

SUMMARY OF THE SEVEN CORE ISSUES IN ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY

The Seven Core Issues were first introduced in the 1982 article “Seven Core Issues in Adoption” by Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Deborah Silverstein. In 2019, Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Allison Davis Maxon expanded the Seven Core Issues to include all forms of permanency, as well as the additional impact that attachment disruptions and trauma has on constellation members, This article is an abridged summary of the book Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency: A comprehensive Guide to Promoting Understanding and Healing in Adoption, Foster Care, Kinship Families, and Third Party Reproduction.

The majority of adoptions and permanent plans start today in foster care or through kinship caregiving, which often means the child has suffered trauma and/or neglect. The deep feelings that come from what children have experienced are often later misunderstood as any range of mental health issues. This article provides a deeper understanding into how their histories could impact thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout their lives.

As you read this article, know that the *Seven Core Issues* can also help shed light on what may be happening for any member of the family or those connected to the child at any time. (Note: The *Seven Core Issues* refers to this network of people as the constellation.) And, regardless of how a child came into the family or at what age, these lifelong core issues can have an impact.

Any or all of the *Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency* may be experienced by anyone in the child’s family or constellation, throughout their lives. They are:

- Loss
- Rejection
- Shame and Guilt
- Grief
- Identity
- Intimacy
- Mastery and Control



Loss

Loss begins the journey and remains at the center. Families built through foster, kinship care and adoption represent bitter sweet forms of family building as they incorporate the joys and pain of both loss and gain, because while a child has a permanent family, it is crisis and/or trauma that create the circumstances that lead to adoption and permanency.

For all involved, there is a first loss that led to the child being with the permanent family, and then many secondary losses that continue to affect family members and networks throughout their lives. Some of these are vague and may be described as a feeling of distress and confusion about people who are *physically absent* but *psychologically and emotionally present* in their lives. And, these feelings can occur at any point in their lives. People who are adopted lose both their birth/first families; siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. They may lose cultural, racial and ethnic connections and/or their language of origin. If they are adopted as older children, they may also lose friends, foster families, pets, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings.

For birth/first parents, adoption and permanency means the loss of a child whom they may never see again and the loss of their parenting role. Parents who have adopted may have experienced the loss of not giving birth to a particular child, failed fertility treatments, and dreams of raising a child with whom they are genetically connected.

Losses include:

- A family member; the family tree is permanently altered
- The loss of their familial tree that includes a history, culture and lineage
- Important physical, genetic, mental health and historical information
- Safety, love and protection of one's birth/first parents
- Societal status and being part of the norm
- Their original role in somebody's life
- Power over their life's circumstances

Rejection

These kinds of losses are most often experienced as a form of social rejection. Rejection can be real, indirect or imagined. People get their most basic needs met through human connectedness so being rejected or shunned from a person, family or community can leave someone feeling a deep sense of abandonment and isolation. People who are touched by these experiences describe feelings of unworthiness, being of little value, and having a fear of future. Or, sometimes, rejection is felt in a person's body as discomfort and physical pain, so may not be understood. When this issue is tapped, the person may anticipate rejection, provoke rejection and/or defend against further rejection with words or behaviors.



Feelings of Rejection may include:

- Increased sensitivity to any further rejection; large or small
- Subsequent losses being experienced as rejection
- Questions such as “Why me?” or “What did I do or not do to deserve this?”
- Children believing the crisis was their fault since they believe the world revolves around them
- Feeling judged, unwanted, different, ‘less than’, or ‘not good enough’

Shame and Guilt

Rejection leads to feelings of shame and/or guilt. Shame is the painful feeling that one is bad and undeserving of deep connections and happiness. Guilt is a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, whether real or imagined. Shame is about ‘being’ (I’m bad) and guilt is about ‘doing’ (I did something bad).

Shame leaves a person believing that their core self is ‘less worthy’ than other people. These beliefs increase anxiety and may lead to defensive behaviors. Shame and guilt discourage people from thinking of themselves in a positive way. It can limit individuals from loving and receiving love as they do not feel worthy.

Guilt develops from our earliest parent-child experiences and is a learned social emotion. Consistent, secure and healthy primary attachment relationships allow the child to experience the attachment figures’ values and beliefs, which helps them to learn right from wrong, and to later develop a conscience as a result.

Shame and guilt can also come from outside the family, like from extended family members or expectations in society. The keeping of secrets that has historically been attached to adoption and permanency in families, societies and systems has also added to shame and guilt.* Children impacted by foster, adoption and kinship caregiving often experience both shame and guilt over time as their understanding of what happened to them unfolds developmentally, as do the stigmas.



People may experience shame and guilt when:

- Attachments have been broken
- Trauma in relationships, violence, abuse and neglect occur
- Stigmatizing words and labels are used
- Parents withhold important information from the child/teen/adult
- People are lied to, manipulated or forced, or important information is withheld
- Professionals and 'systems of care' criticize or put down (intentionally or unintentionally)

*The negativity of keeping secrets is not the same as thoughtful, respectful protection of a person's privacy, which all individuals deserve.

Grief

The profound losses that created feelings or fears of rejection, which led to the emotions of shame and guilt, must be grieved. Adoption and permanency losses are too often left unnamed, un-acknowledged and un-grieved. The losses may be difficult to acknowledge and mourn in a society where these forms of family building are seen as problem-solving events that benefit everyone, rather than an event surrounded by loss. This point of view can make it difficult to accept, discuss and express the emotions connected to grief.

In today's society, children are not taught how to cope with loss and adults are often expected to simply get over things and move on. Yet, grieving is essential to any healing process. To support one another with grief, it is important to know that while grief is universal, it is experienced as a personal and highly individual process. It depends on many factors including: personality, gender, culture, temperament, religious and/or spiritual beliefs, coping styles, life experiences, the age the loss occurred, the nature of the loss and an individual's support system. There is no recipe to shorten the process or make the suffering go away. Grief is about acceptance, patience, adaptation, forgiveness and endurance; it changes you. Grief for families who have experienced profound losses that change the course of their life may be grieving at different times, in different ways as one's life unfolds.



The adoption/permanency constellation network may experience grief when:

- The original separation occurs
- Anniversaries of the loss or crisis occurs
- Losses that require more adaptation occurs
- Someone asks a question that triggers the feelings of loss
- Memories surface in connection to the crisis, loss or person lost
- A child/teen's understanding of adoption as their story unfolds
- Search and reunion occur

Identity

Because it is a life-altering event, adoption/permanency affects an individual's identity. Everyone wants and needs to understand who they are, where they fit, and when they share their stories with others, they are able to better understand themselves. Yet, children with histories of loss and trauma have patchy life stories. For a child who is adopted, gaps can be experienced as early as when a child starts school or needs to complete a family-focused classroom assignment, like creating a family tree. Later, as they grow through teenage years into adulthood, unanswered questions, missing family stories, absent medical information and unknown values and traditions can all lead to a sense of feeling like the puzzle pieces to their identity are missing.

As with all of the core issues, the identity of the child's family members and constellation will also be impacted. For example, parents who are fostering, adopting or kinship caregivers, may not feel like "real parents", and birth/first parents may be unsure of their role in their child's life since they are not actively parenting the child day to day.

People in the adoption/permanency constellation may experience identity issues when:

- Tweens and teens are forming their identity
- Children feel insecure or angry and say 'You're not my real mother/father'
- Search and reunion occur
- Personal or intrusive questions are asked
- Medical issues arise
- People ask 'Are those your real children?', 'Are those your real parents?'
- People ask the birth/first parent 'How many children do you have?'
- Birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day create questions about one's connections



Intimacy

Intimacy requires a person to know who they are and what they need in relationships and a belief that they have personal value. Individuals' most primary motivation is the drive to belong, so they learn how to get their emotional needs met through human connections. Intimate attachment relationships require trust, respect, acceptance, empathy and mutual exchange. If the earlier core issues have not been addressed, an individual may not know themselves well enough to know what they 'really need' or what they have to offer the other person in an emotionally intimate relationship.

If individuals have acknowledged their core losses, and know where, when and with whom rejection surfaces, can address feelings of shame and guilt, have taken time to grieve, and have embraced their identity, they are able to offer their true self in an intimate relationship. Identity and intimacy are linked; as a person clarifies who they are, their ability to relate to others, forgive others, embrace others and trust others grows.

Intimacy challenges can occur when:

- People have experienced trauma in relationships, multiple moves, and attachment disruptions
- They have experienced abuse, violence and neglect
- A person who was adopted lacks people who are genetic, ethnically and racially the same or similar
- Parents lose an intimate connection to a child they were parenting
- A person loses an intimate relationship with a partner and/or family member
- The crisis of infertility, invasive medical procedures and sex-on-demand in order to conceive, impacts the couples' sexuality and their relationship
- Professionals and the courts intrude into a person's most intimate and personal decision
- People ask intrusive questions about infertility, your child's story or the loss of your children

Mastery and Control

All of the unidentified, un-named, unacknowledged and un-grieved losses can create intense feelings of powerlessness and loss of control. Mastery over one's life circumstances has been lost at some point by all members of the adoption/permanency constellation. Initially, everyone lost some power and control because of a life crisis, with the infant/child losing the most as they had no input into the decision that changed their life course. People who are adopted and/or children in foster care, had no choice about being adopted or fostered and must cope with the haphazard nature of how they joined their particular family. Birth/first parents may emerge from the adoption/permanency process feeling victimized and powerless. Parents who have adopted/given permanency have lost control of over when, how and whom to parent.



The ultimate goal for everyone is Mastery, which is a regaining of power and control over one's life. Feeling empowered gives a person the ability to have an effect on others, feel that they have authority and rights, be hopeful and create change.

Mastery is a hard-earned skill. The achievement of mastery in various aspects of ones' life is a process, a journey, which includes adapting, learning, self-awareness and forgiving.

People who are part of an adoption/permanency constellation may gain a sense of mastery when:

- Their own core issues are acknowledged and addressed
- They can identify their strengths, needs and value, to themselves and others
- They clarify what they were able to control and not control
- They can forgive themselves and others for decisions/mistakes that were made
- They can acknowledge other constellation members losses, challenges & pain
- They clarify the lessons that they have learned and take the time to celebrate their accomplishments, their resiliency, strengths and gains

Awareness of the impact of the Seven Core Issues can help people better understand how the experience of adoption/permanency affects their life and relationships. For example, a parent's understanding of the Seven Core Issues helps them to more accurately address the complex challenges and feelings their child may experience throughout various stages of development. The Seven Core Issues is also a powerful tool to allow people to better communicate about their own core issues and better understand each other's' core issues, which leads to greater self-awareness and stronger relationships with one another.

