** This added guilt can make adoption conversations with parents extremely uncomfortable.

So, what's a parent to do?

First, parents must think about their teen. What is he like? (Quiet? Analytical? Dramatic?) What times of the day does she seem more receptive? Next, parents must be honest

about their own communication style. Many teens complain that parents don't pay full attention when they are trying to talk. When teens actually want to talk, parents should take the time to really listen.

### Five Principles for Effective Parent Communication with Teens

**One: Send a clear message that you are open and willing to talk about adoption.** Find ways to reach out that diminish the chances of emotional confusion or overload. Many attempts will be rejected, but you may well get credit for the effort.

Kevin was a thoughtful, bright, and athletic 17-year-old who had never talked much about feelings and even less about adoption. One night, while he and his parents were watching television, a news story came on about an adoptee/birth family reunion. When Kevin abruptly got up and went to his room, his parents were certain it was because of the news story.

Kevin's parents knew that if they directly asked him for his thoughts on the news story, he would politely deny that he had any. Instead, they decided to send an email to Kevin the next day. It read: "Kevin, We know we are being typical worried parents, but we love you very much and were wondering if you stopped watching TV because of the story about the young man meeting his birth mother and birth sister. If you had feelings about this, we just want you to know that we're here for you if there's anything you want to talk about. Love, Mom and Dad."

That night Kevin wrote back: "I would never want to search. You're my mom and dad and that's it." Kevin's parents then shared their thoughts about searching, and their willingness to support him if he chose to search. Several weeks later at dinner, Kevin casually told his parents that he might like to meet his birth parents

# Meet the Agape Staff



Heather MacLeod

*“The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other’s life.”*

- Richard Bach

Heather began her work with Agape in October 2008. She works as a Child and Family Therapist with the ASAP program. She also specializes in Art Therapy. She graduated from Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas with her MMFT. She has two dogs: Duncan and Westley.

## Fun Facts About Heather!

1. She has traveled all over the world, doing anything and everything from studying at Oxford to living in the rainforest of Costa Rica with the orphans.
2. The two things in life that creep her out the most are sharks and feet.
3. Art is one of her major passions. She sculpts, paints, does photography, and builds furniture.
4. She lives an all organic, planet, animal, and human friendly lifestyle.
5. Her all time favorite book is ‘The Giving Tree’ by Shel Silverstien.

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some day. They discussed that a bit and then Kevin changed the subject.

Some parents take a more indirect approach. In news stories, movies, and books, themes of loss, uncertainty, and complexity abound. Teens may be willing to share their feelings about such stories without having to directly address adoption or their own story.

**Two: Communicate respect for your teen’s feelings and show how much you value her opinion.** This rule applies to all situations with teens, but be especially careful of our emotions when discussing adoption. Our teen will be watching for signs that you are uncomfortable or disapproving.

Sixteen-year-old Maurya knew that she was conceived during a short-term sexual relationship when her birth mother was 17, and when she entered her junior year of high school, Maurya suddenly began dating several different guys and staying out past curfew. When her parents confronted her about her behavior, Maurya yelled, “I know you think I am a whore just like my birth mother!”

Maurya’s behavior and words communicated the pain and anger she felt about her birth mother and her adoption. It was as if she were waiting for her parents to confront her and was relieved by her outburst, but her parents wisely sensed that they could not set limits without first exploring Maurya’s feelings. After consulting with their daughter’s therapist, Maurya’s parents shared their concerns for her safety and well-being, and gently asked to hear Maurya’s thoughts about her birth mother and her adoption story.

Because Maurya was willing to express her anger, her parents could talk with her about making different choices than her birth mother, and finding better ways to handle her anger. These discussions eventually relieved some of Maurya’s pain and helped her to better understand and forgive her birth mother.

**Three: Look for red flags in your teen’s behavior.** Certain behaviors signal what is going on inside. (See “Six Spots Where Adopted Tees Get Stuck!” below.)

Lisa, 15, entered therapy after symptoms of school phobia, peer problems, and self-destructive behavior led to intense family conflicts. While exploring adoption issues, Lisa expressed an interest in her birth history. Without knowing who her birth parents were, she said, she couldn’t figure out who she was. Lisa was also frustrated that her mom couldn’t understand why she started wearing one green and one blue contact lens (her birth mom had blue eyes; her birth dad had green eyes).

Lisa’s dramatic behavior reflected a desire to communicate, but it conflicted with a desire to keep thoughts private since she felt disloyal to her adoptive parents when she spent so much time thinking about her birth parents. Even though Lisa’s mother knew about her daughter’s conflicted sense of identity and interest in her birth parents, she missed Lisa’s signal. As Lisa’s mother admitted, she had been minimizing Lisa’s feelings and had a very hard time “walking in Lisa’s shoes.”

