



nurture.  
inspire.  
empower.

## C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 5

### TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION PART B: DIFFICULT INFORMATION

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Part B of this series on talking with children about adoption focuses on the why, when and how to discuss adoption with children. A daunting enough task for many adoptive parents, when the adoption story includes information that might be considered negative or painful, the task for many parents can feel even more challenging. Examples of such stories include birth parents who may have - used alcohol or drugs, suffered from mental illness, been convicted of a crime and incarcerated, or conceived the adopted child as a result of rape or extra-marital affair. What a parent may consider difficult information is a very personal experience. For example, some parents worry about sharing adoption stories in which a birth parent is raising biologically related siblings that were conceived either prior to or subsequent to the adoption, where birth parents later married; or when the birth mother isn't sure about who the birth father is.

When adoptive parents are faced with such circumstances, in their desire to protect their child from painful feelings, some parents vow that they will never share negative aspects of their child's adoption story. Most adoption professionals agree that this is not in the best interests of the child. Instead, they believe that children have the right to know everything that the adoptive parents know about the birth family, especially by the time the children are about to "leave home." They advise parents to consider the ways in which all aspects of the adoption story help children to achieve a better understanding and acceptance of why they were placed for adoption. Instead of protection, most professionals underscore the value of building resiliency in children by teaching them the skills they will need to cope with many of life's challenges.

There is no question that of course, sensitive information must be shared carefully and thoughtfully. Although parents are advised to tell the truth to their children, consideration must always be given to the child's age and ability to comprehend information, maturity, and individual personality (e.g. extremely sensitive, easy going, etc.). Holly van Gulden, author of Real Parents, Real Children suggests that children be told difficult information during the latter school-age years (9-12) so that they can address their issues and feelings before the turbulence of adolescence, and because they are likely to be more receptive to parental support. These issues will likely be revisited during adolescence, but may be easier to grapple with if they have already had the opportunity to deal with them during an earlier developmental phase of their lives. Other professionals suggest that parents can wait to share certain kinds of information that might be better understood with the maturity of adolescence.

Whatever the time frame, it is important for parents to help their children make sense of the information. One way is to help children to separate behaviors or decisions their birth parents made from who they are as people. For example, a parent might say, "I believe that your birth mother was a good person who did not have the opportunities or family love and support that you have that might have helped her to make better choices for her life." This message helps children to develop empathy for their birth parents, which is critically important as children move into adolescence and develop their sense of identity. Children need support to be able to view their birth parents in a positive light while at the same time knowing that they are able to make choices about their own lives separate and different from those made by their birth parents. Again, as stated in Part A of this series, parents are encouraged to emphasize that the reasons behind a child's placement for adoption are never about the child, but always about adult (birthparent) circumstances/difficulties.



nurture.  
inspire.  
empower.

(Continued page 1)

## C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 5

### TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION PART B: DIFFICULT INFORMATION BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

As parents share difficult aspects of the child's adoption story with their child, they may also want to help their children think carefully about the ramifications of sharing this information with others, especially friends and other peers. Children need help to understand the difference between privacy and secrecy, the latter of which suggests that something is bad and must be hidden. It is important that they be helped to understand that children have the right to decide whom they share their adoption story with. They need to know that keeping any or all aspects of their story private does not mean the information is "bad", but rather that others may not be able to understand the information and might unknowingly or purposefully hurt the child with that information.

Given the importance of sharing difficult information, and the natural anxiety that parents may feel about this, many adoptive parents choose to consult with adoption professionals who can assist parents with decisions about when, what and how to share information with their child.

Children in open adoptions can often see for themselves some of the challenges facing their birth parents. While this can be troubling, it can also help adopted children to have a clearer understanding for the reasons why they placed in an adoptive family. In any event, children may feel responsible, guilty, confused and desirous to help their birth parents. These will be difficult conversations, and again, they can also happen with birth family in many instances. Again, adoptive parents may want to want to discuss with birth parents how to respond to the child's questions/concerns.

#### RESOURCES

For more information on this topic, the following books can help:

*W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook* by Marilyn Schoettle (Order online at [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org))

*Twenty Things Adopted Children Want Their Parents to Know* by Sherrie Eldridge

*Real Parents, Real Children* by Holly van Gulden

*Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens* by Debbie Riley

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

*Making Sense of Adoption* by Lois Melina

*The Family of Adoption* by Joyce Pavao

*Making Room in Our Hearts* by Micky Duxbury

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