

New study on experience of adopted people as they become parents

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Parenting is always challenging, but for adopted people becoming a mum or dad can be extra demanding, as well as extra special—according to research from the University of East Anglia.

A new study is the first to investigate the lived experiences of adopted people in the UK as they become parents. "How do adopted adults see the significance of [adoption](#) and being a parent in their life stories? A narrative analysis of 40 life story interviews with male and female adoptees" is published in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*.

It finds that they are affected by issues that link back to their adoption and to difficult experiences in their past—related to loss, rejection, abuse and neglect.

Because of these difficult early experiences, many adoptees experience significant challenges, particularly as teenagers and [young adults](#).

These included [mental health](#) problems, emotional and behavioral difficulties, education and employment, [relationship problems](#), and substance misuse.

But while many people were parenting under the pressure of also trying to manage these challenges, becoming a mum or dad was often a key turning point and a motivation to turn their lives around.

Lead researcher Prof Beth Neil, from UEA's School of Social Work, said, "Adoption is a life-changing event, and it is really important to understand how people are affected throughout their whole life—not just in childhood.

"Becoming a parent is a key life experience, but the research on adopted people becoming parents is very limited and has not tended to include people adopted through the child protection system, or the experiences of adopted men as fathers.

"We wanted to better understand the issues faced by people who are adopted, as they become parents themselves."

The team worked with 20 adopted men and 20 adopted women—who were interviewed about their experiences.

Most of the participants were in their 20s and 30s and all had been adopted under the age of 12—with two-thirds having been adopted through the child protection system.

Almost a quarter of the parents in the study were not living with their children—including some who had themselves lost their children to care or adoption.

Prof Neil said, "We guided them to break down their life into key chapters and talk through the high points, the low points and the turning points that were most significant to them. We wanted to understand adopted people's life stories in their own words.

"What we found is that when adopted people become parents, lots of issues can come up that link back to their adoption and to difficult experiences in their past such as issues of loss, rejection, abuse and neglect.

"For some, having their first child meant meeting the first person in their life that they had a biological connection to. Others were afraid they would not bond with their child or that their child would reject them.

"Because many of the participants had a history of abuse and neglect, thinking about their birth parents often raised anxieties that they would parent their own child poorly.

"The flip side of this was the determination to try and break cycles of abuse, and we saw that for many, becoming a parent was a positive turning point.

"Because of the often-difficult backgrounds of the parents, many reported problems in their teenage years and as young adults with mental health, education and employment, substance misuse, and relationships with parents and partners.

"Often these problems were ongoing when they became a mum or dad, threatening their parenting and playing into their biggest fear—that they might repeat negative cycles of neglect or abuse with their own children.

"Sadly, many adoptees feared that asking for help and expressing worries would lead to scrutiny of their parenting.

"Most people were managing well in their role as mum and dad, but a minority were still struggling with difficult problems, and a small number of parents had experienced their worst fear—the removal of their own children. For parents who were judged unable to look after their own children, not 'breaking the cycle' was devastating."

The team says that support for adopted adults with mental health problems is a particularly pressing need, as parental [mental health problems](#) are a strong mediating factor in the link between childhood adversity and compromised parenting.

Where adoptees are still struggling with these issues when they become a parent, then support is needed at that life stage.

But ideally, the adoption system needs to recognize the need to provide support to adoptive families much earlier on, to prevent the difficulties that often become particularly challenging during the [teenage years](#).

The study found that identity issues raised by both men and women were very similar. This is important because almost all previous research had focused just on mothers. But fathers also felt deeply about the impact of

adoption on their lives, and issues linked to adoption came up for them when they became dads.

"This research highlights the need for more support for adopted people both in childhood and when they become [parents](#) themselves," added Prof Neil.

More information: Elsbeth Neil et al, How do adopted adults see the significance of adoption and being a parent in their life stories? A narrative analysis of 40 life story interviews with male and female adoptees, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2023.107267](#)

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