

**Highlights of the most recent findings of the
Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS)
University of Minnesota
Center for Twin and Family Research**

Background: SIBS is one of the most comprehensive studies concerning adoption outcomes. Research began in 1998 and looked at many factors pertaining to siblings, family interactions and adolescent adjustment in non-adopted and adopted people. Researchers studied interactions between 284 adoptive and 208 non-adoptive families and within 123 families with 1 adopted and 1 non-adopted adolescent. The average age of the youths was 14.9 years.

One of the principal researchers is Matt McGue, a regents professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of Psychology. In preparation for AOCI's presentation to the Minnesota Organization for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting, Dr. McGue shared some highlights from this ongoing research.

First, keep in mind, it's impossible to say how a child would "turn out" if he or she weren't adopted. It's an important public policy question, but an impossible scientific question.

Research has proven

1. Most adopted children don't have any more problems than children who aren't adopted.
2. Children who are adopted are somewhat more vulnerable to mental health concerns (disruptive behavior disorder or school problems, delinquency, etc.) in adolescence than children who are not adopted.
 - Clinical observations show a higher representation of adopted children. For example (using rough numbers), if 2 percent of the population is adopted, 5 to 6 percent of clinical population is adopted. Researchers see a bias that adoptive parents seem more willing to seek help because they are (in general): better educated; already understand the social service system because they went through the adoption process; may not have complete medical health background of the child.
 - Right now, researchers know very little about what happens after adolescence. Preliminary findings show increased vulnerability in adolescence doesn't follow into adulthood. But they'll know more in the coming years.
3. Children who are adopted domestically (born in the United States) have higher risk than children who are adopted internationally.
4. These findings show moderate-sized affects. One researcher explains it like this: Increased risk of adoption is comparable to having a boy vs. a girl. Boys have higher rates of ADHD than girls. About the same rate of risk is evident when studying mental health vulnerabilities of an adopted child vs. a child who is not adopted.

Intellectual achievement – A lot of research exists on the intellectual achievement of adopted people. It's considered a fact that adoption is related with an increase in intellectual achievement, with as much as a 7 point IQ advantage in adopted children. Reasons for this include that adoptive parents are (in general) better educated, have higher IQs, have a higher income and are more committed to parenting (having been through the adoption process).

Birth parent research – Research on birth parent outcomes (“Do parents go on to live happy, healthy lives after adoption?”) cannot be accurately studied in this country. With closed birth parent records, it's impossible to truly randomly select study participants. Be wary of research on this topic and take a close look at how birth parents were identified.

People often want to know...

1. Does an adopted child fare as well as a child who is not adopted?

It's accurate to say that an adopted child may have somewhat increased vulnerability, but most don't have problems. It's a mistake to say problems never happen with adopted children. That's not true.

2. Does an adopted child feel as close with his/her families as a child who isn't adopted?

In a large study with adolescent people, there is a little more conflict within adopted families. That might be the result of the corresponding increase in mental health vulnerabilities, which could lead to conflict. However, the families studied did not show diminished warmth. Dr. McGue hypothesizes that how cohesive these families are when the adopted individuals become adults will depend more on the warmth than the conflict dimension.

3. Does placing a child for adoption create problems for that child?

With 95 percent confidence, research shows the answer is “no.” There is an old notion that adopted children feel rejected because their birth parents chose not to raise them. There isn't much evidence of that. Every person has challenges. In adolescence, and adopted person may find that his/her adoption is a challenge and, for some, it can become a real concern. It will be something they may deal with – and they should deal with it honestly. (An obsession with birth parent background isn't healthy.) But it's not a major mental health concern. Keep in mind, we tend to look at similar challenges and conflicts differently when dealing with an adopted person vs. a person who is not adopted.