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## C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 4

# TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION PART A: THE BASICS

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

It is the rare adoptive parent who does not experience some degree of anxiety or angst on the subject of talking with their children about adoption. Many adoptive parents do not want to be reminded of their own pre-adoptive experiences, which might have included painful feelings related to infertility and loss. Others wish to avoid the uncertainty about how to answer questions for which they have little information. Still others fear “losing their children to birth parents.” Some parents may even wonder why they even have to discuss adoption, wishing to protect children from the painful and confusing aspects of adoption. Other parents understand the importance of creating an atmosphere in which adoption is freely and openly discussed. However, they are uncertain about when to talk with children about adoption, and even more importantly, how?

### WHY SHOULD PARENTS TALK ABOUT ADOPTION?

Adult adopted persons have been our best educators about the importance of honesty and openness when it comes to talking with children about adoption. They have shared with us countless tragic stories of discovering on their own or from someone else the fact of their adoption. The pain of deception and dishonesty destroyed their trust in their relationship with their parents, sometimes causing irreparable damage. Those adoptees whose parents had been advised to tell the adoption story once and never bring it up again unknowingly hurt their children as well.

Many parents believe that if their children don't ask questions about adoption, they don't have any. Instead, we know that there are reasons for this silence. Children may not ask questions because they don't know how to articulate their needs and feelings about adoption. Sometimes they worry that to bring the subject up would be an act of disloyalty to their adoptive parents. Others may have tried to ask a question and either sensed or learned that their parents were uncomfortable, angry, or hurt by the questions. They then assume adoption is a taboo subject. The result is that many of the children's feelings go “underground”, that is, children push their feelings out of their conscious awareness or carry them inside alone.

### WHEN SHOULD PARENTS DISCUSS ADOPTION?

Most experts advise talking with children beginning in infancy. Supporters of early telling believe that it is best to ensure that children learn about adoption from their parents. Waiting can jeopardize this. Practicing in the early years also gives parents a chance to become comfortable with adoption discussions before they really count. Early telling also means that children will grow up without remembering when they were told - making it a more natural experience.

Parents need to know that children's understanding of adoption is based on their developmental stage. Even though parents are advised to talk about adoption in the early years, what preschoolers understand (or don't) is quite different from school-age children, and certainly adolescents. It is therefore recommended that adoptive parents familiarize themselves with what children understand about adoption at different stages of development. *(Please see Fact Sheets 1, 2, and 3).*

Children adopted at an older age are likely to have memories of significant relationships and perhaps the circumstances that brought them to adoption. It is important for parents to talk about these experiences so that children can develop a clear understanding of their early years. Without those conversations, some children may believe they were rejected because they did something wrong, or they may misinterpret some of the memories they have. Adult adopted persons stress how important it is for adoptive parents to acknowledge all parts of their children's lives in order to help them develop complete identities, to put together the parts that make the whole.

Overall, it is important for parents to share age-appropriate information, answer questions, and help children with their feelings about adoption before adolescence. Adolescence can be a difficult time to communicate about clothing and plans for the weekend, let alone birth parents, birth heritage, and complex feelings. For this reason, parents should seriously consider the advantages to laying the foundation for adoption conversations at a younger age.



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## HOW SHOULD PARENTS DISCUSS ADOPTION?

While holding his baby, an adoptive parent can say, “We are so happy we adopted you and that we are a family.” Although infants do not understand the words, they absorb the positive, warm feeling connected with the word adoption. In the pre-school years, parents may say, “There are two ways families are formed - one is by birth, the other is by birth and adoption.” (We have learned from adoptees that their stories often left out having been born, increasing feelings of confusion and being different.) “You grew in your birth mother’s tummy/womb, and then we (or I) adopted you. I am/We are so happy that you are my/our son/ daughter and that we are a family.”

Laying this foundation, future discussions of adoption will likely include three basic parts: the birth parents’ reasons for placement, the adoptive parents’ reasons for adopting, and the children’s feelings about both. Children’s questions should be answered honestly but age-appropriately. Adoptive parents should never say anything that they will later have to correct. However, this does not mean that parents should share information that a child is not ready to understand. For example, a child placed for adoption by a birth mother who was raped can tell a seven year old that the birth mother did not have a relationship with the birth father and did not wish to parent any child or another child at that point in time.)

### Some basic guidelines for parents:

- Some children ask a lot of questions, while others do not. Parents need to take responsibility for initiating discussions of adoption when their children do not. Holly van Gulden recommends.
- Throwing out “pebbles” or statements such as, “I wonder which side of your birth family had athletic talent like you.” Children are free to respond they wish, but the message that it is OK to discuss adoption is conveyed. Parents are advised to look for natural opportunities to initiate discussions about adoption, for example by referring to current events, movies or TV shows, or books with adoption themes. ( See our website for age-related books with adoption themes.) Discussions about *other* adoptees (particularly positive stories!) can help children believe their parents are open to the topic and willing to talk.
- Some experts recommend sharing difficult information in the later school-age years so that children are not first processing this information under the volatility of adolescence.
- Parents need to find ways to honor their children’s birth parents. They need to convey empathy for birth parents and help their children see their strengths.
- Parents should emphasize that reasons for placement are always about adult circumstances/difficulties.
- Parents need to learn how to accept and validate children’s feelings. We cannot fix the pain of adoption, but we can teach children how to cope with painful emotions. If we do not take this on as part of adoptive parenting, our children will be left to handle it alone or with others. Most of us would never want that to happen.
- Parents need to know positive adoption language.
- Children must have all of the available information before they leave home as young adults.

In families with open adoptions, conversations about birth family will be less speculative and more about reality. Questions can be directed to and answered by birth family members. Adoptive parents may wish to discuss with birth parents ahead of time how to respond to anticipated questions: For example, “Why did you keep Johnny and not me?” “As a single mom, I felt I could only manage with one child. I wish I could have raised you, too, cause you are so awesome. I’m so glad you have a wonderful family and that I get to be with you and see all the wonderful things you are doing.”



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## RESOURCES

For more information on this topic, the Center for Adoption Support and Education suggests the following:

### C.A.S.E. IN DEMAND Webinars:

Talking with Children about Adoption (Coming Soon)

Loss and Grief in Foster and Adopted Children (Coming Soon)

[Taking the Fear out of Open Adoption](#)

### Books:

*Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, by Sherrie Eldridge,

*Making Sense of Adoption*, by Lois Melina.

*Real Parents, Real Children* by Holly Van Gulden, Holly and Lisa Bartels-Rabb, Lisa

*Talking with Young Children About Adoption*, by Mary Watkins, and Susan Fisher,

*Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*, by Jayne Schooler and Betsy Keefer

*Making Room in Our Hearts* by Micky Duxbury

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

*Inside Transracial Adoption* by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg