Kids are Dogs, Teens are Cats
by Adair Lara

I just realized that while children are dogs ... loyal and affectionate ... teenagers are cats.

It's so easy to be a dog owner. You feed it, train it, boss it around. It puts its head on your knee and gazes at you as if you were a Rembrandt painting. It bounds indoors with enthusiasm when you call it.

Then around age 13, your adoring little puppy turns into a big old cat. When you tell it to come inside, it looks amazed, as if wondering who died and made you emperor. Instead of dogging your doorstep, it disappears. You won't see it again until it gets hungry ... then it pauses on its sprint through the kitchen long enough to turn its nose up at whatever you're serving. When you reach out to ruffle its head, in that old affectionate gesture, it twists away from you then gives you a blank stare, as if trying to remember where it has seen you before.

You, not realizing that the dog is now a cat, think something must be desperately wrong with it. It seems so antisocial, so distant, sort of depressed. It won't go on family outings. Since you're the one who raised it, taught it to fetch and stay and sit on command, you assume that you did something wrong. Flooded with guilt and fear, you redouble your efforts to make your pet behave.

Only now you're dealing with a cat, so everything that worked before now produces the opposite of the desired result. Call it and it runs away. Tell it to sit and it jumps on the counter. The more you go toward it, wringing your hands, the more it moves away.

Instead of continuing to act like a dog owner, you can learn to behave like a cat owner. Put a dish of food near the door and let it come to you. But remember that a cat needs your help and your affection too. Sit still and it will come, seeking that warm, comforting lap it has not entirely forgotten. Be there to open the door for it.

One day your grown-up child will walk into the kitchen, give you a big kiss and say, "You've been on your feet all day. Let me get those dishes for you."

Then you'll realize your cat is a dog again.

This article is reprinted with permission from the author. Visit adairlara.com and see her newest book "Naked, Drunk and Writing" a funny, anecdotal and highly useful guide to writing personal essays and memoirs.
Another Brick in the Wall
by Terra Trevor

“One afternoon, when my youngest daughter, then age 17, was in a talkative mood she began sharing details of her life with me, a stream of conscience that ran from what she’d done over the weekend and trailing into future plans she might expand on that in her mind were sound and logical. Yet since I was still in the reactive state otherwise known as the—mother of three teenagers—meaning that I was still into preventative parenting, still curbing the war. If the teen years can be described as a see saw of emotions for teenagers experiencing it, the same must be said for their parents. So naturally I began giving my daughter the low down on how I felt about what she’d just told me. We almost began a heated argument, and we would have except that she said. “Stop it Mom, you have to be willing to listen to my ideas without always giving me advice.”

I took a deep breath, and all at once realized that no matter how much I wanted to guide her and protect her from ever having to experience any of the dangers that exist in adult life as she walked towards independence—I couldn’t.

“OK,” I said, “I guess it’s time for me to give you to yourself. “

She rolled her eyes and replied, “Yes, you’d better, because I have friends whose parents refuse to do it, and their kids who won’t talk about everything the way I do; they just tell their parents what they think they want to hear.”

Then without missing a beat she continued on talking, telling me things. At one point I slipped back into advice giving, and she said. “Mom, stop it. Because, when you have too many opinions about my life, you create a wall between us, and you’ve just put up another brick.”

That day we coined the family joke about the “Wall” and whenever I become overly involved in her life, it reminds me to stop.

You’ve heard the term that doctors practice medicine. I like to think of parents as practicing parenting. Nobody has it figured out. But the other day I came across the best quote, “When you come to the edge of all you’ve known and are about to step into the darkness, one of two things will happen. Either there will be something solid for you to stand on or you will be taught to fly.”

I applaud the inner strength and courage revealed in the voices of the contributors who shared their stories in the book Pieces of Me, Who do I Want to Be? Definitely a must read for teens and adoptive parents alike. Come fly with them.

Terra Trevor is the author of the memoir Pushing up the Sky, of which a portion of this story is excerpted.
All I need to know about parenting, I learned from you.

by Carrie Kitze, Publisher EMK Press

I like to tell the story that my oldest has had more practice at being a child than I have had being a mother. She was ten months old when I met her for the first time. She had ten months of being a child under her belt, and I was already behind because I had just become a mother. In many ways, parenting for me has been a game of catch-up. And with her an "old soul," I was really behind. My grandmother used to say that you do what you need. She was talking about choices you make for career or for figuring out who you are. I create resources and understanding for adoptive parents—just what I need.

In working on my newest project for adopted and fostered teens, Pieces of Me, Who Do I Want To Be? I learned yet again how little I know. Pieces of Me was started for purely selfish reasons. I have two children approaching childhood and I was looking for resources to help me navigate the waters. The books I found, written by adoptees, often painted a stark and bleak picture of adoption. Where was the hope? I wondered. Does adoption fail all adoptees in some way? Can I fix that as a parent?

What I discovered in my journey with this book is that there is hope . . . and healing on the adoption front. But some of the pieces of the journey suck, and some of it is good, and which piece is what is different for each adoptee. There is not one single laundry list of feelings or check box of to do items that will make an adoptee not have "issues" or feel good or bad about adoption throughout their lives. I also realized that the journey is lifelong. It is not one discussion, not one book, not one adoption group, not one culture camp, or not one life event that cements what adoption means to someone. With each step our children take on their life journey, the way they piece together what they have been given and what they want is a process that is unique and theirs alone to do.

I think the most interesting thing I have learned in my interactions with countless adoptees from all kinds of circumstances with all varieties of parent relationships is that adoptees don’t tell all to their parents. As a parent, you might think you have a great relationship, and you probably do. But there are some places that non-adoptees can’t go. We don’t have the card to swipe to open the door. We can look in the window and watch from afar, but can never obtain membership without the shared experience of growing up in a different family than you started with. And that is okay. Let me say that again, it is okay that we can’t go there, even as their parents. As my children’s parent, I can strive to learn, understand, empathize and support. But I am not them, I am not my children, and I can’t make the choice of how all of this makes them feel and what they can do about it.

Working on Pieces of Me has made me laugh and it has made me weep. There are several articles
that I proofread with tears streaming down my cheeks, even the multiple times I read them. In the past, the literature in adoption has attempted to create a path to follow for a specific outcome, a path to work on and towards. But *Pieces of Me* is not that; it just “is.” It allows you bring what you have and take what you will. It’s anger and pain. It’s hugs and empathy. It’s honest feeling and experience. It’s about all of who we are and we can all find something to relate to. The power of sharing a story, whatever type of story that it was, is amazing and uplifting. While there are some tough things in here, each article offers hope. And each article offers experiences and real feelings that belong to a person who cared enough to share something about themselves in the hope that it might resonate with someone who just happened to pick up this book; for whatever reason.

I started this project wanting resources for me to use. But I learned so much more. About adoption, about parenting, about who my children are and how they are going to grow up. Working with Robert “Bert” Ballard, a Vietnam adoptee in his 30’s, has taught me much about all of these things and about myself. While this book is for teens, there is an interesting benefit for those of us parenting, or those who work with adopted teens. It’s an invitation into the world of the adoptee, an authentic place that not many of us get to find, with voices ripe for the listening. I hope that for other adoptive parents who take the time to read this book and really listen to the voices and to hear what they say, they will also come away with an understanding they didn’t have before they started. I know I did.

More importantly, I hope they come away seeing their children not as just adoptees who need healing, but as persons who are to be supported, cherished, and loved as they figure out their *Pieces of Me: Who do I Want to Be?*

Carrie Kitze is the Publisher at EMK Press, the author of two books for adopted children: *I Don’t Have Your Eyes* and *We See the Moon*, she is married, an adoptive parent to two daughters who are growing up way too fast, a speaker on a number of topics relating to adoption, and the caregiver to our family cat who is much like the cat portrayed in the first article...
For just a moment, please see it my way . . .

by Robert L. “Bert” Ballard, former teenaged adoptee, now adult adoptee

If you’re parenting a teen right now, maybe you’ve heard this line or some version of it. It might sound a little like whining. And in a lot of cases it might be. But sometimes, it’s a call for acknowledgment, to be seen, to ask for something your child can’t articulate or is not even sure they’re asking for. Throw in that whole adoption piece, it becomes more complicated, more layered, hard to see the bottom. And you think that if you can only find the “bottom,” the one cause, the one reason, then it will be okay, then you’ll know how to respond.

But for just a moment, see it my way. That is, see it from your teen’s perspective . . .

I was abandoned or given up for adoption, probably for reasons that are completely unclear to me. At least once a day, I think about why this happened. And when I come out of my room in the morning, I see my parents, who I love and am thankful for, but who look different than me and are constant reminders of a family I never (or barely) knew and have no (or very few) memories of.

Then I feel guilty for these feelings, because I know my parents love me and care about me and I wonder if they would reject me if I told them that no matter how much they love me and care about me, I still don’t feel like I fully belong. I know in my head I belong, but it still feels like something is missing.

On top of that, my body’s changing. My voice squeaks, I’ve got hair in places I really don’t want it, I’m getting curves, and every day I’ve got to do my hair, makeup, select the right kind of clothes, talk a certain way so I’m not reminded how different I am. I know that lots of other kids do this too, but sometimes it just feels different to me. I really, really, really want to be liked and accepted by everyone I know.

So sometimes I do some really dumb things. I know they’re dumb. I do things with my body or with others’ bodies, I put things in my body I know I shouldn’t. I stop doing my work or completing my responsibilities to feel needed and looked at. I do this because for a moment, I feel connected, I feel loved, I feel seen, I feel heard.

Maybe it has something to do with not being raised by my birth parents. Maybe you and I had a fight. Maybe something’s stressful at school, at home, with my friends. To be honest, I don’t know what “causes” it, but I just react.

Somewhere deep down I have a fear of not being loved, of being rejected. Mind you, this isn’t conscious – I don’t think of it that way. I can’t really. I just feel something. I have some fear and I don’t want to feel that fear.

On top of all that, I go from activity to activity to activity, from sports to lessons to study gatherings to social events to family obligations. I like all of them, but it’s a lot of work. I feel the pressure to keep my mask on, to be social, and to do well because that’s what’s going to get me out of high school and into college or a good job or a way to pay you back for everything you’ve done for me. I know I’m not perfect, but I want to make you proud; after all, if my first set of parents could so easily give me up, why wouldn’t you?

To add to this, I need to maintain constant contact with my friends. I mean it when I use the word “need.” I text, I Facebook, I’m constantly checking my cell phone to keep in touch with my friends. I know you look at me like I’m nuts, like I’m being rude because I’m always on there, but if I miss something going on with my friends, I feel completely on the outside, completely rejected, and that I’ll never be accepted if I miss out on something.
I already feel different. I’m trying to do everything I can fit in with everyone around me, to make you proud. But it’s confusing. It’s hard. One minute I feel completely secure with who I am, I know who I am, I know where I’m going, and I know where I belong. But the next minute, because of something little, something I don’t even recognize, I feel like I don’t fit, I miss my birth family, I feel like no one likes me, I feel unloved.

Another minute I want to be held, snuggled, kissed, caressed like when I was little because I’d give anything to go back to those safe and secure and innocent times. Another minute I don’t want you or anyone near me or helping me or telling me what to do because I want to know I can do it on my own.

It’s hard growing up. It’s hard making sense of the world. It’s hard having these feelings and not knowing if it’s because I’m adopted or I’m just going through things like any other teen my age.

I know you’re doing the best you can. But sometimes, I need to be seen for who I am – all my challenges, struggles, and feelings. I need to know I can share them with you without you judging me or wanting to send me to counseling or blaming it on adoption or something else from my past. I need to know I am seen and accepted and loved for all I am, the good and the bad.

I’m not a problem. I have problems, but I’m not a problem. Please don’t treat me like one. Please see me and see that I have struggles and things I’m working through. Please show me what I’m experiencing is okay for me to feel. And if you can’t do it or don’t understand, find me resources or others who do. It doesn’t mean you’re a bad parent if you can’t do it all. Actually it makes me love you more because it means you care.

I’m going to be okay. But to be okay, I need you to continue to love me. I need you to believe in me. I need you to hear me. I need you to see me, as I am, for all I am.

This perspective is a compilation of my own research, of listening to teens, of reading their words, of talking with others who work with teens, and of my own feelings, some I still feel today.

Through it all, I believe that adopted teenagers (like most teenagers today) want to be seen, heard, and connect in true and honest ways. They know they are not perfect, but with all the pressures they feel, they want to know they are not alone in what they feel and experience. Especially adopted teens.

That is why Pieces of Me: Who do I Want to Be? is the way it is. It is a lot of voices from a lot of different perspectives. It gives teens a place to express what they feel and experience – some of it good and inspirational, some of it sad and troubling. It offers honest voices from adoptees or parents or professionals who “get” teens and who want to bring out the best in them. It offers voices that resonate with teens so they know they are not alone, that others are feeling the same fears, questions, struggles, joys, and hopes they are.

So what does Pieces of Me: Who do I Want to Be? mean for you as a parent? As an adopted person, a former teenager who’s helped put this book together, this book is exactly like the title of this article. It is an invitation to you for just a moment, to see it their way.

There are subjects and stories in this book that will make you uncomfortable. There are stories and voices that will make you sad. There are stories and voices that will reward you and all you’ve done. There are poems and art that reveal struggles and blame others. There are authors and individuals who do not think they are any different than any other kid.

When you read this book, do not feel guilty or sad, do not try to solve the problems or blame others. Do not make this about yourself or pass judgment. Do not moralize. Do not try to protect or reinterpet or shield your teen from this. Just read. Just soak it up. Just shift your perspective to try to
understand, to hear where they are coming from, to see who they are.

Let this article you are reading in this parent guide be an unspoken prelude to the articles, stories, art, and voices in this book. Realize you are walking into someone else’s world, someone else’s experiences, someone else’s feelings. And you are there by invitation only. There are things you may not understand and that’s okay. There are feelings and perspectives that you can’t relate to, and that’s okay.

Think of it like visiting a culture or country you’ve never been to – you don’t bring your perspective. You observe, you listen, you treat others with respect, you don’t insult, you take your cues from others. Most importantly, you can’t fix them, and you can’t fix your kid.

You can just love them.

Do that here in the pages of this book. And for just a moment, see it my way.

Robert “Bert” Ballard, Ph.D. is a Vietnamese adoptee evacuated from Vietnam in April 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War. He is a writer, speaker, researcher, and activist in the international adoption community. He is currently an assistant professor at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario in the Department of Drama & Speech. He is married with two daughters and is awaiting a referral for his adoptive son from Vietnam.
Supporting our Teens (and Tweens too!)

by Patty Wipfler

Adolescents are figuring the whole world out for a second time. They’ve spent their childhood finding out how things work, who they are, who their parents are, how you get things done, and what is to be learned and enjoyed in life.

As their bodies change and adulthood approaches, they must rethink everything. This takes lots of time and energy. They do most of their re-figuring alone, unless we make ourselves available as listeners on a frequent and regular basis. It is important to them that they come up with their own thoughts and understandings, their own ways of handling their lives. They are smart enough to know this. So advice and directives from parents are ignored and resented.

1.) Teens rethink everything.
Your adolescent is trying to find his place in the world as he brushes his teeth, and may be working on an understanding of how to make friends as he thumbs through his heavy metal rock magazine. He talks on the phone, he may be hoping to glean some bits and pieces of reassurance that he’s OK, which he’ll use to help him get out of bed the next day and face another day of school. We aren’t privy to this internal thinking and sorting, but it takes place dawn through dark. The conditions under which teenagers are re-figuring their lives are often more difficult than we parents understand.

2) Young people aren’t respected.
The environment in which they are rediscovering who they are and what they can do in life is usually inhospitable. Adolescents are treated as “betwixt and between,” with no real judgment and no significant contribution to make in the areas of community life, work, the arts, or political life. Adults rarely seek their experience or opinions. Often, this is a continuation of the lack of respect they endured as children, when instructions on what to do and when to do it may have been the mainstay of their interactions with adults.

Perhaps the most difficult effect of society’s ingrained lack of respect for young people is that they internalize this attitude. By the time they become adolescents, they have been made to feel so second-rate that they turn this attitude of disrespect on each other. Rejection of young people by young people runs rampant through our schools. A young person is subject to rejection by his peers on the basis of his hairstyle, his favorite sport, the side of town he comes from, or what he eats for lunch. This kind of senseless criticism targets young people just as they are trying to understand who they are. It is deeply hurtful. It compromises an adolescent’s ability to experiment and learn in safety.

3) Young people don’t get to play freely anymore.
In childhood, play in its freest form is the way children express their genius. They feel powerful, agile, creative, strong, and close to each other as they jump their bikes off homemade ramps or bake pretend cakes in the sandbox. After a playtime that goes well, your child knows in his very bones that he is good, smart, and well-liked. Unstructured play is one of the key building-blocks of self-esteem. It is the cement of children’s close friendships. Even before adolescence, most children have to give up their unstructured playtime. Homework, chores, and lessons of various kinds eat

“When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished by how much he’d learned in seven years.”

Mark Twain
into their time to come up with new and marvelous ways of being together. By the time they reach high school, in many places, it’s not “cool” to play anymore. Goofing around, laughing with friends, creating games and fun out of nothing becomes far too rare. This lack of lighthearted fun robs young people of one of their most direct ways of expressing their good will and creativity. Less play means they get less immediate feedback about how good they are, and how much others enjoy them.

4) Young people are separated from simple affection.
Parents and age-mates alike commonly become more reluctant to show open affection when adolescence approaches. No more snuggling at bedtime, no more sitting on laps while talking, no more lighthearted piggyback rides on Saturday morning. Simple affection is at the heart of close relationships and trust. The cultural habits that pull parents away from showing their affection create loneliness and self-doubt that is almost unbearable. Remember?

5) Young people are confused.
The world and its institutions do not make much sense to young people. They were born for finer stuff--more fun, more love, more cooperation, more adventure without peril, more invitations to make a difference, more praise for their brilliance and creativity. They naturally expect a more rational world, and it is deeply confusing to find that hope and expectation dashed against a reality that includes many senseless injustices.

6) Young people feel powerless.
There is a real vacuum of leadership toward broadly human goals at every level of our society. Most adults act like they have no power to solve the ongoing conflicts which threaten our existence and which divide our communities. Unless they have the example of hopeful, savvy adults who seed and sprout change, young people are left with the impression that they, too, must be powerless to guide their own lives wisely.

What Parents Can Do

We can build relationships with our children that strengthen them against the harshness of their environment. If times are already difficult between you and your adolescent child, the most important step you can take is to find a good listener. It will help to talk and release some of the feelings that have robbed you of your sense of full connection with your child. It’s important to look at your hopes and love, as well as any disappointment, frustration, fear or anger you feel. Your child needs your support, and you’ll be in a much better position to give that support when you’ve had a chance to air some of the tension you’ve gathered in your efforts to care. What follows are general directions that parents of adolescents have found helpful. Don’t forget to use a listener for strategizing and stress release, odd as it may feel to ask for that kind of support. It will help you concentrate on connecting, the positive direction that will most benefit you and your teen.

1) Listen, listen, listen.
Young people are constantly sorting things through, and can use our help if we make ourselves unobtrusively available to listen. This means “hanging around.” It may mean watching TV with your son, or bringing your magazine into his room and plopping down on his bed to be quietly present while he does his homework. It may mean sitting in the bathroom with your daughter and admiring her while she applies her makeup. It does NOT mean asking probing questions! Our probing questions shut the door between us and our teenagers. The questions we ask usually arise from our fears and suspicions, and these questions indicate to them that we’re too worried to listen to their thoughts, their questions, and the experiments they’re thinking about.
When your child begins to talk, stay interested but don’t voice your opinion unless you are asked. Most likely, the subject of the conversation won’t be a subject you are concerned about. Remember this: your child will choose a subject he feels safe talking to you about. In your mind, you will be waiting for a subject of concern to you to surface. You’ll want your daughter to talk about how badly she felt that she wasn’t chosen to be a cheerleader, or your son to talk about why he’s getting a D in geometry. But what your child can safely talk to you about is which CD he wants to buy next, or whether or not she should spend her money on a manicure. Hang in there! The longer you listen with interest and quiet approval, the safer it will get. Patience with your daughter while she’s trying a new hairdo can become a good cry about not being happy with her appearance. A conversation about funk bands can turn into a talk about cliques at school, and how your son has been rejected. Trust that your child is gathering safety as you listen to what may strike you as a petty concern. Over days and weeks, safety will build if you continue to be pleased, interested, and quiet about your reactions.

Young people, like the rest of us, look for ways to release emotional hurt and tension. When they’re grumpy and hard to live with, they are carrying a heavy burden of bad feelings. If and when things become safe enough (or hard enough), and your child begins to rage or cry, stay with him. Don’t talk much, except to say you’re sorry that things are that difficult. But stay. Most likely, your son or daughter will not want you to be nearby. In times of deep feelings, most adolescents see their parents as part of the problem. If your child is telling you to go away, you need to cooperate with that request to some extent, or he will feel that you aren’t listening or respectful of his wishes. So you may go to the door of the room, or you may say that you’ll leave for 2 minutes. But come back. We have to keep letting our children know that, no matter how they feel about us, we love them and want their lives to be good. Your child needs to cry and rage his tension away. And if you stay, without reproach, you will have passed the test - you cared about him when it was very tough to care, when he was telling you to get lost.

This kind of listening is very difficult for a parent to do. We get angry with our children for being as upset as they are, we blame them for their troubles, we feel overwhelmed and badly treated. But it is a powerful way to rebuild bridges that have fallen. In order to listen to our children while they are feeling most separate from us, we have to hold on tight to the understanding that they are unloading painful emotions that haunt them. When the crying or raging is over, your child will feel relieved of that part of his burden, and will be much better able to absorb love, help, and new information. When problems have been sitting with a child for a long time, it can take several long cries and upset times before the young person can substantially change his viewpoint and regain his feeling of connection with his family. Although it may be a slow process, listening to feelings is a powerfully dependable way to mend relationships.

2) Spend “special time” alone with your teenager, doing what he or she likes to do. It’s a very busy world we live in, and time alone together for fun and adventure is precious. This kind of time can be a powerful builder of close relationships between parent and child. Going to a baseball game, shopping at the mall, or watching late night movies together are the kinds of things you can begin to do with your child, once you set up the time. Focus your attention on the fine young person you’ve brought into the world.

3) Show respect for your teenager. Praise the good you see. Remember that your child is subject to criticism daily for the smallest things. You can counterbalance this lack of respect by letting your teenager know that you value him. His good looks, his good taste in clothes, his love of music, his sense of adventure, his marvelous ability to tolerate the mess in his room—you can find many things to praise and enjoy. Stuck? Find a listener, and talk about the things that bug you. When you’ve talked long enough, you’ll be able to remember what you enjoy.
A second significant area in which we can promote respect for our young people is by supporting them to find work or projects that are worthwhile. Volunteering at the local hospital, assisting the local veterinarian, and paid work available in your town are examples of good avenues for building a young person’s understanding of his importance to the community.

4) **Support your teenager’s sense of fun and play.** He may need rides to see the friends he laughs with most. He may need you to be delighted when he and his friends, who were watching a video, begin to laugh and stuff popcorn down each other’s backs. In the serious business of building a grownup identity, your help in hanging onto laughter and play will be invaluable.

5) **Be affectionate with your teenager.** The best way to go about being affectionate is not to stop your hugs, wrestling around, hair-ruffling, cuddling while watching TV, or snuggling at bedtime just because your child is growing up. If you have let your cuddling lapse, start it up again, a little here and a little there. One warning. Let your child determine how much affection you show between you when his friends are around, at least at first. Your child may be subject to harsh treatment because of any missteps you make in this area.

6) **Maintain an attitude of hopefulness about your child’s capabilities, and about the ability of people to solve problems big and small.** The news media concentrate on problems, seldom on solutions. Scoundrels grab the headlines, not heroes. Our children need us to fill in large gaps in their perspective with exposure to people who make the world a better place, and ideas that are useful and uplifting. Their confusion won’t be as deep if we work to supply hope and the determination to make life good.

   **Parents can counter the harshness of adolescent life.** Our attitude of unfailing respect and interest, our hopefulness about our children’s future, our affection and playfulness, our confidence in their ability to uncover their own good thinking, and our example as active, undaunted adults will strengthen their confidence in themselves. Our willingness to find a listener when we feel sad, afraid, or angry about them is key to moving forward as their parents, on the issues they present to us. Our teenagers need our genuine, open appreciation for who they are, struggles and all!

Patty Wipfler graduated from Occidental College. The focus of her work since 1974 has been teaching basic listening, parenting, and leadership skills to parents. She has led over 370 residential weekend workshops for families and for leaders of parents in every part of the U.S. and in 23 other countries. She founded and directs the Parents Leadership Institute (Hand in Hand), a non-profit organization. Hand in Hand assists parents to use basic listening skills to deepen their relationships with their children and to build effective long-range support for themselves. Patty has two grown sons and lives in Palo Alto, California. Find more information at www.handinhandparenting.org.
Connecting our Teens and Ourselves

by Laveda Moore Doxey, LCSW

Adoption is one of my passions. I’ve been an Adoption Social worker for 30 years now. During that time I’ve had the privilege of connecting teens with their “forever” families. I’ve had the good fortune of running a successful group for teens 14-18; and have facilitated in-home parties for adopted teens. I adore teens...I find teens to be fascinating. I’ve learned and continue to learn a great deal from the teens I know. I was even involved in the adoptions of some of the teens that I know now.

Something that will support your teen in a way you can’t as a parent is a teen support group. If there isn’t one going in your community, develop one! Over the years, I have learned that teens love to talk to each other. Adopted teens love getting together with other adopted teens. The chemistry and camaraderie that develops is amazing. What they take away from the group is so great for their emotional health! They even may find a friend or two that they will know for life. Adopted teens need to be connected to other adopted teens in some way. Using technology is great too. The teens I know are using the technology to their advantage to remain connected to one another. Now, I receive emails from some of the teens and their parents whose lives I’ve been a part of. Because they’ve stayed connected with me I know this for sure, “Adopted Teens want to connect with other Adopted Teens.” I’ve only seen positive things come from these connections.

Adopted teens should reach out to other teens who’ve been adopted. I really believe that they will be glad that they did! I think both of you will find the benefits of groups, parties, or whatever you and your teen create to connect will be rewarding for all concerned. So, whether it’s a group that meets regularly or a party that happens once a month or two or three times a year. I encourage you to give it a try, add your own spin on things to create a group or teen party that is unique to you and works for you. Adopted teens have an experience, namely adoption, that is unique to them. I have discovered that sometimes adopted teens feel isolated and by finding others with shared experiences, they will feel less alone.

For a teen gathering, it’s important to do several things. The teens need their own space, away from parents and listening ears. Great food is essential, get your teens involved in the preparations and the details. Ask parents to stay and you all head to another part of the house to create your own support network. You will find support in the shared experiences as well! I also would recommend that the group/party be facilitated by a younger adoption social worker/adoptivee. I utilized a young adopted person to facilitate the teens group at one of the parties for adopted teens. This worked very well. I met with the parents and handled adoption issues that presented there and she handled some of the teen questions and issues that came up.

I certainly hope that you will find your way of connecting with other teens, just for the FUN and HEALTH of it!

Laveda Moore Doxey, LCSW is a social worker in Georgia who loves her work with adopted teens. She is the Families First Project Coordinator at The Georgia Center for Resources & Support Serving Adoptive and Foster Families.

Creating a group can be rewarding and fun. EMK Press offers a kit (a discounted 10 pack of Pieces of Me Books and a special guide for therapists/social workers to create a 7 week group with activities and questions from the book. Find it at the EMK Press site. www.emkpress.com/teenbook.html
Parenting the Adopted Teen In Crisis

By Julie Craft, Adoption Support Center/Adoptive Mother

If you are the parent of an adopted teen who is struggling, you have probably read books, searched web sites, talked with therapists and left no stone unturned to help? save your child. Been there. By now, you know that there is no silver bullet. I say with great pride that our family survived the teen years with my adopted daughter, Lauren. Those years included drugs, alcohol, truancy, promiscuity and suicide attempts. When she became a healthy young adult, fresh from her experience and wise beyond her years, she shared with me what I did right, after I thought I’d done everything wrong. She still had one foot in adolescence and now had one in adulthood. Her memories were fresh. She had become a confident, young woman who had a strong appreciation of family, gratitude for every possession she worked so hard to obtain (including a house by age 20), and an unselfishness that was humbling. And she was happy, really happy! But I learned lessons from those times and from her wisdom. Here is some of what I learned.

Learn to be the parent your child needs you to be. It didn’t come naturally for me to be Lauren’s mother. I was an enabler. I had to learn a new collection of parenting skills. I learned to support her when she was making good choices and step away when she was not. I learned to set my boundaries and not get drawn into the drama. We used to say “chaos” was Lauren’s drug of choice - it was so easy to be pulled into her vortex. Insanity truly was doing the same thing over and over, expecting new results. I had to break the cycle and do something different. I had to change for her to get better. I had to be what she needed me to be, not what I wanted to be or what was comfortable for me.

Raise your child with Empathy, not Sympathy. Don’t let guilt run you. Instead of feeling sorry for your child over their past or their heritage, instill independence in them. Don’t ask “How can I fix this for her.” Find ways to help them figure it out for themselves (why I like Pieces of Me). Lauren learned of her heritage - it included alcoholism, depression, heart disease, diabetes and more. At first she was angry that she had been given all these issues. But then she said, “I was also given life. Stop the excuses. This is my reality. What am I going to do about it?” It took awhile – lots of hard work and struggle – but at 18, she made the choice to be grateful. She figured it out; we just provided the resources, but she still had to make the choice and deal with her past and heritage.

We sought professional help to become adoptive parents, now we seek professional help to save our families. You can’t do this alone . . . and that’s okay. It may take a variety of professionals – therapists, doctors, psychologists and more to help you out. There are even special schools and programs for teens. Your child will need someone to talk to as they struggle, and right now, it might not be you. Actually, it’s probably better it isn’t you. The hardest thing to accept is that your child is not broken, your family is. Whatever you choose, make sure it includes the entire family – you are not sending your child away to be “fixed.” The child is just a symptom. So when the therapy starts, you all go. You’ve probably heard the saying, “Don’t train the dog, train the owner?” This is no different – it’s about the family, not the child.

They “use” their adoption label. Being adopted is sometimes an excuse for them not to look at their own lives, ammunition to get a response from you.. Lauren told, “I worked my family to the bone. Yes, I was curious and felt as though I didn’t fit in. But, I was a teenager! When I didn’t get what I wanted, I used the excuse ‘my adoption’ to make people feel sorry for me and get what I wanted the next time.” Most teens are manipulative, narcissistic and filled with drama. It goes with the territory – and the guilt of adoption feeds right into their plan.
**Be wary of the new catch-all diagnosis – bipolar disorder.** A recent study found that 57% of patients diagnosed with bipolar were misdiagnosed. Trends in society, highly advertised new drugs, and parents and doctors looking for any answer will quickly lead you to this solution. Certainly consider their advice; but, sadly, the only way to eliminate bipolar disorder as a diagnosis is to see if the drugs work. There is no test, no screening to confirm the diagnosis. Lauren said the medications they gave her only fed into her assumption and sadness that something was wrong with her. We discovered years later that she was misdiagnosed as bipolar, that she suffered primarily from depression with some attachment and bonding issues. She “outgrew” most of her symptoms, and by age 18, she was on no medication. By 21 she was effortlessly balancing marriage, a new baby and her job. It had taken us years of therapy, rehab, schools and love to safely exit those difficult teenage years. [did she have something – what was it? – provide some alternatives maybe?]

**Attend an AA or NA meeting without your child.** Does this sound like your world?: “We admitted we were powerless over (insert child’s name) and our lives had become unmanageable.” Step One. It doesn’t matter whether you are dealing with drugs, alcohol, truancy, gangs, promiscuity or eating disorders, there’s nothing like a 12-step program to help you realize things are out of control and cause you to take inventory. Sometimes the best thing to do as a parent is admit you can’t do anything or anymore.

**Don’t hide your problem.** No family is perfect. Every family has secrets. Yes, our hiccups in life are horribly embarrassing. I’m not saying go advertise your imperfections and mistakes, but own them. It might sound cliché, but you are not alone. I openly cried, asked for help, and received support, referrals and heartfelt advice. My husband and daughters all shared when our crisis had passed, that the thing we were most proud of was that we were rewhat do you mean “real”? Our family had openly lived our struggle. We didn’t have the added stress- of hiding, retreating, pretending. And when we did succeed, our extended family, friends, and co-workers were all the more proud of our years of effort, our commitment to each other, and our love. We eventually became a source of comfort for others.

**Make your child accountable for their actions.** Don’t let your child off the hook. Be consistent, be clever, be strong. Work as a team. A teenager smells dissention. They will try to divide and conquer, and they won’t care who they hurt to win. (They want you to hurt as badly as they do.) Many families have been torn apart by a struggling teen – marriages have failed, the teen has moved out, and siblings have suffered. You may not share the same parenting skills, but present a united front to your child. Talk with each other. Strategize. Seek professional advice if you need assistance in building a new collection of skills. Set a plan. Think before you speak. If necessary, send them to their room - regroup together so you can agree on a plan or punishment, then take action. Together.

**That’s on YOU.** Our own life experiences ultimately determine our reactions to everything. How and why we react the way we do is determined by our history. We can’t control what happens around us, only how we react to it. So the reaction is on YOU. If you react in anger, sadness,
frustration, guilt or fear, look at why. Take a journey of self-reflection and discovery. Get some professional help like counseling if you need to. You reacted because of the way someone reacted to you. Becoming more aware of this will help you change how you react. The answer will help your child and your family.

**It’s not a competition.** Welcome and initiate questions about birth parents. Answer them openly and honestly - with love and without fear. Sometimes “I don’t know” is the best answer. This is not a competition – you were all pivotal to your child’s existence and you all love him or her. Encourage your child to be grateful for what each parent brought to their world. One brought life and the other, day-to-day love. No one is better than the other. Don’t compete, just love.

**Show unconditional love.** In the end, this is all that matters. Teenagers secretly crave boundaries, hugs and attention. They can seem insatiable – you will feel that there is not enough love, money and attention in the world. It’s a test. It’s a test of how much you love them. All the more for a child who- thinks his or her birth parents didn’t love him or her. All the therapists, discipline, boundaries, medication and effort won’t work if it isn’t balanced with love. I would tell Lauren, “I’m hanging up now. Call me back when you’re not yelling. I don’t support this behavior. I love you and you can call me back when you’ve calmed down.” And she would. Somewhere in your adventure, you’ll need to help your child break the cycle of poor choices, anger, and sadness so they can be strong in their conviction. It may require changing schools, friends, surroundings. Then once they start making good choices, there can be some clean-up involved. It can take awhile for fender benders, poor grades, bad credit, and court hearings to pass. Have the support come with clear goals and expectations because they will still need to be held accountable. For instance, if you loan them money, set up a schedule for repayment. Be an advisor, a supporter. Once they have made the turn, there will come a time when your help is truly appreciated; a time when their natural reaction is to be motivated, unselfish, and truly grateful. A time when FAMILY means everything to them. Love includes accountability. Love means setting boundaries and limits. Love means loving them no matter what.

**Don’t be hard on yourself.** You have the best of intentions. You’ve done your best. Every reaction, every decision was not perfect, but no one expected it to be. Quit trying to be perfect – just be you and discover ways to change for your child if you need to. If your child knows you loved them during good times and bad, they will remember that, I promise. It may not feel like it now, but they are absorbing all that is being said - by you, their therapist, the 12-Step - group, everyone. When they are ready to get healthy, it all comes back to them. You have to provide a loving and supportive environment for them to become ready, but you can’t make them be ready. I once asked Lauren if I did anything right. She said, “Mom, you kept me alive, you kept me safe from myself, and you loved me. You did nothing wrong. Until I was ready, there was nothing you could do.”

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Julie Craft is the Co-Founder and President of The Adoption Support Center, Inc. in Indianapolis, Indiana. A state licensed agency since 1986, the Center has helped create over 3700 adoptive families. Julie is the biological parent of Lindsey and adoptive parent of Lauren. Both daughters involved themselves in work at the agency. Lindsey became an international home study specialist (then later a Pediatric Registered Nurse), while Lauren openly shared her struggles and triumphs as an adoptee and became peer support for birth mothers.