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Talking about Adoption

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Starting the Adoption Conversation

Keep talks with your child simple and relaxed. Your ease with discussing adoption lays the groundwork for a lifelong dialogue.

BY FRAN EISENMAN

Talking to young children about adoption is an opportunity to shape attitudes and expand knowledge before influences outside the family come into play. Such discussions build self-esteem and give a sense of safety and security to a child. Every child who was adopted should be able to talk about it. This is true even in placements where the child resembles the parents and adoption is not evident to observers. In such cases, parents are not likely to have adoption-related conversations with strangers in public places—and their children miss chances to listen and learn.

Preschoolers are concrete thinkers. They see things as either black or white, and cannot appreciate the gray areas in between. They interpret what is said to them literally; metaphor and innuendo are lost on them. They do not have the experience or the abstract thinking to see the bigger picture. It is no wonder that parents struggle to find the right words to launch this childhood-long conversation.

Teachable Moments

Sometimes the best way to talk about adoption is to use a common experience as a teaching tool. For example, a mother and child are talking about a neighbor's puppy. As the child expresses her feelings about the puppy, the mother can point out how young animals, like young humans, need care day and night. Someone

must protect and shelter them. This might prompt the child to think about what it might have been like if the puppy had no one to take it to the vet or keep it warm. Together, mother and child could share their relief and joy that this puppy now has a home and everything it needs to grow up healthy and happy. Casually, accompanying her words with a hug or quick kiss, the mother can say that children need care too, and that she is thrilled to be a mother to her child. Thus, a casual observation about an everyday event becomes a feel-good lesson about adoption for the child.

Other teachable moments occur when a child notices a pregnant woman; hears comments on differences in his appearance from a parent; or when a new baby comes home, either by birth or through adoption, to a family you know. Use calm and snuggly times, like bedtime or reading time, to share the story of how the child came to be adopted



Use a common experience to demonstrate what adoption and caring mean.

into his family. Pleasant emotions are associated with the words, creating a foundation for later exploration of more complex issues.

Fran Eisenman is a New England-based social worker with two internationally adopted children.

STARTING ADOPTION CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR PRESCHOOLER

- ▶ Use simple language and examples familiar to children (like pets or neighbors).
- ▶ Keep your tone casual and relaxed.
- ▶ Accompany discussion with feel-good actions: snuggles, smiles, laughter.
- ▶ Use positive adoption language.
- ▶ If you're questioned by a stranger about your child, say that you'd love to chat, adoption has been great for your family, but this is not a good time. If appropriate, take the person's phone number and offer to call later. Your upbeat response lets your child know the topic is not taboo, while protecting his privacy.
- ▶ When you talk with your child about adoption, end with an affirmation of how happy you are to have adopted her.

Talking with Children About Adoption

Is it what you say, how early you say it, or how often you say it that matters most to your child? BY BARBARA RUSSELL

Catherine Brunson clearly remembers the day she learned she was adopted. After being approached by a classmate at school, her brother asked their mom about adoption. “My mom took both of us by the hand, led us into the bedroom, and proceeded to tell us the facts of life,” she says. “She went through the whole thing—the birth process, etc., then segued into how this happened to someone else, not to her and Dad.”

“We were looking at each other going, ‘Wow.’”

Misguided? Comical? Perhaps, by today’s standards. Effective? Definitely, according to Brunson, who says the incident was key in developing her matter-of-fact attitude about adoption. “After that, we were extremely open about adoption in our family.”

Just like Brunson’s mother 30 years ago, today’s adoptive parents face a challenge: helping your children achieve a level of comfort and confidence with their adoption. And the most effective way to accomplish that is by talking to your children.

“Children can’t move forward into the future unless they have a grasp of what happened in the past,” says Jane Brown, M.S.W., an adoption educator, consultant, and author. “Talking with them enables them to get their feelings about having been adopted out on the table.”

If talking were all about cozy chats by the fireside, it’d be a snap. But many times, it involves fielding a question while you’re driving the kids

to soccer practice, fending off a stranger’s comment, or deciphering your child’s angry outbursts.

Techniques developed by adoption experts can make talking a little easier and a lot more effective—whether a heart-to-heart conversation or a spur-of-the-moment surprise.

■ **Begin talking when your child is young.** Early talks—starting in infancy—help your child begin to grasp his adoption story and learn the language. These talks will help you, as well as your child.

“Tell them early and tell them often,” says Tom Swanson, a dad to four grown children, two adopted domestically and two adopted in Korea. His wife, Linda, adds, “Part of it was to get us used to using the words, before they really even knew what we were talking about.”

Practice the story in your mind, or role-play your responses to questions your child might ask.

It’s important for partners in a two-parent family to coordinate their stories, says Debbie Riley, executive director of the Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE). “They both have to be committed to talking and sharing the story,” she says. “It takes a lot of the stress out.”

■ **Keep your conversations developmentally appropriate.** Susan Fisher and her co-author Mary Watkins found a common thread when they interviewed families for their book, *Talking With Young Children About Adoption*. “Conversations often

started when a kid would ask, ‘Was I in your tummy?’” Fisher says. That’s a common developmental question that usually appears between ages 3 and 4. So you need to answer in language that can be grasped by a 4-year-old.

Think carefully about how to discuss difficult issues without lying. “For example, if you know your child was conceived by rape, you don’t want to start by saying ‘Your mommy and daddy loved each other very much,’” says Lois Melina, author of *Raising Adopted Children*. “Say something that implies that her parents didn’t know each other very well.”

■ **Be honest.** The adoption story belongs to the child, and the child has a right to know that story.

Developmentally appropriate storytelling isn’t license to replace missing facts or soften harsh ones. “As adoptive parents, we want to make it all better,” Riley says, but we can’t. “What might fly at 6 may not fly at 13. That’s why you have to be careful about what you say. Don’t make it up; just admit you don’t know.”

■ **Talk often, and show that you’re willing to talk when your child wants to.** Children absorb concepts through repetition. “We’re asking children to understand complexities that many adults can’t understand,” Riley says. “Sometimes the information is too emotionally laden for the child, or he might not have been able to process it developmentally. So it’s important for the parent to revisit the information frequently.”

(continued on page 6)

ADOPTION WORKSHOPS

The right environment will encourage your child to open up and start talking about adoption

BY JULIE MICHAELS

The children filed into the waiting room at Spence-Chapin Adoption Agency in New York City like kids being dragged to the dentist. Most were 7 or 8 years old, all were adopted. Their parents had signed them up for a 90-minute “Kids’ Workshop on Adoption,” one of many post-adoption services the agency offers. Nervous and unsure what would be asked of them, the children clung to their parents like barnacles to a ship.

“Children are rarely eager to attend these sessions,” says Ronny Diamond, director of post-adoption services for Spence-Chapin. “They’re anxious; they think they’re going to be put on the spot. But once engaged, the experience can be transforming.”

Every adopted child has questions. They may harbor thoughts about birthparents that they hesitate to share. They may struggle with how to speak to peers about being adopted. Even well-adjusted children may at times feel separate and confused.

Lesson I: Starting Young

Diamond explained to parents that working with children who were as young as 7 and 8 was new for Spence-Chapin. Ordinarily, children start addressing adoption issues when their thinking becomes more complex. But, she said, parents had been eager for workshops that focused on younger children. “This is a generation of parents that doesn’t want to push adoption issues under the rug,” said Diamond. “They’re eager to get their kids talking.” Once children understand that it’s all right to bring up difficult questions—and that there are other adoptees who feel what they feel—they’re less likely to close down around the subject.

Lesson II: A Safe Place to Say Scary Things

Social worker Peter Maramaldi explained to his young charges that whatever information they shared in the sessions was private. He would talk to parents about the session in general terms, but he would not share the children’s individual comments.

“This gives the kids permission to say things they might not say otherwise,” says Maramaldi. “Most children this age have thoughts about their birthmother—‘what was she like, why did she give me up, did she love me?’—but they may be reluctant to share these thoughts for fear of upsetting their adoptive parents.

“What we provide here is a social learning model—the children learn from each other. They sit in a group and hear another child utter their own most secret feelings. Other adoptees will bring issues out into the open that the child thought were his problems alone. And there’s no disapproval. The child realizes, ‘Hey, I can say these things and the world won’t explode.’ ”

Lesson III: Establishing the Group

Maramaldi later explained to parents that he started his sessions by establishing trust within the group. The children had to go

around the room, make eye contact with the person next to them and state their name. They had to hold hands and squeeze the hand of the person next to them.

Next he established what they all had in common. “How many children here are 7, how many are 8?” Hands would shoot up. “How many children are in first grade?” “How many children here like ice cream?” Hands up. “How many children here are adopted?” Hands went up all around the room.

Lesson IV: The Mean Meter

Maramaldi asked them to talk about their experiences around adoption. Had anyone ever said anything about their being adopted that hurt their feelings? Had children in school teased them?

As the stories came out, Maramaldi suggested they rate the stories on a “Mean Meter.” How mean is it? A little mean, moderately mean, REALLY mean? Suddenly, children were eager to share hurts that just an hour before they wouldn’t have dreamed of acknowledging. Again, hearing another child tell of similar experiences made being adopted not so unusual after all.

Lesson V: Thinking about the Birthmother

When Maramaldi asked the kids if they ever thought about their birthmothers, they all raised their hands. Although, as promised, he didn’t give children’s names, he did tell parents what he heard:

- ▶ “I think of her as my imaginary friend, next to me all the time.”
- ▶ “I’d like to travel back to when I was a baby and talk to her.”
- ▶ “I wonder what she looks like.”

Because this was a group that included domestic as well as internationally adopted children, there was much discussion of unmarried mothers too young to care for their children. Whether or not this was true for each child, it helped them think more about their own biological mothers and talk about their feelings.

Lesson VI: Instant Friendships

At the end of the workshop, parents returned to a group of children who, ninety minutes before, had been complete strangers. Now they were friends. There was a feeling of relief in the room—not only had they come through an experience they had been anxious about, there was also the relief of discovering they were not alone. Dark secrets had been shared and turned out to be not so very dark after all.

The children returned for a second session with the same group the following week. Their assignment had been to bring some item with them that related to being adopted. Some children brought a photo album, others brought clothing. One little girl chose to bring a tiny, tiger slipper that she had worn in China.

The second session turned out to be less revealing than the first. “They just wanted to play,” said Maramaldi. “They weren’t ready to take things any farther.” This may be the downside of working with younger children. If they’re not ready to talk, they won’t. Even so, the experience was remarkably positive for all of the families. “It freed my daughter to talk more, to feel what she felt without guilt,” said one mother. “It opened up her world.”

Julie Michaels lives with her family in Massachusetts.

Make sure the conversations are relevant. “Talk about it when it seems to be a significant piece of whatever’s going on,” Melina says. “At some times in a child’s life, that’s going to be frequent, and sometimes it’s going to be infrequent.”

■ **If your child isn’t talking, consider using techniques to spark conversation.** An indirect conversation allows parents to keep the subject open without forcing the child to participate. “It’s meant for the child to hear, but it’s not talking to the child,” says Joyce Maguire Pavao, Ed.D., founder of the Center for Family Connections and author of *The Family of Adoption*.

For example, she says, a dad—knowing his child is nearby—might ask his wife, “I always think of Lisa on Mother’s Day because she’s Sally’s birthmother. Should we buy flowers for Lisa and put them on the mantel, or send her a card?”

Or comment about a topic casually and see if your child responds. (Adoption expert Holly van Gulden calls these “pebbles.”) For example, Brown says, a stranger’s nosy questions could prompt you to say later, “I felt so awkward when that woman asked me about our family.” Use your child’s response (if any) to set the course of conversation.

Sometimes a direct approach works best. “Occasionally we’d say, ‘Do you have any questions about adoption?’” Linda Swanson says. Sometimes the children would ask a question, other times, they wouldn’t.

■ **Help children learn to express their feelings.** “Help them develop a feeling-word vocabulary,” Brown says. “That starts with toddlers. Help them have an extensive vocabulary so they can identify feelings that get jumbled up and get them out in words.”

Look for nonverbal ways to help your child work through adoption issues. Some children might benefit from drawing pictures about their adoption story, Riley says. Older children can write in a journal, Melina

suggests. “It’s a good way to work out a lot of grief and process abstract thoughts.” Of course, the journal is the child’s property—no snooping.

■ **Make certain children who are older when placed receive the explanations and support they need.**

If language is a barrier, Pavao says, talk with the child through a reliable translator. Start the process in-country and continue it at home.

She also encourages families to hold adoption ceremonies to help children understand what’s staying the same and what’s changing. “Ceremonies are very important,” Pavao says. “And when children are older, involving them is key.”

Don’t try to make your child forget her past. “Often, parents think That was a hard life; we’ll bring the child here and make everything better,” Riley says. “But nine years of one’s life is nine years. The child should remember—and feel comfortable talking about—everything, both good and bad.”

■ **Learn how to respond appropriately to others’ questions and comments and teach your children the same skill.**

“If somebody walked up to you in the grocery store and asked how much money you make or how often you have sex, you know where the boundaries are,” Melina says. “It’s important for parents to recognize that being honest and open with their children about their histories doesn’t mean they have to be honest and open with everybody they meet.”

That can be difficult to do when it comes to adoption. “We’re so overjoyed to have our child and so proud of having gotten him home that we’re eager to talk,” Brown says. “We radiate that. But if we allow the focus to stay there when it shouldn’t, we’re doing that at our child’s expense.”

Pavao suggests practicing a response that goes something like this: “We love to talk about our personal matters in our family, but we don’t talk to strangers about that.”

Then redirect the conversation or sim-

ply say goodbye in a pleasant manner.

Once you’re back in the car, give your child an opportunity to talk about the incident if he/she wants to. Seize the teachable moment, too: “Remember, we don’t talk to strangers about personal matters.”

■ **In an open adoption, discuss topics with the birthparents, but don’t allow them to set the agenda.** “In open adoptions, I think what’s most important is to realize that the adoptive parents are the parents forever,” Pavao says. “Adoptive parents shouldn’t defer parenting to the birthparents. That’s not what adoption is. It’s not joint custody.”

She recommends treating birthparents as extended family members who must be “on board” with the adoption agenda. Be sure that they are aware of your approach to the adoption story and will work with you as the child asks questions.

Now that you’ve learned those rules, here are the two most important ones:

■ **Don’t talk too much.** Every child is different. “If you have four adopted children,” Pavao says, “you’re going to deal with each one differently. It won’t work to follow a template.”

You shouldn’t force the topic on any child. “I see kids in therapy who tell me their parents never stop reminding them that they’re adopted,” Pavao says.

So how do you know what’s the best approach for your child? Simple: You’re the parent.

“Parents know their kids,” Pavao says. “I constantly remind them that they’re the experts on their child.”

Listen to your children, Fisher says, and give them what they need, not what you need. A tall order, perhaps, but it’s the essence of parenting—adoptive or otherwise.

■ **Feel free to adapt, break, or ignore the rules.**

Barbara Russell is a freelance writer and editor in Charlotte, North Carolina. She and her husband are the parents of two internationally adopted daughters.

Let's Play Adoption

Fantasy play can be a comfortable way to explore adoption issues with your child. BY SUSAN TOMPKINS



I smiled and listened closely as I overheard my daughter, Lillianna, and her friend, Rachael, playing with their dolls the other day. Lilli said, "Let's play orphanage." There was no hesitation. Rachael picked up the theme in a heartbeat and said, "I'll be a mom coming to take my baby home." And thus began an hour of play between these two adopted seven-year-olds and their dolls.

We adoptive parents have made it a practice to talk to our children about

their adoption story. We retell it, discuss it from time to time, and add facts and information when it seems appropriate. There may also be times when it does not seem right to talk or encourage our children to talk about adoption, as well as times when the pressures of parenting cause us to forget about keeping up the discussion.

We find that younger children ask questions about their adoption story. As they grow older, we know they continue to think about adoption-related

issues. But, ironically, as their thinking becomes more concrete, they tend to ask fewer questions and engage less in discussion about adoption.

But, as Lillianna and Rachael teach us, there is another way for adopted children to work out their feelings about adoption, and that is through play. Playing is comfortable, natural, and more fun than talking. And, lucky and fun for us, we can be a big part of it.

And, lucky and fun for us, we can be a big part of it.

Barbie's Home Study

This realization came to me one day when Lilli asked me to play Barbie with her. I had never been a big fan of Barbie and her friends (although I would have to concede that they now come in plenty of great colors). On this day, I decided to put my own agenda into the mix to make it interesting for me. Accordingly, I suggested to Lilli that Barbie and Ken wanted to adopt a baby from China. Usually Lilli doesn't care for my imposing on her fantasies of dress-up, princesses, and the like. However, on that day she took my suggestion.

We played for quite awhile. Lilli took the lead in the dialogue between Barbie and Ken about adoption. I proposed that the social worker come to Ken and Barbie's house for a home study so we could be sure that they were suitable parents. (I played the social worker.) Barbie and Ken did quite well in the interview and seemed to have a perfect marriage. Barbie and Ken then flew to China in the pink Corvette convertible that is fashionable among Barbies. They, of course, went to an orphanage and came home with a beautiful baby.

So when I heard Lilli say to Rachael, "Let's play orphanage," it was music to my ears. Hearing her suggest this on her own meant that my daughter was comfortable enough to share her feelings and beliefs about adoption with her friend. It probably helped that her friend had a similar adoption story. The playing gave Lilli and Rachael another way to work out their feelings. It has helped Lilli to understand and accept her past. Playing adoption gives me a gentle and effective way to provide my daughter with more information. Lilli now knows that families have to pass a social worker's scrutiny to adopt. Later, I can add more bits about the adoption process and her own story, if

PLAY BY THE RULES

- ▶ Do not be afraid to bring up adoption in the context of play. It can help children process their feelings, get comfortable talking, and bring you closer to them as you share this fun and private time.
- ▶ If your child has not wanted to discuss adoption in the past, playing might be the way to get him or her to open up. Play also encourages creativity, helps develop a sense of trust and reduces anxiety. Play can set up a healing stage where your child's buried feelings of sadness or anger can be expressed, explored, and explained.
- ▶ Stop the play and/or consult a professional if your child exhibits excessive anger, worry, sadness, fears, aggressive behavior, or new separation anxiety.

I choose to and if she's interested.

Many Ways to Play

I like everything about playing adoption. It is a positive way for my daughter to explore and become more comfortable about her own beginnings. You can play about adoption in general, or you can go deeper into the child's own adoption story. You can also probe feelings if it seems right. You can explore how it must have felt (fear of being in a new place, abandonment, coming to an adoptive family), and how it feels now. There are many levels to the play. You and your child can decide what is most comfortable.

When you ask questions or suggest scenarios, the child can go with it, if she wishes. If she feels threatened by the direction the play is taking, she can say nothing, end the play, or change the story line. You'll know what is working when you see it.

Not for Girls Only

Dolls are a perfect venue for playing out scenarios. So, what about our boys, who may not want to play with dolls, G.I. Joe or otherwise? Do boys prefer to sublimate their feelings rather than discuss them? I decided to try other strategies with Tino, my son, who is 11 and does not care to discuss his adoption story very much.

Legos are my son's "thing." He plays out stories constantly with them as he builds and rebuilds. Star

Wars, rescue missions, World War II battles, and current events are his realms. I entered this world one evening by asking, "Can I play Legos with you?" He was surprised, since I do not venture into this arena often. "What would you want to play?" he asked. "I was thinking of building your orphanage," I replied. A barrage of questions ensued. How many stories would it have, did we have any baby Lego people, would it have a roof, and what about a crib? Tino was delighted to play this with me.

Our play was part reality, as I recounted details of the day I met him, and part fantasy, as we played out a rescue mission with a Lego car that turned into an airplane. Tino had built it specially for this event. During our time together, he learned details of his own story that I had never told him. These were minor things, but every one became important to him. At the end of our play, Tino said, "I'm just so happy I got to come home to this family."

Our children need to accept the past so they can grow and become emotionally healthy adults. Playing with them about their adoption can help get them there.

Susan Tompkins is executive director of Journeys of the Heart Adoption Services. She lives with her family in Oregon.

When Your Kid Clams Up

If your preteen is suddenly silent about adoption, look for “reachable” moments. BY JAYNE SCHOOLER

Once upon a time, Josh was quick to respond when his mom brought up adoption and asked about his feelings. Around his 11th birthday, all that changed. If Carol mentioned the word “adoption,” Josh would sullenly reply, “I’m fine and I don’t want to talk about it.” Carol didn’t know what to do.

What’s Going On Here?

As children enter their preteen years, their ability to think in abstract terms increases dramatically. They really comprehend the meaning behind the words of their adoption story. At the same time, they’re striving to be successful and industrious in school, in sports, and with same-sex peers. They want to be capable and to be similar to their friends. If adoption makes

them feel different, they may try to avoid the subject.

In addition, preteens are concerned about fairness. Attention to the rules in game-playing with friends reveals this mindset. They also worry about the fairness of adoption—that they are not being “fair” to their parents if they have feelings or questions about their birth family, particularly if they sense discomfort in their parents. This is why Josh became reluctant to discuss his adoption and birth-parents.

3 Things You Can Do

When children aren’t talking about adoption, don’t assume they aren’t thinking about it. Instead:

1 Look for “reachable/teachable” moments. It’s generally healthy to keep the dialogue going. While your child should not be forced to discuss adoption-related issues, keep letting her know that you’re open and comfortable with the subject when she is ready. You might occasionally remark about your child’s skills, looks, or interests, indicating that some of these attributes probably came from her birth family: “You play the piano so well. I wonder if anyone in your birth family has musical talent. Do you ever wonder about that?”

2 Be alert for “anniversary reactions.” A child may be especially somber around his birthday or adoption day. Instead of allowing him to suffer in silence, anticipate sadness, and help him express it: “I always think about your birthmother



around your birthday. Do you think about her too? Do you have any questions about her that I could answer?”

3 Let children know they can love two sets of parents. Preteens may feel disloyal to their parents if they have questions, or even emotions, about their birth family. Assure your child that you expect her to love both you and her birthparents. Explain that parents do not stop loving a child who is already there in order to start loving a child who has just arrived. In the same way, children can love more than one set of parents.

*Jayne Schooler is co-author of several books, including *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child* (Bergin & Garvey).*

Still Not Talking?

If your preteen remains silent on adoption after you’ve tried to reach her, look for other ways to engage her:

- ▶ Suggest an “orphan-lit” book, such as *Dave at Night*, by Gail Carson Levine (HarperTrophy).
- ▶ Talk to her about attending a peer-group adoption workshop, suggesting she might like to hang out with other adoptees her age.
- ▶ Get together with another adoptive family who has a child close to your child’s age.
- ▶ Consider a counselor for her to talk to in private.
- ▶ And keep in mind that she may not be talking because she’s at a comfortable place and it’s not a need.

Why Didn't They Keep Me?

Answering kids' questions about their birthparents.

BY CARRIE KRUEGER

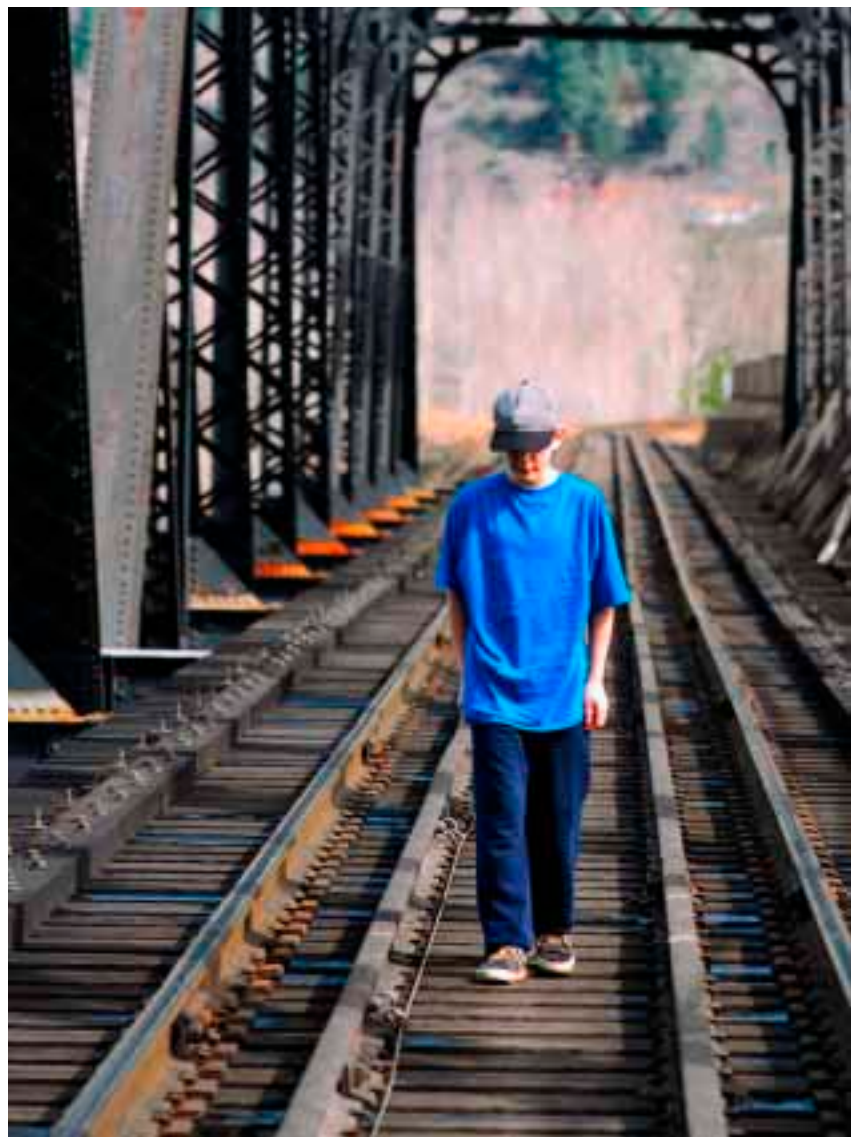
Six-year-old Michael wants to call his birthfather in Texas and ask why he didn't keep him. Eight-year-old Rachel asks her mother, "Did I look funny when I was born? There must have been something wrong with me." Nine-year-old Suzanne wants to know whether her birthmother has freckles like she does.

Why Now?

All three of these school-age kids are thinking about their birthparents. Their questions and behavior are typical of this age but often surprise adoptive parents. Even when the joyous adoption story has been comfortably and frequently discussed during the preschool years, the reality of the poignant (and pointed) questions of 7- or 8-year-olds can be painful for parents to hear.

It makes sense that kids this age would try to understand what it means to have been placed for adoption and why it happened to them. Lois Melina, author of *Raising Adopted Children* and *Making Sense of Adoption*, points out that this is the age when children consider life and death, when school exposes them to all kinds of families and they become acutely aware of their own. So, although adoption may seem less important than activities such as soccer or scouts, a lot of thinking about it is usually going on under the surface.

"Just a couple of weeks ago, my daughter said she wanted to know what her birthmother looked like," says Charise, the adoptive mom of an eight-year-old. Elementary school children typically want to know who



their birthfamilies are, what they look like, where they live.

Even children who never talk about adoption are probably wondering about their birthparents. Ronny Diamond runs group sessions for adopted kids ages seven to 13 for Spence-Chapin in New York City. She

tells of one session in which "a significant number of parents thought their children didn't think much about their birthparents," says Diamond. Having just been with their kids, the group leader reported to parents that all the children wondered about their birthparents and wished

they knew more about them.

Set the Stage

As it turns out, Diamond says, “although preschoolers may know their adoption stories and tell them with pride, verbatim, they don’t understand them.” Nonetheless, early discussions lay the groundwork for questions that will emerge in the school years. Some parents are very comfortable talking about the joy and beauty of adoption but shy away from mentioning birthparents. If you are comfortable, talk about your child’s birthparents in a natural and casual way from the earliest age. For example, toddlers love to admire themselves in the mirror. It would be natural to say, “You have such pretty eyes. I wonder if your birthmom has eyes like that?”

A four-year-old’s “mommy” games will often lead her to ask, “Did I grow inside your tummy, Mommy?” This is the opportunity for parents to tell their child that she grew inside her birthmother, just as all children grow inside a woman, and that she was born, just like other children. This is also the time to set the stage for adoption talk by distinguishing between giving birth to a baby and being able to care for one. Parents can explain to the child that, after she was born, her birthmother could not raise her, so she made a plan for her adoption.

What’s important to underscore is that it was the birthparents’ situation, not anything the child did, that led to his adoption, that a child be told specifically that his birthparents would not have been able to care for any child.

What Are You Really Asking?

Despite lots of early talk, most adoptive parents are caught off-guard by the tough questions of their seven- or eight-year-old. My own daughter asked repeatedly, “Why, Mommy, why?” Before you answer specific questions, try to find out what your

child is thinking. In the case of a nine-year-old who asks to see her birthmother, Melina asks, “Is she asking, ‘Do I look like my birthmother?’ Is she saying she has something she needs to know or to tell her?” Resist a quick answer that ends the dialogue. Instead, use the opening as an opportunity to learn what your child is thinking and worrying about.

LETTERS FROM WONDERING HEARTS

From Myung Hee to her unknown birthmother in Korea

Dear Mom,
Do you remember me? I’m Myung Hee. My American name is Melanie. Are you in Seoul still? America is good. But I wish I could see how Korea is. I always wonder about Korea. Why did you send me away? Didn’t you love me? Well, even though I don’t really know you, I love you. What happened to Daddy? How old are you? Do I have siblings? I love you!!!! I miss you. Please contact me.

Love always, Myung Hee

From Adam, age 9, to his birthmother, Sherry

Dear Sherry,
Do you have any pets? We have 5 dogs and 3 cats. I take karate. I am the best sparer in my division. I like to play sports. I’ve got a joke for you: It’s snowing. You go in a house. There’s a lamp, a stove, and a fireplace. You have a match left. Which one should you light first?

(Answer on back.)

Here are some things I’d like to know:

How tall are you? How old are you?

What is your hobby? Are your neighbors nice?

Do you play sports?

Do you sew?

Love, Adam

(answer to joke: the match)

Ronny Diamond adds, “When a child says, ‘Can I call my birthmother?’ that’s not a literal request. She may mean ‘I want to know more about this person.’ That’s an opening. Ask, ‘What do you think she’d be like?

What would you say to her? What do you think she might say to you? There are many places you can go with a question like that.”

Most children have questions about why their birthparents decided on adoption. It’s important that your child talk about these questions. Suggest that she write a letter to her birthmother asking the questions on her mind. If you are in a semi-open or open adoption, providing answers to these questions is often all that’s necessary to satisfy a child’s curiosity. For those children for whom there are no answers, sending a letter to the adoption agency or orphanage may help. (For examples of letters to birthmothers written by children, see “Letters from Wondering Hearts,” left.)

Despite parents’ assurances to the contrary, children this age are self-centered and may decide that they were placed for adoption because of something they did. It’s usually not enough to assure them that this isn’t the case. Parents should share as many facts as possible to help children come to more reasonable conclusions on their own. (See sidebar, “Make The Story Concrete,” right.)

If you have no information about your child’s birthfamily, don’t assume there isn’t much to talk about. Adopted children with no information have as much curiosity as those in open or semi-open adoptions. And they need just as much support in thinking it through and asking the all-important question, “why?” “Adoptive parents often feel concerned that they have little or no information,” says Ellen Singer, of the Center for Adoption Support and Education in Silver Spring, Maryland. “But you can help a child understand the circumstances or governmental policies that might have led a birthparent to make an adoption plan. It is important to acknowledge that it may feel unfair.”

Don’t forget that your job is to provide your child with as much information as you can and then let

MAKE THE STORY CONCRETE: ADVICE FROM LOIS MELINA

Answer questions honestly using concrete images and as many details as possible, says the author of *Making Sense of Adoption* and, with Sharon Kaplan Roszia, *The Open Adoption Experience*. "A child needs to understand that his birthparents are real people, not fantasy figures. If you have a picture, show it to him, and put it in context. Say something like, 'Here you are with Susan on the day you were born.' Telling your child who attended his birth, what people said, and what he looked like can go a long way in helping him understand that his birth was normal and had nothing to do with his adoption. If you don't have any information about your

child's birth, you can explain what conditions were probably like where he was born.

Instead of, "Your birthmother was too poor to keep you," you could say, "Your birthmother already had two children to take care of. She could barely find enough money to buy them food and pay for heat. She was afraid that she wouldn't be able to feed all of you." Sharing a birthmother's letter describing rundown housing, the meals she could barely afford, and the difficulty of getting to the grocery store without a car, will help a child understand concretely why she was placed for adoption.

parent to make an adoption plan. It is important to acknowledge that it may feel unfair."

Don't forget that your job is to provide your child with as much information as you can and then let her come to her own conclusions. Says Diamond, "Parents are not supposed to make it neat and tidy. Children have to keep figuring it out and revisiting it."

Fantasies and Sadness

Patricia Martinez Dorner, an adoption professional in Texas and author of *How to Open an Adoption* (R-Squared Press), notes that kids often wonder what their lives would have been like had they not been adopted. Dorner says, "Some children imagine that life would have been perfect if only they lived with their perfect birthparents." Dorner notes that these feelings are normal and may emerge as sadness or anger over adoption. Parents should remind themselves that these feelings have nothing to do with a child's love for her adoptive parents. If anything, school-age kids need more reminders than ever that adoption is forever.

Internationally adopted children may benefit from a homeland trip as a way to cope with fantasies about life in another family. Mostly, parents need to let kids know that it's okay to feel sad (or angry or worried), a difficult task for any parent, and even more so for those of us for whom adoption has brought such joy.

Don't Give Up

Often opportunities to talk with your child crop up unexpectedly. "It's usually when you're not even discussing adoption," says Melissa, mother of a nine-year-old in a semi-open adoption. "It's something they have been chewing on." Adds Diamond, "If you miss an opportunity, bring it up at another time. If you blow it, go back and try again later." This can be difficult and emotional. No parent handles every query perfectly and seizes every opportunity. But a commitment to listen and to support your child will go a long way in helping her deal with one of the most complex issues she will ever confront.

Carrie Krueger is a single mom of three in Washington state. She spends a lot of time



School age kids often need to understand why they were placed for adoption.

TAKE ACTION!

Things you can do with your child as she explores adoption issues.

▶ Draw your heart out.

Art is great therapy, according to adoption specialist Ellen Singer. Suggest your child draw pictures of what he is thinking or how he feels.

▶ Get it on paper.

Let your child write or dictate letters to his birthmom. These can be kept in a box for possible delivery at a later date or forwarded to the agency if it is a link to her.

▶ Play detective.

Is it possible that there is some information out there about your child's birthmom that you aren't aware of? Even the smallest tidbits of information have significance.

▶ Role-play.

Allow your child to fantasize that his or her birthmom is there in the room. What would he like to tell her? Grab a couple of dolls and let him act out a reunion.

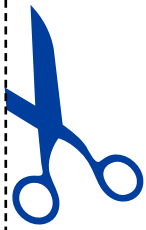
▶ Make a birthmom box.

This can be a place for your child to store documents, letters and artwork. The box gives a child something tangible, something to visit from time to time.

▶ Create rituals.

Light a candle to honor birthparents. Pray for them if your beliefs include praying for others. Create a tradition of throwing a stone in the lake each time you walk by to say thank you to birthparents. Simple rituals can help kids more than you think.

talking about birthparents!



ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

Talking to Your Three- to Five-Year-Old About Adoption

Three-to-five-year-olds are curious. Their burgeoning cognitive and language skills are tools for figuring out what life is about. The questions they ask offer insight into how much they want to belong, to be accepted, to be safe and secure. They have short attention spans and will change the subject or ignore us once their curiosity is satisfied or our talk goes on too long.

The best approach to adoption questions is to answer only the question your child is asking, in the simplest possible way. Offer words for expressing feelings, and let your child know that you're always game for talking. Talking calmly and matter-of-factly about adoption sends your child the most important message of all: that adoption is okay and he can feel completely comfortable discussing whatever is on his mind.

Here are some questions children are likely to ask, along with some answers you might offer:

"Why wasn't I born in your tummy?"

■ "Your dad and I couldn't make a baby, but we wanted a baby to love and take care of very much. You were born from your birth-mother's tummy, and then Daddy and I adopted you." "I wish you'd been born in my tummy too."

"Why did you adopt me?"

■ "We wanted a child to love and take care of."

"Why didn't my first mother keep me?"

■ "Sometimes a man and a woman give birth to a child, but they can't take care of any child right then. It's not because of anything about the child. It's for grown-up reasons. So they find another family who can take care of the child."

"What does my first mother look like?"

■ "You are wondering what your birthmother looks like." *If you know what she looks like, once you've acknowledged the question, describe her. If you don't know, you might say something like, "She must be very beautiful if she looks like you." Imagine together what she might look like, or invite your child to draw a picture.*

SAY IT SIMPLY

- "Every baby is born to a man and a woman." (A key concept to impart at this age.)
- "Families form in two ways: Babies can live with the family they were born in, or they can live with the family that adopts them."
- "Sometimes a woman can't grow a baby, so she adopts a baby."
- "Sometimes a mom and dad can't take care of a baby who is born to them, so they find another family to raise their child."
- "Sometimes families adopt children from far away."

A SAMPLE CONVERSATION

When my three-year-old, Sasha, adopted as an infant in Florida, first noticed a pregnant woman, our discussions of life and birth began.

SASHA: "I was in your tummy too, Mommy."

ME: "You were in Linda's tummy. Your birth-mother gave birth to you, and then Daddy and I adopted you."

SASHA: "But how did you and Daddy get me from Linda's tummy?"

ME: "Linda couldn't take care of any baby, and we needed a baby to love and take care of. So we adopted you to be our baby."

What if a child doesn't ask about adoption? Some of us believe that if a child does not ask about adoption, she does not want to know. In fact, a child who does not ask may simply be keeping her thoughts to herself. Your casual mention of adoption—*"Did you know that Janie was adopted from Guatemala?"*—gives her permission to ask.

Talking Strategies

- ◆ **Make sure you know** what your child is really asking before answering a question.
- ◆ **Offer concrete ways** of expressing feelings. Suggest that your child dictate a letter to a birth-parent, to send or to put in a special place. Have her draw a picture. Use dolls to act out feelings and questions.
- ◆ **Read books together** about adoptive families. Bedtime reading can be a warm and affectionate experience—a time when your child feels secure and open to questions.
- ◆ **Reflect and repeat** what your child says. Paraphrasing her words demonstrates that you are paying attention and are interested.



WHY IS TALKING IMPORTANT?

Children at this age need:

...to know they were wanted and loved—and that nothing they did or didn't do led to their being placed for adoption.

...to know that we are here for them. As they grapple with what adoption means, help them understand that they can bring any question to you.

...to know that adoption is forever. They will not be un-adopted if they don't behave well.

...to know they have two families. (The details can come later.) My daughter delights in listing all the family she has, both birth and adoptive, even though she has met only a few of them.

...to hear that adoption is not shameful or secret. This is just one of the ways families are formed.

...to normalize adoption as a way to build a family. Even though most children are not adopted into their families, adoption has been around since human beings first formed communities. Children are remarkably clear about relationships and accept as normal what we present as normal.

...to hear our respect and compassion for their birthparents. Even if we know troubling information about birthparents, we should send the message that they did their best. Our children need to feel that they were born to good and loving people.

...to hear our acceptance of their ambivalence or sadness about having been adopted. Sad feelings don't compromise our family's closeness. Talking about them only brings us closer.

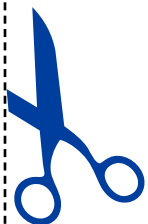
...to hear positive adoption language. They were not "given up," "put up," or "given away." Their birthparents made a plan so that they could be cared for. When we hear adoption concepts stated in a negative way, by other people or even by our children, we can rephrase what they say in positive terms.

...to be assured of our willingness to keep discussing adoption, even as they grow and the questions and feelings become more complex and difficult to express.

Susan Saidman is a mother by adoption to Sasha. She directs a domestic adoption program for Adoptions Together in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Adoption Books for Three- to Five-Year-Olds

- ◆ *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperCollins)
- ◆ *Susan and Gordon Adopt a Baby*, by Judy Freudberg & Tony Geiss (Random House)
- ◆ *How I Was Adopted: Samantha's Story*, by Joanna Cole (William Morrow & Company)
- ◆ *We're Different, We're the Same*, by Bobbi Jane Kates (Random House)
- ◆ *Love you Forever*, by Sheila McGraw (Firefly Books)
- ◆ *Through Moon and Stars and Night Skies*, by Ann Warren Turner (HarperTrophy)
- ◆ *The Day We Met You*, by Phoebe Koehler (Aladdin Paperbacks)



I think things that you don't know about!" my daughter, Sasha, informed me soon after she turned six. She was letting me know that she was becoming aware of herself as a person separate from me. By this age, children are starting school. Peers and teachers begin to influence their view of the world and of themselves. Children take on new roles—of pupil, classmate, friend—and they begin to question where, exactly, they fit in the world.

At this age, your child is likely to realize that most children were not adopted into their families. Remember: Your child isn't the only one tuning into the world outside his home. Your child's classmates, too, are becoming more curious about the people around them. They are likely to ask your child blunt questions about himself and his family. The more prepared your child is with answers, the better.

Understanding why their birthparents were not able to raise them is an important task for children this age. They may connect being adopted by one family with being "rejected" by another. If you've been talking about adoption in a loving way, you'll be ready for this stage, but you'll have more direct questions now. Answer honestly, and be as concrete as you can in your descriptions of your child's birthparents, what their life was like, and why they weren't able to raise a child. These discussions go hand-in-hand with reassuring your child that you will always be there to take care of her—that adoption is forever. This message is more important than ever before.

T.I.P. = Tell, Ignore, Keep It Private

This acronym helps children remember that they can choose whom they do and do not want to share personal information with. For example, if a schoolmate asks, "Why did your real mother give you up?" Your child will know that he can choose among the following options:

TELL: "My birthmother was not able to take care of me."

IGNORE: Don't answer; change the subject.

KEEP IT PRIVATE: "That's a private story."

Susan Saidman is a mother by adoption to Sasha. She directs a domestic adoption program for Adoptions Together in Silver Spring, Maryland.

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH MY CHILD?

Identity is more complex.

- Children at this age think more abstractly, asking,
- "Who am I apart from my parents? How am I like my birthparents?"
- "How am I different from my classmates?"

Associating "special" with "different."

- A preschooler may see her adoption as special, but an older child sees the other side of special: different.
- At school age, children grasp that most children live with their birthparents.
- They begin to process the fact that their birthparents chose not to raise them.

Mingling fantasy and reality.

- Changing facts is a strategy children use to protect themselves from realities they aren't ready to cope with.
- Your child might say, "My birthmother was a princess."

Emerging fears.

- Children this age understand how helpless they'd be if their parents were to die.
- Fear of kidnapping may reveal deeper fears that she was kidnapped from her birthparents—and could be kidnapped back.

AND WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Help your child gather what you know about her birthparents.

- Highlight attributes she might share with them:
- "Your birthmother must be very beautiful and athletic."
- Make a scrapbook.

Normalize your family by socializing with other adoptive families.

- Be open to ambivalence about having been adopted.
- You might say, "It's okay. We all feel sad when we've lost something or someone."
- Show how to express feelings constructively: "It's okay to say you are mad. It's not okay to hit your sister."

Don't directly contradict your child's fantasy.

- It is playing an important role in her development.
- Say: "It's okay to pretend. I can see why you'd want to make the story happier."

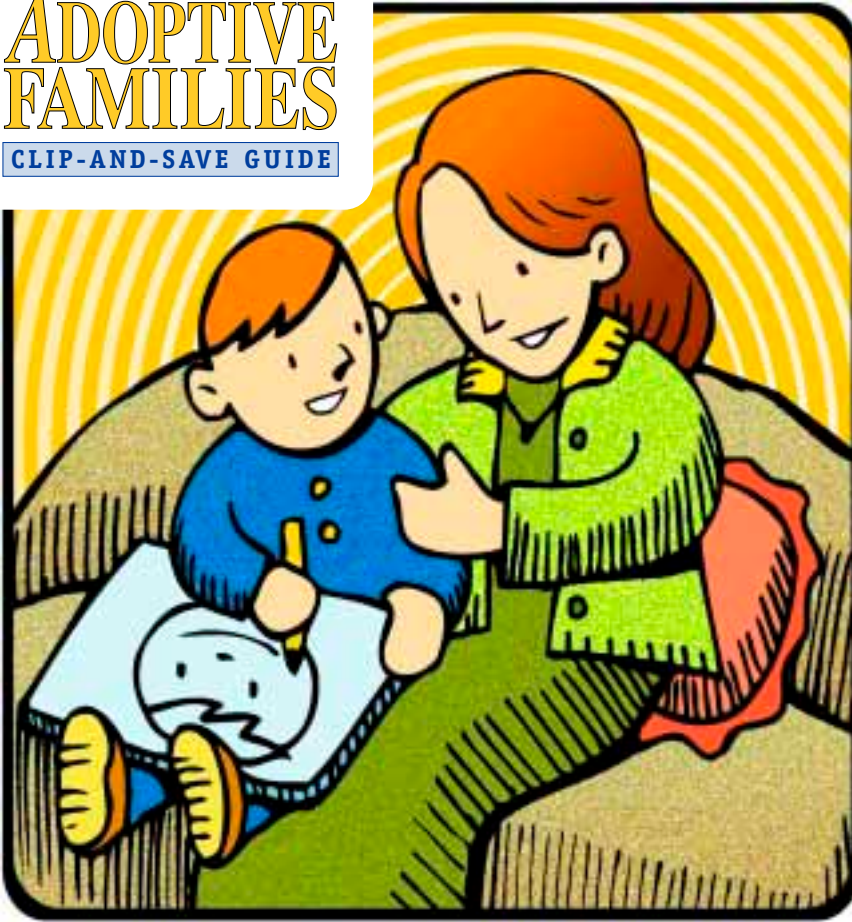
Reassure your child that no one can take him away.

- Show him his adoption certificate.
- Describe concretely why he was placed for adoption.
- Share a birthmother's letter describing why she wasn't able to raise a child.

ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

ILLUSTRATION BY WOOK JIN JUNG



What if my child says...?

“I must have been a bad baby for my mom to give me away.” Resist arguing with a comment such as “No, you were a wonderful baby.” But correct misperceptions: “It’s nothing you did that made your birthmother plan adoption. All babies are good, but they need to be taken care of.” (This is a good time to make examples of the babies you know in the neighborhood.) “Your birthmother wasn’t able to take care of you.”

SMILE BE GENTLE AND HUMOROUS

More and more as they mature, our children will note how we react to comments from strangers and others about adoption. Developing polite and humorous ways of fielding ridiculous comments is a powerful tool to use to manage our own feelings and to show our children.

Becoming a School Advocate

Difficult questions will come up at school, when we’re not around to help our children formulate a response. **You can support your child and help create a positive environment at school by:**

- ◆ **volunteering** to talk about adoption in your child’s class.
- ◆ **preparing a program** for teachers or inviting a local agency that has a post-adoption program to come in and talk with teachers about how to expand and modify assignments that might be difficult for adoptive families.
- ◆ **exploring educational resources** available for children, teachers, and parents at www.adoptivefamilies.com. Click on “How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade” or one of the other Classic Clip-and-Save articles on the home page.

◆◆◆ Affirming Activities for Parents and Children

As kids become aware of how many different sorts of families there are, it’s important to emphasize that adoption is a great way to make a family, that their birthparents are good and loving people, and that they can feel proud of themselves. **You can do this by:**

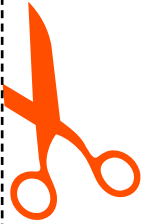
- ◆ reading books or renting videos with adoption themes, such as *Anne of Green Gables*, *Superman*, and *Free Willy*.
- ◆ making cards for birthparents on

Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.

- ◆ collecting pictures of themselves they want their birthparents to see.
- ◆ talking about birthparents, their country/culture/race/background.
- ◆ imagining birthparents, if you don’t know them. What must they look like? Which interests might they share with your child? Invite your child to draw a picture of what they might look like.
- ◆ showing compassion and acceptance

of difficult circumstances that led birthparents to place their child for adoption.

- ◆ making connections with role models who share your child’s racial or ethnic background, famous and not.
- ◆ reminding children about how much deceased people in your family loved them or would have loved them. These loving figures become inner resources.
- ◆ putting a map on the wall showing all the places your family comes from.



ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

Talking to Your Nine- to Twelve-year-old About Adoption

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

Are you ready for the preteen years? As any parent of a preteen will tell you, glimpses of teen moodiness can begin at this stage, especially in girls, who mature more quickly than boys. But for the most part, children of this age are open to talking and have the intellectual sophistication for satisfying conversations.

This is the time to establish your role as advocate and coach in preparation for the challenges that are soon to come—while you are still able to teach, guide, and set limits.

Don't attribute all problems to adoption. Research shows that most adopted kids do just as well as their peers who were not adopted.

We need to ask more questions at this stage. Children may keep more to themselves as their own questions become more complex. Ask open-ended (not yes or no) questions. Reinforce the lines of communication that will be crucial in guiding your child into adulthood.

Reassure Them!

At this age children are coping with the demands of schoolwork and peers, teachers and counselors, coaches and teammates (and parents!). They want to know:

- ◆ Am I loved?
- ◆ Am I attractive?
- ◆ Am I smart and capable?
- ◆ Can I make and keep friends?
- ◆ Am I like my peers and my family?
- ◆ Was I adopted because my birthparents didn't love me? Is there something wrong with me?

Susan Saidman is a mother by adoption to Sasha. She directs a domestic adoption program for Adoptions Together in Silver Spring, Maryland.



ILLUSTRATION BY WOOK JIN JUNG

Talking Strategies

- ◆ **REAFFIRM SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCES:** "Yes, we are both good at fixing things. You must get your talent for writing from your birthparents."
- ◆ **ACCEPT YOUR CHILD'S ANGER,** an easier emotion to express than sadness or hurt, especially at this age: "You're angry at your birthmother for taking drugs. That might be why you have some learning challenges. I can see why you might feel upset." Or "I wonder what her life was like?"
- ◆ **BE PHYSICALLY AFFECTIONATE.** Now is the time to cuddle; teenagers are often less open to physical affection. Hugs connect us when words fail, strengthen our bond, and inoculate us against future friction.
- ◆ **USE POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE.** Your attitude and words are the best models for your child. Talk about adoption with pride, and your child will know what to say when you're not around to come to his rescue.

CONCEPT/TASK	CONVERSATION/ACTIVITY
LOTS OF PEOPLE WERE ADOPTED.	Tell the adoption stories of children and adults you know. Check out an adoption-related movie or book together. (See list below.)
THIS IS MY FAMILY.	Ask your child to draw a picture of her family. Talk about what, whom, and how she chooses to draw.
PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND ADOPTION.	Ask your child how others react to learning he was adopted. Let him know it is his choice to tell, ignore, or keep adoption information private.
EVERYONE HAS FEELINGS.	Ask your child how it feels to think about her adoption story—and how it feels to talk about it with others. Help her prepare answers in advance as a way of managing emotions.
I WAS ADOPTED.	Talk with your child about what that means to him. Look through his lifebook or your family's adoption scrapbook together.
WHO AM I?	Ask your child to draw a picture of herself. Use it to talk about what she sees as her strengths and weaknesses, which aspects she shares with you, and which she might share with her birth family.
BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM.	Plan outings with other adoptive families and with children your child feels comfortable around.

When to Seek Therapy

Some children cope with their growing awareness by becoming angry or depressed, or by acting out. These behaviors or feelings may not be related to adoption; however, whatever is happening in your child's life, adoption comes along for the ride. Think about seeking help if your child:

- ◆ threatens to leave home
- ◆ has difficulty managing anger
- ◆ behaves in a way that is a dramatic departure from his usual personality and temperament
- ◆ suddenly shuns social activities, although she is typically outgoing
- ◆ suddenly challenges authority in school (Challenging parental authority is normal for American children. "You are not the boss of me" is their mantra!)

This is a stage when children may be more open to talking with a family therapist than they be will later. And many experts recommend this as the time to convey difficult or troubling aspects of a child's adoption story. A therapist can give a child difficult information, with the parent or parents on hand for support and discussion.

When Your Child Says Nothing at All

If your child doesn't bring up adoption, it doesn't mean that he doesn't want to talk about it. Let him know you're open to talking by saying:

- ◆ "Do you ever think about meeting your birthparents?"
- ◆ "Do you know if Elizabeth knows her birthparents?"
- ◆ "It's been a while since we have talked to your birthmother."
- ◆ "I noticed that you turned away when I brought up visiting your birthmother. What were you thinking/feeling?"

Losses Children This Age Are Coming to Terms With

- ◆ Loss of the biological family: "Why couldn't they raise me?"
- ◆ Loss of being a "normal" family: "I wish we could just be like other families."
- ◆ Loss of innocence about adoption: "Now I get it: Special means different."
- ◆ Loss of status (real or imagined): "Will kids tease me about being adopted?"
- ◆ Loss of a wholly positive view of adoption: "That story about birthmothers on the news was scary."

In recognizing these losses, grieving them, and coping with them, children build inner resources and vital life skills.

Conversation Starters

Movies and books are an excellent way to normalize adoption and to show that families have adopted—and authors have written about it—throughout history.

Anne of Green Gables, by Lucy Maud Montgomery (also VHS & DVD)

Annie (VHS & DVD)

The Great Gilly Hopkins, by Katherine Paterson

Heidi, by Johanna Spyri (also VHS & DVD)

Pollyanna, by Eleanor H. Porter (also VHS & DVD)

Superman (VHS & DVD)

Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael (VHS)

Sharing Difficult Details

Sometimes vital information included in adoption records is actually supposition, innuendo, or interpretation.

BY HOLLY VAN GULDEN AND LISA BARTELS-RABB

Telling children difficult details in their personal histories (e.g., conception from rape or incest, a parent in prison) is something parents hesitate to do. Parents naturally want to protect their children, and what children don't know can't hurt them, right?

Wrong! Most secrets eventually come to light. And when they do, the fact that they remained secrets tells the child that he or she should feel ashamed. Adopted children need to know their entire life stories, not just the good parts. But when should you share difficult information?

The Right Age

Most parents' first inclination is to put it off until the child is a teenager. But adolescence, hard enough for most young people, is probably one of the worst possible developmental stages for children to learn about difficult family history. Although teens can understand the information, they're inclined to think, "If my birthparents were..., then that means I must be...." Such internalizing can lead to self-destructive thoughts and behaviors, especially if the young person decides he or she must be more like the birthparents than like you.

A better time to first share difficult information is around the age of 8. This allows a few years for the child to work through the "hard stuff" and for you to emphasize that poor choices made by one generation are not genetically predestined for repetition in the next.

How to Tell

Telling will not be easy, and you may want to consult a psychologist or social worker for guidance. You might also turn to this professional for family and individual counseling as your child deals with the information. Consider the following whenever sharing difficult personal information with a child:

■ **CHECK THE FACTS.** Before telling your child potentially disturbing information, make sure it's true. Sometimes vital information included in adoption records is actually supposition, innuendo, or interpretation. Check out the source. Did he or she seem to be making value judgments? Was there proof?

Even if you believe the recorded information was false or skewed, you still need to share it, because your child may eventually find out about it through adoption records. If you doubt the information, present it saying something like: "The social worker believed your birthmother was a prostitute because.... It may or may not be true."

■ **BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND JUDGMENTS.** Explore your values by completing open-ended sentences like: "A person who commits rape is....," "A victim of rape is....," or "A person in prison is...." Even if you never say a word, your child will pick up your feelings through body language or facial expressions. It's better to admit to yourself and your child how you feel and then, as a family, practice separating feelings about the birthparent's actions from the birthparent

as a person.

■ **EVALUATE YOUR CHILD'S CURRENT FUNCTIONING.** Some times are better than others for sharing difficult information. If your child is already struggling with a negative self-image, anger, grief, or attachment issues, you need to help your child work through these difficulties before loading on another. Again, professional counseling may be necessary.

Waiting until your child is feeling great can also be a mistake. Your child may conclude that no matter what he or she accomplishes, there will always be something bad about himself or herself waiting to reveal itself. Choose a neutral time.

■ **PLAN WHAT YOU WILL SAY.** The goal is to be open, honest, and caring. Convey the information with as few biases as possible. Write down your thoughts and the words you want to use.

Your child may need time and support to work through the information. Validate your child's feelings. Allow your child access to adults—family, friends, clergy, or other professionals—he or she trusts to talk with about feelings. Seek similar support for yourself if you feel overwhelmed. Working through the difficult information together can be an experience that, in the end, brings you and your child closer.

*Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb are co-authors of the book **Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child**. van Gulden is in private practice as a family counselor. Bartels-Rabb is a freelance writer specializing in adoption and health care.*

The Evolving Conversation

Should parents initiate talk about adoption or wait for their child's questions? Sometimes you lead, say the authors, and sometimes you follow. BY GAIL STEINBERG AND BETH HALL



How will I talk to my child about adoption?" This is a question every parent asks himself or herself. Even as your new baby takes her first steps,

you wonder if you'll be ready when the questions come. Soon you realize that your child is simply your child, not your "adopted" child, and it becomes difficult even to imagine an

adoption talk. But you'll have this conversation, not just once, but over time, offering more information as your child matures. Sometimes its coming will take you by surprise,

launched by the query of a curious child. Sometimes you'll see an opening and take it, offering the chance to talk if the feelings fit. The key here is comfort, to create an atmosphere of openness and warmth in which both parent and child feel free to approach a hard topic.

What if you miss an opportunity? What if a question is asked and you deflect a thought? Relax. You have a whole childhood in which to talk. Some time between ball games and play dates, math tests, and family reunions, you'll have your conversations. In a way, talking about adoption is like dancing with your child. Sometimes he leads and you follow. Sometimes it's the reverse. And with each conversation, successfully joined, the dance will become more graceful. So go ahead, take that first step.

DIRECTED PLAY: Following a child's lead

Three- to five-year-olds often use words without having a clear idea of what they mean. The goal with even the youngest child is to create a healthy intimacy. A preschooler feels like the star of his own adoption story when it is presented as something that makes his parents happy. And don't be fooled by their using the right words. Research makes it clear they are sometimes mimicking more than understanding.

Haley, at 4, is delicious. All seriousness and concentration, she cooks our breakfast at her toy stove in the backyard—sand oatmeal, pebble popovers, squashed raspberries, pretend vanilla ice cream. Pouring cold-water tea from a red flowered pot into thimble-size cups, she serves up her feast as grandly

as a queen. I take imaginary sips from my little cup. We have time today to do anything we choose, the sun is shining, and I'm filled with every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous inch of her. It's hard to keep from scooping her up and holding her close. Then she says gravely, "Remember when I came out of Daddy's tummy?"

LET YOUR CHILD LEAD THE CONVERSATION...

- ▶ **Whenever** kids ask direct questions or make statements about adoption
- ▶ **Whenever** outsiders ask questions about your family in front of your kids
- ▶ **When** adoption comes up as a school issue or in sensitive school assignments
- ▶ **When** hurtful incidents occur

FOLLOW HIS LEAD BY ASKING...

- ▶ **What** happened
- ▶ **How** it made her feel
- ▶ **When** it happened
- ▶ **If** he's happy with what he said or did
- ▶ **If** there is anything you can do to help

INITIATE CONVERSATION...

- ▶ **When** your intuition tells you to
- ▶ **When** your child appears sad or contemplative
- ▶ **When** your child experiences loss
- ▶ **On** your child's birthdays
- ▶ **On** Mother's Day and Father's Day
- ▶ **Whenever** the subject of birthparents comes up in books, films, or conversation
- ▶ **Whenever** there is an opportunity

Curiously, I am not panic-stricken. What do I say? How do I say it? I think. I breathe. I pay attention. I tell myself, "This is not the only chance I will have to talk about adoption."

"Haley, you didn't come out of Daddy's tummy. Only mommies can grow babies inside of their bodies, not daddies. I've been your mommy since

you were born, but you were not in my body either. Daddy and I adopted you. Your birthmommy, Ellie, carried you in her body, and when you were ready to be born, you came out of her."

"Nope, your body," Haley insisted. "If I wasn't in Daddy, I was in you."

"I can see how you might have thought that," I said. "Actually, Daddy and I came to get you at the hospital when Ellie gave birth to you. You grew inside your birthmommy, just like all babies do. And when it was time for you to be born, you came out of your birthmommy, just like all babies do. Ellie was sad that she couldn't take you home with her and care for you. She didn't think she could take care of you in the ways she knew you would need. So she picked us to be your other real mommy and daddy forever."

"What did you say when you first saw me?"

"We said, 'How amazing! How wonderful! You are our most important dream come true! We are so happy!' And we wrapped you in your yellow blankie and drove home very, very carefully, right to the place where you were going to be forever. With us, your very real parents!"

"Oh," she said, relaxing against me. "Would you care for some more tea now?"

The best way to read children's feelings about adoption is by their actions rather than their words. To know what your child is thinking, play with her. Use dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, scarves, trucks—whatever toys she enjoys making up stories with. Let her be the boss and tell you what your character in the story should do. For example, if she asks you to be a lost puppy, while she is the mother dog, ask her how to do it. Rather than initiating the pretend plot, ask your child if the puppy is scared, or worried, or hungry. Your child will probably be delighted to be in charge and direct your actions.

Follow your child's lead and

don't push to give the story a happy ending. You want to learn how she interprets the situation. You may be surprised, but try not to seem distressed. Remember, this is a window into your child's thinking at this one moment. If the story is unhappy or anxiety-provoking, come back to it later. Over time you will have opportunities to clarify and expand understanding.

SHARE YOUR FEELINGS: Leading by example

When I picked Jordan up from school that day, I hoped he couldn't see how crummy I felt. During a visit that morning, my aunt had implied that I could never love Jordan as much as I would a child who was born into our family. She talked about blood being thicker than water. I felt hurt and angry. I was doing my best to hide it—afraid my little boy would pick up on it.

"What's wrong, Mom?" he asked.

"Nothing, honey. Don't worry about it."

We drove in silence for a while, me not trusting myself to say more, Jordan seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. During our long drive home, I had a lot on my mind, and I could tell Jordan was concerned by my silence. I wondered if I should share my feelings with him. Wasn't it up to me to protect him from the hurtful views some people have of adoption and not to burden him with adult concerns? On the other hand, we always asked Jordan to share his own feelings.

"Are you okay, Mom?" he asked again.

"Sometimes it's hard to talk about things, honey, but thank you for asking. Something upsetting happened to me today. I'll try my best to tell you about it, but I'm embarrassed, hurt, angry, and sad all at once. It doesn't have anything to do with you. Someone I thought was close to me said some stupid things about my not being a real mother, and it really hurt my feelings. Some people just don't

understand that you are my real son, I guess."

"Oh," he said. A few minutes later he added, "I wonder if it's like how I feel when kids ask me why my real mom didn't want me?" I was astonished.

"Maybe."

"Why didn't my birthmom want me, Mom? Do you think maybe I cried too much?"

Wow, I thought. Jordan had never mentioned this before. With a sigh, I reached over to rub his back.

"Babies are supposed to cry," I said. "Crying is how babies tell us they need something before they can talk. Sometimes when a baby is born, his parents have problems that keep them from being able to take care of him. It's not ever the child's fault."

Jordan and I were quiet the rest of the way home. We held hands across the seat, and we both had a feeling that something important had happened. When we got home, as we were getting out of the car, Jordan said, "I'm glad you told me, Mom. I like it when you tell me how you feel, even if you feel sad."

"Me, too," I said.

One way to take the lead in discussing adoption is to offer your own experiences of being an adoptive parent, both the happy and the sad. Disclosing difficulties often has more impact than sharing only joyous feelings. Kids know it's not easy to talk about the hard stuff, and they feel honored to receive "privileged information." It's important, too, to give permission to express their concerns about birthparents without denying their feelings or trying to fix things. Parents can show that they accept their children's feelings with an empathetic sigh or hug, a soft exclamation, or just by saying "What a way to feel." When parents share painful as well as joyous experiences, children feel free to follow.

THE CASUAL COMMENT: Lead by opening topics you think matter

Another way to lead is by making casual comments and letting them resonate. Your child may not respond to these at all. Nonetheless, by putting them out there, you are saying you are ready to discuss these issues when they are. Do this often, simply by thinking out loud about things you've read or seen on TV, your child's genetic inheritance, or feelings. Here are some examples:

"You're such a talented pianist, and now you're even composing your own songs. I wonder if someone in your birth family was a musician."

"I always think about your birthmother when it's time for your birthday. I wonder if you think about her, too."

"I read that lots of adopted kids think it's their fault they got placed for adoption."

Adoption is but one aspect of your family's life. Remember, the goal is to create a reasonable balance between talking about adoption and just living daily life. Ask yourself, when was the last time adoption came up? If you can't remember, it's probably time to raise the subject. But none of us is defined by a single feature of our lives. We are parents first, not adoptive parents. Never forget your most important job—creating the close family you dreamed of when you began the journey toward adoption. Life is a gift. Our children are treasures. Cherish them above all.

*Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg are the co-founding directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, and the authors of *Inside Transracial Adoption*.*

TELL US ABOUT YOUR FAMILY'S CONVERSATIONS.

Write to: AF, 39 W. 37th St., 15th Floor, NY, NY 10018, or e-mail: letters@adoptivefamilies.com.



Birds, Bees, & Adoption

Talking with your children about reproduction is a vital part of the adoption discussion. Here's a guide to help you build on the dialogue as your child grows. BY MARYBETH LAMBE

When our daughter was six years old, she asked me, "Where do I come from?" "Georgia," I replied. "You were born in Atlanta." "No," she was louder now. "Where do I come from?"

You are probably quicker than I in realizing that she was not asking for a geography lesson; rather, she wanted to understand her origins. Her next question sealed it: "Was I made from sex?"

Even though I had covered this territory with her older siblings, I'm embarrassed to admit that I remain squeamish about such discussions. Many of you may feel the same. It is hard to know exactly what to say and how to say it. Nevertheless, honest talk about sex is critical for our children. As parents, we want to be sure they feel at ease in coming to us for honest responses. As they grow, we want them to be able to turn to us, without shame or awkwardness, for help in understanding their bodies and their sexuality. Most importantly, if we do not talk to our kids about sex, someone else will.

With children who were adopted, honesty is particularly important. Our children did not come

from an adoption agency. They need to know they were conceived and born like every other child and then adopted into their forever family. Sometimes their story of origin is painful or uncertain, but it must be conveyed—in an age-appropriate fashion—if we are to have credibility as they grow.

When your child is old enough to ask questions, she is old enough for honest answers. Although the way your child asks sex-related questions may make you grin, you'll want to avoid laughing at all costs—or your child may feel embarrassed and avoid further discussions.

If your child reaches age seven and has not asked questions or seems uninterested in talking about sex, you may need to initiate the discussion. Try to find apt moments—perhaps a television show will provide an opening, or a song on the radio. Adopted kids may have questions but be hesitant to reveal them. Some worry about sounding unappreciative if they ask about their birthparents. Some sense their parents' anxiety about such topics or assume that, if they are supposed to know, we will tell them. Again, look for opportunities to open the conversation.

An Ongoing Dialogue

Teaching about reproduction doesn't happen in one "big talk," but in a series of discussions throughout children's lives. Some questions need a two-minute chat, while other topics, particularly as children grow up, require a longer give-and-take. While kids don't need drawn-out discourses about every detail, they do need to hear about basic values and have their questions answered again and again as they grow.

Our goal is to give our children the tools to avoid mediocre relationships, one-night stands, and casual sex—to protect them from sexual and emotional abuse for which ignorance leaves them vulnerable. We want them to develop healthy, loving relationships and to understand that their body is sacred and to be cared for. This isn't achieved in one talk, but through years of open, honest discussions.

What to Talk About, Age by Age: Ages Three to Six

How are babies made? Where did I come from?

When a young child asks a question, it's a good idea to find out why.

“For example, if a child asks, ‘What do mommies and daddies do to make a baby?’ a parent could ask, ‘What made you bring that up?’ or, ‘Well, what do you think happens?’” suggests Doug Goldsmith, Ph.D., executive director of the Children’s Center in Salt Lake City. “This helps parents explore what is going on in the mind of the child.” They can then give more focused answers.

Simple, brief answers are best: “Babies grow inside their mommy’s tummy until they are ready to be born. They grow in a special place called a uterus.” Don’t use cute or made-up terms. Now is the time for your child to learn the correct anatomic language: penis, vagina, vulva, breasts, nipples.

A child at this age may not retain or even fully understand the information you offer. He may ask the same questions repeatedly. Just as preschoolers do not fully grasp the concept of adoption and their own adoption story, so do they have trouble understanding sex. This makes it even more imperative to keep explanations simple and concise.

If a child wants to know more, he’ll ask. If a question seems too mature or asks for details you feel are not yet suitable, it is all right to reply: “That’s a very good question, and we plan to talk to you about it when you are a little older, so we know you will understand.”

Your preschooler may ask, “Did I grow in your uterus?” It is important

to be clear that he was created by a birthmother and birthfather and carried in his birthmother’s uterus. Many young children express sadness because they lacked this ultimate closeness with you. You’ll want to empathize, saying, “I wish you’d been in my tummy too,” or “You were born in my heart.”

Children this age are often more concerned with birth than conception, so you might discuss, briefly, what giving birth is like. Because adopted children sometimes feel they were born “unnaturally,” it’s critical they know that they entered the world the same as all babies. Speaking about your child’s birth sets the stage for discussion about why he was placed for adoption and helps him understand he has a history that includes his birthparents. Repeated over the years, this helps him to believe it is acceptable and good to talk about this history.

Ages Seven to Twelve

What does it mean to have sex? Do you have to be married to have a baby?

At this age, kids become curious about the mechanics of sex. Your explanation might be: “A man and a woman lie close together and feel loving toward each other. The man’s penis fits inside the woman’s vagina. That’s called sexual intercourse.” Beyond the mechanics, discussions with children in this age range should be about sexuality in general—

CHECK OUT these excellent books, which can help you talk about sex with your child:

FOR KIDS 5-8:

- ▶ *It’s So Amazing! A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families*, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick Press)
- ▶ *What’s the Big Secret? Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys*, by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown (Little, Brown & Co.)

FOR KIDS 9-12:

- ▶ *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick Press)

which includes understanding relationships and gender orientation, as well as sexual intercourse.

Be prepared for a reaction of disgust or embarrassment. Let your child know this is natural and common and that she will feel differently as she grows older. School-age children need time to digest information and to ask further questions. This is also the time to begin imparting your own family values, such as abstinence. In addition, you can reinforce the idea that sex is a positive and wonderful experience and making love is a profound bond between two people.

School-age children who were adopted frequently mention that they feel like they were hatched or born in a non-natural way. This is particularly true if their life stories have been told beginning with the first meeting or “gotcha day” rather than with conception and birth. So, as with younger children, your grade-schooler needs to be reminded and reassured that she was born just as any other child is born—that her birth was normal and was not the reason she was placed for adoption. If available, the specific facts around your child’s birth should be shared with her. If this history is unknown, the likely circumstances can be told: “You were probably born in a hospital...”

IF YOUR CHILD WAS OLDER...

There’s a chance that a child joining a family at an older age has witnessed or even experienced sexual abuse. This may not come out for a few years, until a child feels safe enough to discuss it. If this is your child’s history, your job is to help her see the difference between sexual mistreatment of a child and apt expression of sexual feelings between two adults.

Be careful to avoid rancorous characterizations of her birthparents, who may have allowed abuse to happen. This will create conflict for your child, who certainly retains some loyalty to her birth family; resenting your criticism, she may refuse to reveal any further details. A more effective approach: awareness of her birthparents as victims themselves, and empathy with your child’s difficult history—and constant and generous expression of love and support.

Such discussions can lead to the important topic of why your child was placed for adoption. Helping her to understand that her birthparents could not take care of any baby is critical. In this way you help dispel any perception that it was some negative characteristic of hers that caused her to be placed for adoption.

At this age your child will likely be interested in the idea of relationships—and may want to know if her birthparents were married. A child born out of wedlock may want to know if this makes her different from or inferior to her friends. If you avoid the tough questions or act hesitant, you communicate that her queries are painful and uncomfortable. Soon the questions stop coming, and a child is left feeling that discussions of sex or adoptive history are taboo. It is important to be honest.

Ages 13 and up

You and your child have probably been engaging in discussions about sex since early childhood. Even if you

haven't, it's not too late to start. Teenagers, however, almost never ini-



It's important for your child to know that, like all babies, she grew inside her birth-mother's body.

tiate these conversations, so it's up to you. Now is the time for give-and-take dialogue about contraception, abstinence, date rape, and other important subjects.

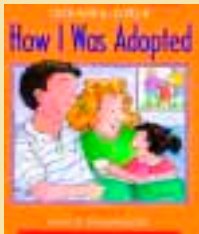
Remember that sexual behavior is not an inherited trait. You have had years to instill your family's values. Because her birthmother got pregnant does not mean that your child will. If you have such fears, examine them honestly and avoid communicating them to your child. Otherwise, you may create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which your teenager resents your judgments about her birthparents and rebels by acting out sexually.

When our children ask tough questions, we must remember that they can often handle the answers better than we do! Sexual education is really about helping our children learn how to build relationships and experience intimacy. It is about protecting them from unwanted sexual attention or abuse. As adoptive parents, we are also teaching them that their birth is about more than a simple sex act; that they have a valid and treasured history before joining our family.

Marybeth Lambe is a family physician and writer who lives with her family on a sheep farm in Washington state.

HOW TO SAY IT

For most children, the facts of life and the facts of adoption are inextricable. Yet very few adoption books address reproduction. These two books offer words for parents...



In *How I Was Adopted*, by Joanna Cole (Harper Trophy), the narrator says:

"Before I was adopted, I was born. Daddy and Mommy told me how babies are born. They said that every baby grows in a special place inside a woman's body. That place is called her uterus. When a baby is

ready to be born, the woman's uterus squeezes and squeezes, and the baby comes out into the world!

"Many children stay with the woman who gave birth to them. Some children do not. Some children need to be adopted, the way Mommy and Daddy adopted me. I did not grow inside Mommy's uterus. I grew in another woman's uterus."

How I Was Adopted is available online via the AF Bookstore, www.adoptivefamilies.com/books.php.



In *Lucy's Feet*, by Stephanie Stein (Perspectives Press), Lucy is sad that she didn't grow inside her mother the way her brother did.

"I don't want to be adopted! It's not fair. Elliott has your feet because he grew inside there," said Lucy, pointing to her mother's stomach. "How come I was adopted and he wasn't? I want to come

from in there, too!"

"You know, Lucy, in a way you did grow in here," said Lucy's mom. ... "Elliott grew inside my body, but my love for you, my wanting you, grew in here." Lucy's mom pointed to her heart.

"But you couldn't feel me in there, the way you could when Elliott kicked before he was born."

"Oh yes, I could!" said Lucy's mom. "I carried you around in my heart for a very long time. And while I waited, I thought about the little baby that would be mine someday. I thought about what you would look like. I thought about how it would feel when I held you close. I thought about the songs we would sing and the places we would go. Then my heart would start beating very fast, and I would think, 'Now that's my baby kicking, only she's not kicking at my stomach, she's kicking away at my heart.'"

Talking About Adoption in the Classroom

Some parents choose to talk to their child's teacher about adoption. Others believe it's a private matter. Here's how your fellow readers weigh in. BY DEB LUPPINO

According to a recent *Adoptive Families* reader poll, the majority of parents decide to speak to their child's teacher about adoption. Many of you have even made a presentation about adoption in your child's classroom. Others choose to keep their family's adoptive status private, at least for now.

For those still weighing the decision, here's one mother's account of her efforts to bring adoption awareness to her daughter's classroom:

"This is how we became a family"

When my daughter Julie's second-grade class started a unit on "community groups," including the family, I decided to visit her classroom to make a 30-minute presentation on adoption. I was delighted to find that all of the kids sat still during my talk and asked excellent questions.

I patterned my presentation on Amy Klatzkin's article, "How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade" (*Adoptive Families*, Mar/Apr 2001). I read aloud from *Families Are Different*, by Nina Pelligrini. The book offers examples of different types of families, including non-adoptive families in which siblings and parents don't look alike. The teacher then placed the book in her classroom library.

I then posed the questions, "What kind of things do babies or kids need?" and "What kinds of things do parents do for babies or kids?" When the students were done brainstorming, I reminded them about something that they'd left off

their list: Parents give birth to children. I explained that some parents can give birth but can't do the other things. Other parents, I continued, cannot give birth but can do all the other things. (Of course, there are many other reasons for adoptions, but I was trying to keep it simple.) I emphasized that, no matter what the reason, it is never the child's fault.

I also talked a little about Julie's sister, Sarah. I told the class that we'd traveled to adopt Sarah, too, and that Julie went with us. I explained that Sarah had different birthparents. I then asked the kids if they wondered whether Julie and Sarah were "real" sisters, and provided this answer: They were not sisters at first, but from the moment of our adoption of Sarah, they were real sisters.

Some of Julie's classmates talked about a friend or relative they knew who was adopted. We had a good discussion about domestic versus international adoptions, and whether adopted people get to meet or know their birth families. Julie sat proudly by my side, and at the end, she took questions. Most were predictable. How old was Julie when she arrived? Did she know her birthparents? Finally, we showed our photo album. The kids acted as if we could have gone on twice as long. Later, I asked Julie if she'd felt embarrassed or uncomfortable, and she said no.

As a postscript, I talked with the teacher about family tree projects. She hadn't assigned one of those in a long time. Instead, she's instituted an "All About Me" week for each child.

When Julie's week came, she was in control. She got to pick out the pictures or items she felt were important to her. She selected three from our trip to adopt her, as well as more recent photos. There was no mention at any point of including baby pictures. We discussed her selections at home the night before. When the teacher asked if they'd learned something new, all of my daughter's classmates raised their hands.

Deb Luppino lives with her family in Farmington, Connecticut.

ADOPTION & SCHOOL POLL

Have you discussed adoption with your child's teacher?

- 4.0%** No, it doesn't seem necessary
- 16.7%** Not yet, but I will if it makes sense to do so
- 3.3%** No, I'm concerned about negative assumptions about my child
- 61.3%** Yes, I've spoken to my child's teacher privately about adoption
- 9.3%** Yes, I've given an adoption presentation in the classroom
- 5.3%** I haven't decided yet whether I'll broach the subject at school

Source: Adoptive Families Update e-mail newsletter, October 2002.

Dear Teacher

Even a teacher sensitive to adoption may benefit from having words to say. Here's a sample letter to help you compose your own.

BY KATHY URBINA AND DEB LUPPINO

Dear Mrs. Jones,

I wanted to make certain you know that our family was formed through adoption, since it may come up in discussion this year in your class. Throughout the year I would like to share some terrific educational resources about adoption, family trees, positive adoption language, and more. In the meantime, I am sending you information and sample Q & As that may help you with responses to questions about adoption from kids in the classroom, should they arise.

Background on Adoption from China:

Adoption of children from China by American families began in 1992, when a law authorizing international adoption was passed by the Chinese government. Most of the children available for adoption from China are girls. To control its serious population problem, China actively discourages most families from having more than one child. Because it is traditional for a male child to support his parents in old age, the one-child policy creates a dilemma for parents to whom girls are born. As a result, some Chinese families make the decision to place girls for adoption. In China, adoption takes place anonymously, so we do not have any information about our daughter's birth family. [\[http://www.adoption.com/articles.php?id=417\]](http://www.adoption.com/articles.php?id=417) Readers will want to adapt this paragraph to their child's situation. For background information about why children are placed for adoption in the U.S., Eastern Europe, Guatemala, Korea, and China, see:

www.adoption.com/articles.php?id=417

Here are some questions you may hear in the classroom, with appropriate answers suggested.

Q: Where are Emily's real parents?

A: Emily's real parents are the parents who are raising her, John and Kathy. She also has birthparents in China who gave birth to her.

FACTUAL RESPONSE: Emily has two sets of "real" parents. Her birthparents are real, as she was born to them. Her American parents are real, as they are raising her and she is their daughter.

Q: Where's Emily from?

A: She's from Connecticut. She was born in China, but she is now a U.S. citizen.

Q: Why doesn't Emily look like her parents (mom) [dad]?

A: She was born in China and her parents adopted her when she was a baby. Her parents are European American; she is Chinese American.

Q: Does she speak Chinese?

A: No. Emily came to the U.S. when she was several months old. She was not speaking any language at the time! Children speak the language of the country they are raised in, just as you speak English and not the language your grandparents spoke before they immigrated to the U.S.

Q: Does she eat with chopsticks?

A: Chinese kids are not born knowing how to use chopsticks. In the same way that American kids learn to use spoons, forks, and knives, using chopsticks is learned by Chinese kids. Here in America Emily has learned to eat with a fork, spoon, and knife, and also with chopsticks.

Q: Will she be a Communist? Buddhist?

A: No. Belief systems are learned (whether by choice or not). We are not born with them.

Q: Did it cost a lot to adopt her?

A: This is like asking how much your parents paid for the doctor and hospital when you were born. In adoption, there are other costs involved, like fees to the adoption agencies, professionals, and attorneys to cover the legal and social work involved in completing an adoption.

Q: Why didn't her first family want her? Didn't they love her?

A: They probably loved her very much, but knew that they couldn't take care of any baby at that time. They wanted Emily to be raised by a family that would love her and could take care of her forever. Adoptions always happen for grownup reasons, and are never the result of anything a child does.

We want you, our child's teacher, to know that we believe that families are created through love, respect, and caring and not solely through genetic connections. Thank you for helping us communicate this to Emily's classmates.

Best,

Emily's Mom and Dad



Relatives Say the Strangest Things

When bringing your family into the adoption conversation, educate them with compassion but hold your ground.

BY LEONARD FELDER, PH.D.

Whatever you do, don't adopt," insists my pushy uncle Bruce at a family holiday gathering. "Why not?" I ask. "Well, I heard somewhere that all adopted kids have problems," he announces in a booming voice.

My wife and I look at each other

in disbelief. This is not the first time Bruce has said something insensitive. Yet for Linda and me, his comments and the ensuing family debate about "Do adopted kids really have more problems" are especially painful. We had gone through six years of trying to start a family and several more

years of infertility procedures. Now that we had finally made up our minds to adopt, here's Uncle Bruce and his "I heard somewhere."

In a perfect world, our immediate and extended families would be educated, sensitive, and supportive about our journeys in the world of

adoption. Yet as an adoptive parent and a psychotherapist who has counseled many families about adoption issues, I am constantly amazed at the clumsy, invasive, and hurtful things that certain relatives have to say.

For example, have you ever:

- ...been treated as a second-class member of your family because you were childless, or because your children were adopted?
- ...had to listen to one of your relatives spout nonsense, rumors, or generalizations about “all adopted children”?
- ...gotten tired of hearing, “Oh, but she looks exactly like you!” (As if it mattered.)
- ...been asked, “Don’t you wish you could have a real child?” or “How could you be so stupid as to stay in touch with that irresponsible birthmother?”
- ...been aghast when one or more of your relatives made insensitive or stereotypical remarks about your child’s racial features or special needs?
- ...felt slighted by a grandparent who gives a little less love, money, gifts, or attention to your child who is adopted?

How does an adoptive parent or adopted child respond to family members who say and do strange things due to misinformation or discomfort about adoption? Here are the four rules that have worked for my counseling clients and in my own family encounters:

Appoint yourself ambassador of adoption.

Rather than feeling shocked or belittled each time something bizarre comes out of a relative’s mouth, see him or her as an innocent soul who lacks in basic knowledge about adoption. Your task is to teach this person what he or she needs to know in order to stop hurting or insulting you and

your child.

In order to be a knowledgeable ambassador, educate yourself and your children about the positive aspects of adoption and what to say to the nonsense certain people utter. That could mean two hours a month attending a support group of adoptive parents or taking a class on post-adoption issues at a local agency. Or it could mean reading magazine articles or books on situations you and your family are encountering or will be facing in the future.

One of my counseling clients told me recently, “I often get useful information from my catch-up phone calls with other adoptive parents. Just a half hour every couple of weeks talking with those who have kids a bit older than mine gives me a great preview of what I’ll be facing.”

Increase your comfort level with adoption.

How do you protect yourself and your child from certain members of your family who just don’t get it?

First, prepare before a family event to stay calm and positive. A few days or several hours before a family gathering, ask a supportive person who will be at the event with you—a longtime friend, a sibling, or some other informed relative—to be your “booster shot” if anyone says something unpleasant. Tell this person, “If anyone says or does something ridiculous, I’m going to look at you, and we’re going to make eye contact to remind each other that I’m a good parent and I’ve got an amazing kid.” Knowing ahead of time that someone understands and is rooting for you will immunize you against whatever toxic comments come your way.

At the Vista Del Mar Adoption Support Groups in West Los Angeles, adoptive parents are taught to say numerous times to their infants and toddlers, “Hey, do you know what adoption is? It’s how we became a family, and we’re so glad that we’re all together as a loving family.” One of my counseling clients, an adoptive mother of two children, told me, “My

kids and I are so comfortable with adoption because from the time they were old enough to talk, we would play this game of asking ‘Hey, do you know what adoption is...?’ Now at ages five and eleven, whenever they hear negative comments, they wonder, ‘What is wrong with this person? Doesn’t he know that adoption is a great thing? He is so out of it.’”

Prepare yourself for some insensitive remarks.

Another way to deal with the odd remarks of an opinionated relative is to uncover the hidden insecurities that underlie the strange comments. If you ask a few of your family members why a relative tends to say hurtful things, you will probably discover something very interesting.

Quite often, the most invasive or chronically advice-giving relatives are that way not because you need advice, but because they were raised by an invasive or chronically advice-giving mother or father. Or you’ll find this person to be judgmental with his or her own spouse and kids—it’s not just your kid who gets picked on. Or maybe you’ll come to understand that the relative who cannot get comfortable with your child’s racial or ethnic features is uncomfortable with her own appearance or social status.

For example, Jenny, 44, is the Caucasian parent of 12-year-old Alicia, whose Latin-American features are part of her beauty. Yet Jenny’s mother, Bernice, 64, can’t stop making negative comments about Alicia’s skin, eye, and hair color, or her ethnic pride as a Latina.

According to Jenny, “For years my mother has urged me to make Alicia look, sound, or act more ‘classy.’ What she really means is that she wants Alicia to be more ‘white.’ I want my daughter to feel connected to her extended family, yet I often feel like screaming at my mother and forbidding her to see Alicia.”

I asked Jenny to find out why her mother is so obsessed about status, race, looks, and fitting in. A few weeks later, she told me, “I spoke to

mother is so obsessed about status, race, looks, and fitting in. A few weeks later, she told me, “I spoke to my mom’s younger sister and found out something I’ve never known before. When my mother was in high school, she was in love with a Cuban immigrant whom her parents refused to let her marry.”

Jenny continued, “You would think my mother would have learned from that painful episode, but it’s just the opposite: My mom was rejected by the status-oriented cliques at her high school, and she’s always tried to make up for that painful experience by doing everything she could to look affluent, act sophisticated, and fit in socially. She probably thinks she’s trying to help by being so concerned about Alicia’s looks and whether she, too, will fit in.”

Even if your relatives are carrying hidden pain or shame, that doesn’t make their prejudices excusable. It simply allows you to think about their problems rather than feeling insecure about your own life.

Hold your ground firmly but with compassion.

Even though you might feel like lashing out at relatives who say or do hurtful things, you will be far more effective if you respond in a more sensible way. The next time Jenny heard Bernice say, “Why don’t you put some blonde highlights in Alicia’s hair?” her first impulse was to snap at her mom. But instead, she took a deep breath and tried out a communication technique we had practiced in a counseling session. It utilizes both firmness and compassion to let the family member know you care about him or her but you will not put up with hurtful comments about your child.

The technique consists of two reassuring statements surrounding an assertive middle one. In a calm and sincere tone, Jenny said, “Mom, I know you care about Alicia and that you want the best for her.” (This was the reassuring top layer.) “But your comments about hair color are dan-

gerous to her self-esteem. They make it sound as though she needs to pretend to be white in order to be OK. I love you, Mom, and I want Alicia to have a good relationship with you. But if you make one more remark about her looks or racial features, I won’t be able to let her be around that kind of harmful talk.” (That was the assertive middle part of the sandwich). Jenny then concluded, “I know you can do it, Mom. You are an intelligent, considerate person and you can appreciate that my daughter, your granddaughter, is a beautiful Latina who is going to do quite well in this world.” (That was the reassuring bottom layer.)

Jenny could tell during the next few months that it wasn’t easy for her mother to get beyond her own insecurities. Bernice still gave holiday and birthday gifts of clothes and accessories that were “preppy” and not quite what Alicia or her friends like to wear. Yet Bernice did stop making hurtful comments to Alicia or to Jenny. Over time and with several one-on-one conversations, Jenny was able to teach her mother that, to some extent, times had changed.

As Jenny told me during her final session, “I don’t know if I’ve completely changed my mother from being an insecure or prejudiced person. But I’ve helped to change her comments and her behavior. And for now, that’s enough. She is supportive and positive with Alicia most of the time.”

As with many of our relatives, the expectation in Jenny’s case was not perfection or 100% compliance. A few of our relatives will still sometimes say and do things that make our hair stand on end. But if you become more adept at responding with a mixture of compassion and firmness, you and your children will survive any clumsy family moments. Without being shocked or crushed at occasional misinformed remarks, you can smile and say to yourself, “It’s all relatives.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE HE SAID THAT!”

Comments you may hear—& how to respond

YOUR RELATIVE: Her birthmother was a teenager, right?

YOU: We’re keeping information about Janie’s birth family private right now.

YOUR RELATIVE: How could anyone give up such a beautiful child?

YOU: Her birthmother decided that she couldn’t raise any child right now.

YOUR RELATIVE: It’s too bad you couldn’t have a child of your own.

YOU: Janie is our own.

YOUR RELATIVE: Aren’t you worried his birthparents will come and take him back?

YOU: No. We’re Michael’s family by law.

YOUR RELATIVE: I hear adoption is outrageously expensive. How much did you have to pay for a newborn?

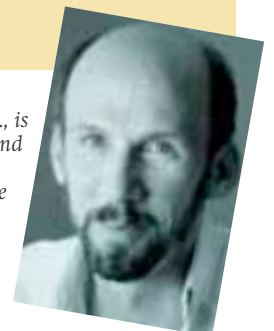
YOU: After tax credits and employee benefits, adoption was no more expensive than giving birth. And you don’t buy a baby—the legal and social work fees are all approved by the courts.

YOUR RELATIVE: Aren’t most adoptees really troubled?

YOU: Studies show that adoptees are as well-adjusted as their non-adopted peers.

KEEP IN MIND: The most important thing is to reinforce your child’s sense of belonging in your family; you never need to “explain” your family or your child to anyone. You may choose to educate relatives at a time when your child is not around.

*Leonard Felder, Ph.D., is an adoptive father and psychologist in West Los Angeles. He is the author of *When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People* (Rodale Press, Fall 2003).*



Positive Adoption Language

The way we talk—and the words we choose—say a lot about what we think and value. When we use positive adoption language, we say that adoption is a way to build a family, just as birth is. Both are important, but one is not more important than the other.

Choose the following positive adoption language instead of the negative talk that helps perpetuate the myth that adoption is second-best. By using positive adoption language, you'll reflect the true nature of adoption, free of innuendo.

POSITIVE LANGUAGE	NEGATIVE LANGUAGE
Birthparent ▶	◀ Real parent
Biological parent ▶	◀ Natural parent
Birth child ▶	◀ Own child
My child ▶	◀ Adopted child; own child
Born to unmarried parents ▶	◀ Illegitimate
Terminate parental rights ▶	◀ Give up
Make an adoption plan ▶	◀ Give away
To parent ▶	◀ To keep
Waiting child ▶	◀ Adoptable child; available child
Biological or birthfather ▶	◀ Real father
Making contact with ▶	◀ Reunion
Parent ▶	◀ Adoptive parent
Intercountry adoption ▶	◀ Foreign adoption
Adoption triad ▶	◀ Adoption triangle
Permission to sign a release ▶	◀ Disclosure
Search ▶	◀ Track down parents
Child placed for adoption ▶	◀ An unwanted child
Court termination ▶	◀ Child taken away
Child with special needs ▶	◀ Handicapped child
Child from abroad ▶	◀ Foreign child
Was adopted ▶	◀ Is adopted

Words not only convey facts, they also evoke feelings. When a TV movie talks about a "custody battle" between "real parents" and "other parents," society gets the wrong impression that only birthparents are real parents and that adoptive parents aren't real parents. Members of society may also wrongly conclude that all adoptions are "battles."

Positive adoption language can stop the spread of misconceptions such as these. By using positive adoption language, we educate others about adoption. We choose emotionally "correct" words over emotionally-laden words. We speak and write in positive adoption language with the hopes of impacting others so that this language will someday become the norm.

8 Myths and Realities About Adoption

FACTS:

- ▶ As of the 2000 Census, there were 1.5 million children under age 18 in America who joined their family through adoption, 2% of all children in the U.S.
- ▶ In the U.S., there are 5 million people today who were adopted. More than 100,000 children are adopted each year.
- ▶ 65% of all Americans have a personal connection to adoption and view it favorably.

MYTH There are very few babies being placed for adoption.

REALITY 20,000 or more U.S.-born infants are placed for adoption each year—as many or more than the number of international adoptions yearly.

MYTH Adoption is outrageously expensive, out of reach for most families.

REALITY Adoption is often no more expensive than giving birth. Costs to adopt domestically average \$15,000, before the \$10,000 Adoption Tax Credit and benefits that many employers offer.

MYTH It takes years to complete an adoption.

REALITY The average time span

of adoption is one to two years. The majority of domestic and international adopters who responded to a recent poll by *Adoptive Families Magazine* completed their adoptions in less than a year.

MYTH Birthparents can show up at any time to reclaim their child.

REALITY Once an adoption is finalized, the adoptive family is recognized as the child's family by law. Despite the publicity surrounding a few high-profile cases, post-adoption revocations are extremely rare.

MYTH Birthparents are all troubled teens.

REALITY Most birthparents today are over 18, but lack the resources to

care for a child. It is generally with courage and love for their child that they terminate their parental rights.

MYTH Adopted children are more likely to be troubled than birth children.

REALITY Research shows that adoptees are as well-adjusted as their non-adopted peers. There is virtually no difference in psychological functioning between them.

MYTH Open adoption causes problems for children.

REALITY Adoptees are not confused by contact with their birthparents. They benefit from the increased understanding that their birthparents gave them life but their forever families take care of and nurture them.

MYTH Parents can't love an adopted child as much as they would a biological child.

REALITY Love and attachment are not the result of nor guaranteed by biology. The intensity of bonding and depth of emotion are the same, regardless of how the child joined the family.

How Domestic and International Adoptions Compare: Cost and Wait

Five-year waits? Extortionate fees? Results from our reader's poll tell a different story.

	Domestic Adopters	International Adopters
Waited one year or less.....	76%	61%
Waited two years or less.....	95%	96%
Total cost less than \$15,000*.....	50%	14%
Total cost less than \$20,000*.....	70%	46%

*Before the Adoption Tax Credit

Source: Adoptive Families Reader Poll



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