



nurture.
inspire.
empower.

C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 1

CHILDREN AND ADOPTION: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS (3-5)

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

WHERE DID I COME FROM?

For children adopted as infants or toddlers, as they move into their pre-school years, they become increasingly more aware of their environment and other people. They may notice that the mother of a playmate or an aunt or family friend is pregnant and wonder about it. As they begin to understand that being pregnant means “there’s a baby inside,” their natural curiosity may lead them to wonder about their own birth. They may ask such questions as, “Mommy, did I grow inside your tummy?” Their play may involve themes related to pregnancy and birth.

In response to their child’s developing awareness, many adoptive parents follow the advice of professionals who believe that this stage of development is the appropriate one for introducing the child to the basics of his/her adoption story. Usually, children are told that there are two ways families are formed: by birth, and by birth and adoption. (It is important to use these terms so that children realize that adopted children are also born!) They learn that they grew inside another woman’s body, or were born to another woman and man (who can be named or called birth mother and birth father), and *then* their parents adopted them. Particular emphasis is placed on how happy the parents are to have the child be a part of their family. Parents can also add any facts which pertain to their story, such as “you came over on an airplane from another country called Korea,” or “we went to an agency to adopt you.”

If the adoptive family is in relationship with their child’s birth family, adoptive parents should be referring to “Jane” and “Jim” as the child’s birth parents. Not understanding what that means, the pre-school child may still ask these same questions, and parents can adapt the answer to say, “You were born to Jane and Jim (or however parents refer to the birth parents—some call them Mommy Jane...)”

Early telling ensures that children hear their story from their parents and not someone else, makes the child’s adoption a more natural part of his life, and allows parents to practice discussions with children about adoption. This will become an ongoing process as children progress through subsequent stages of development.

WHAT CHILDREN CAN UNDERSTAND

As parents listen to their children relate their adoption story to others, they should understand that children are “parroting” what they have heard without any true comprehension of what adoption really means (even those children in open adoptions.) Because children at this age do not have the cognitive ability to understand the meaning and significance of the story, they generally think and feel that everything is okay, everyone is adopted and that their story is special and makes them feel good. Children who have contact with their birth parents may better grasp and accept the concept of “being born to another woman” but Mother/Mommy is the person they live with and who loves and takes care of them.

However, it is important to note that some children may experience feelings of sadness around not being born to their adoptive mothers. For most children this age, the sense of loss is not related to feelings or concerns about birth parents. Children who were placed after infancy are likely aware that part of their early life was spent in a different place and/or with people who are not their parents today. Consequently, some children may have confusing, sad or even scary memories or emotions because of these early experiences. For the majority of children, however, early facts about their lives do not cause negative feelings on a day-to-day basis – especially when the adults in their lives make them feel safe, secure, and loved.



nurture.
inspire.
empower.

(Continued from page 1)

C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 1

CHILDREN AND ADOPTION: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS (3-5)

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

MAKING SENSE OF ADOPTION

Because children are generally receptive to hearing their adoption stories at this age, they may ask to hear it as a favorite bedtime story. They may also enjoy looking at pictures or other memorabilia that the parents have collected to share with their child as part of their story. In open adoptions, birth parents can be part of this process as well.

Parents at this age may begin to create special books called LIFEBOOKS that may include the preparation for adoption, pictures of birth parents if you have them, placement, and also space to add special memories of future occasions. Parents also read children's books with stories about adoption with their children – for example, *Horace*. Before parents (and birth parents) talk with their children about adoption, it is strongly recommended they familiarize themselves with positive adoptive language that uses words and phrases that provide the necessary foundation and tools to help children explain their adoption story to others. For example, the terms *birth mother* and *adoption plan* help to offset misunderstandings that can arise. A preschool child hearing she was “*put up for adoption*” may indeed have fantasies of having been placed on a store shelf.

It is normal for children this age to ask endless questions about everything. In response to their story, they are likely therefore to ask, “Why?” which is the common refrain to anything they are told at this age. Preschoolers are usually satisfied with simple, age-appropriate information. “They were not ready to be parents.” Birth parents in open adoptions can answer simply as well, “I didn’t feel I could take care of you by myself. I wanted you to have a mom and dad.”

This is also a good time to introduce your motivation to adopt. It’s OK to say, “We couldn’t make a (another baby) and we wanted so much to be parents (again).” Two moms/dads “We could not /didn’t want to make a baby...” “I didn’t have a wife/husband to have a baby with...” “We wanted a daughter.” “We wanted another child. Again, parents are often afraid this will lead to a “sex” talk. That would not be age-appropriate, but it is age-appropriate for preschoolers to know that it takes a man and woman for the woman to become pregnant and give birth. (Note: Because of being told their story, adopted children may ask how the sperm gets to the egg (earlier than their non-adopted peers), and it is not unusual that they learn the answer earlier than non-adopted children—e.g. by age 6).

Perhaps the most important part of telling the story to preschoolers, is to emphasize what they can understand: how happy you are that they are your child, your son, your daughter, that they are part of your family. In open adoptions, birth parents can share that while they may feel sad that they could not raise their birth child, they can affirm their positive feelings for their birth child, the adoptive parents/adoptive family.

COMMON FEELINGS

Especially in transracial adoption, perhaps as young as 2 or 3, children will become increasingly aware of the physical differences between themselves and their family. (This may be due to the fact that other people make comments or ask questions about their family that relate to differences in physical appearance.) Children of a different race may express negative feelings about their skin color because of their wish to look like their parents, and they will begin to internalize that the physical appearances of family members are a defining aspect about their family. Same-race children may express the wish to have their parents’ hair or eye color. Aware of this, parents should validate their children’s wish to look like them, while emphasizing the beauty of their children’s skin color and working to ensure that the family’s inner circle of friends and community is multi-racial, including people of their child’s racial/ethnic heritage. Again, in open adoption, children may have the benefit of relationship with birth family members of their racial heritage.

By age 4-5, non-adopted children may talk about the day they were born. Even if adopted children know these details, they are aware that their story is different from their non-adopted peers. Certainly, by the age of 6, adopted children understand that most other children are not adopted—that they are being raised by the parents who gave birth to them.



nurture.
inspire.
empower.

(Continued from page 2)

C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 1

CHILDREN AND ADOPTION: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS (3-5)

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

RESOURCES

This is an ideal time to lay the foundation for future family communication about adoption. Although children understand very basic concepts, parents can do a great deal to let their children know they are proud to be an adoptive family and welcome conversations about the subject. It is not uncommon for adoptive parents to experience some anxiety as they embark on conversations with their children about adoption; therefore, it can be helpful to plan ahead. Suggestions include:

- ◇ Attend an adoptive parent support group to learn what others have done
- ◇ Build a broader understanding of adoption by sharing books for children, including those which are stories about different kinds of families.
- ◇ Find (or create) a play group for children in adoptive families, as well as those in many different kinds of families, including foster, step, or single parent families
- ◇ Consult with an adoption professional for advice, particularly if there is concern about the need to share difficult information. (See FACT Sheet # 4 A and B)

Books

Talking with Young Children about Adoption by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher

Telling the Truth to Your Foster or Adopted Child by Jayne Schooler and Betsey Keefer

Real Parents, Real Children by Holly van Gulden

The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass

Inside Transracial Adoption by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg

Horace by Holly Keller

Tell Me Again about the Night I was Born by Jamie Lee Curtis

A Mother for Choco by Keiko Kasza

Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale

Webinar

Talking with Children about Adoption In Demand Webinar