

Why Would Anyone Want to Adopt a Teenager?

By Laurie Flynn

"Why would anyone want to adopt a teenager?" As the mother of twelve children, seven of whom are adopted, I've often been asked that question.

Like many families, we adopted adolescents simply because we became aware of their urgent need for family stability. Sarah, fourteen, and Michael, twelve, joined us in 1974. My husband and I were already experienced parents with four biological children and two adopted as infants. We certainly had no illusions about adoption. The agency provided a thorough group preparation process, which included parenting skills, values clarification, lots of practical reading material and most importantly, a chance to meet and talk with others who had adopted older kids.

The social worker shared with us all the information she had about our children's past life experience. We learned that both Mike and Sarah were troubled after six years in foster care. Mike especially had had a rough time of it. He'd been in four different foster placements and was in a group home before coming to us. We knew that both Mike and Sarah needed love and security. We also knew they would probably resist much closeness for quite a while. After all, they had no reason to trust adults. The traditional concept of family held little meaning for them.

How did it work out? There are problems and frustrations faced by all parents today in raising adolescents. For Mike and Sarah, this was compounded by the emotional baggage they brought with them when they came to stay. To be perfectly honest, we had some very tough times. As my five-year-old

said when Mike had been with us about a month: "Mike's famous, Mom! Lots of times I hear his name over the loudspeaker at school- 'Michael Flynn, come to the office!'"

Mike's problems with school were enormous, and were aggravated by hostility and aggressiveness. School had never been an area of success for Mike and he was eventually placed in a class for emotionally and socially disturbed children. He never completed tenth grade. During his mid-teens Mike became increasingly angry and antisocial, and experimented with alcohol and drugs. He ran away from home repeatedly and was arrested for theft and vandalism. Finally, at age sixteen, he was ordered by the juvenile court to a residential treatment facility when family therapy and individual counseling failed to alter his self-destructive behavior. This was a very distressing time and my husband and I often felt like failures.

Sarah, too, experienced real difficulty in adjusting to our family. Never able to articulate her feelings, she was by turns moody, sullen, and childish. Sometimes she withdrew and wouldn't speak to us for days at a time. Sarah was an indifferent student and began to sneak out of the house at night to see her boyfriend. In her senior year, just three months short of graduation, Sarah eloped. We were heartsick. She was over eighteen and we could do nothing but try to keep lines of communication open and pray.

All this sounds terribly depressing. But we had many great times with Mike and Sarah. We gave Sarah her very first party and took Mike out to dinner at his first real restaurant. We enjoyed much family fun together at picnics and camping.

Mike and Sarah proved to be easy-going companions to our younger children, for whom they developed a strong affection. Once in awhile, they would open up a little and share some of their deepest feelings. Slowly and gradually trust and caring grew between us. We knew our guidance and love were vital, even though like all parents we often found our advice ignored and our values questioned.

How in the world did we manage to stick with Mike and Sarah through all the trouble and turmoil? We were motivated by a commitment to them as our children and our enduring belief in the power of love. Love can transform people, especially love that is transmitted through supportive family relationships. Everyone needs and deserves someone with a commitment to care. It is clear to us that adoption, even when difficult, is a committed relationship. The children you adopt may turn your house upside-down and you inside out, but you don't turn them away! They come to your home on a permanent basis, **not** on approval.

That does not deny that these are high-risk adoptions. In fact, about fifteen percent don't make it to legalization. However, of those who suffer a disrupted placement, over three-fourths go on to another successful adoption. Even the most challenging children can find a secure home. The best match is when a child with a problem is placed with a family flexible and committed enough to say to him: "You are ours. We want you. Even if you never change, we will stick with you, for you are family."

What can be learned from our experience? We need to be realistic about our ability to change other people, even people whom we love dearly. Adoption of older children is a lot like marriage. If we are lucky, maybe the child will choose to change. But the change belongs to him, not to us. We have no real control over how many or which of our values, beliefs, and interests a child will absorb. Our time with a teenager is quite brief and we cannot hope to wipe out the patterns of a lifetime. We do, however, have a chance to make an impact,

recognizing that an adolescent will take from us what feels comfortable and useful, and will do so at his own pace. Our job as parents is to keep showing in words and example what our values and expectations are. In the end, it doesn't matter so much whether our children change. What matters most is that they have the opportunity to learn and grow through what we offer. I have a favorite verse which puts it in perspective.

To be a parent is to take a risk.
To risk disappointment, to risk a bruised ego,
To risk a failure, to risk a broken heart.

To be a parent is to love a challenge.
The challenge to teach, the challenge to heal,
The challenge to love, the challenge to let go.
—Anonymous

To be effective parents, we must learn to accept risks and approach them as challenges. That essentially is how we made it with our teenagers.

What's become of Mike and Sarah? How are they doing today? Pretty well, we think. Both are grown and gone now, but we still see them, for we are their family. Adoption goes on forever. The need for family connections doesn't end at age eighteen. Where, I wonder, do foster children who reach adulthood go for Christmas? To whom do they send cards on Mother's and Father's Day? Who rejoices with them when they start their own family?

Sarah is now twenty-one and a busy young housewife. She is a wonderful mother to her two little boys. Recently she and her sons spent a week visiting us and she confided that she'd learned a lot about childcare from me. Her success as a mother has greatly enhanced Sarah's self esteem. She has enrolled in a GED program to complete high school and hopes to go to work next year to supplement the family income. We are quite proud of her!

Mike is also independent now. He still has problems with his temper but has recently been able to secure his first steady job. This spring he hitchhiked to our house for a visit. For the first time he talked seriously about his future and discussed plans to enter the military. He felt comfortable enough with us to ask for a loan. When he feels lonely he calls (collect. of course) and talks for awhile. He knows he's never far from home.

Unlike Mike and Sarah, thousands of young adolescents still wait for a home and family. The fact that people are asking, "Why would anyone want to adopt a teenager?" and that such adoptions are happening are proof of the dramatic changes that have taken place in adoption during the past decade.

Readily available birth control, abortion, and changing social mores lessening the stigma of unwed motherhood have all contributed to the long waiting lists for adoption of infants. With fewer healthy babies available for adoption, attention has shifted to children with special needs.

By far the largest group of children who need adoption have only one real problem – their age. Of an estimated 150,000 children in the United States who are legally free for adoption, nearly half are over age ten. The need for aggressive effort on their behalf is clear. Teenagers have certainly been regarded by many as among the most difficult children to place for adoption. Perhaps Seneca was correct in saying, "It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult."

As social workers focus increasing attention on the adoption of older children and adolescents, I hope they will consider the following suggestions:

1. Every child needs and wants a permanent family. Although teenagers may seem uninterested in adoption at first, further exploration usually reveals that this attitude masks a tremendous fear of rejection. Teenagers

need reassurance that they are valuable and lovable and can be successful family members.

2. In recruiting potential parents for adolescents, remember that non-traditional families are excellent resources. Older couples, experienced foster parents, single and divorced men and women, minority families, and those who are already raising several children have all successfully adopted teenagers. The old rules regarding eligibility for adoption shouldn't apply when the real criteria are flexibility and commitment to children.
3. Recognize that adoption of teenagers is challenging and will sometimes be extremely stressful. This is normal and should be expected. Families need intensive preparation for parenting adolescents and must be given a realistic understanding of their role. Other families who have been through the adoption of teens are a vital source of support. There is nothing like the advice of someone who's been there to provide both practical help and encouragement. A network of supportive parents can make the difference between a successful adoption and a painful disruption.

A final and personal word. Michael and Sarah tested us to the limit and, for a while at least, gave us no real feeling of success. But adoption is truly an addiction. In the midst of some of our most difficult days, the social worker who had helped us make it gave us a tremendous boost. She called one day to tell us about a fifteen-year-old girl who had just been through a broken adoption and needed an experienced family. We didn't hesitate to say "yes" and within hours we had a twelfth child! Amy is now seventeen and has been with us two years. She's in eleventh grade and works part-time at McDonalds. Like all teenagers she has both good days and bad days. Don't we all? Amy's vibrant energy and easy smile have enriched our family life. Our adoption announcement said it all: "It is only with the heart that one sees rightly."