TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION

PRESENTED BY:
ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION
With decades of experience, our mission is to strengthen the well-being of children and families of all adoptive experiences by providing them the adoption competent services and resources they need, including:

- Pre- and post-adoption counseling, assessment and therapeutic services
- Individual and group therapy for kids, teens and adults
- Crisis intervention, support and assistance with school issues
- Training, education & interactive workshops – for families, educators and professionals
- Nationally recognized post-adoption models
- New family game: 52 Ways to Talk about Adoption
- Award-winning print publications, articles, newsletters and online resources
BEFORE WE BEGIN...

• Put what you learn into the context of the joys of adoptive parenthood
• I will be sharing themes
• Children experience adoption in their own unique way based on: pre-adoption experiences, genetics, individual temperaments/personalities; adoptive families, etc.
• “Adoption doesn’t happen because of good things” – D. Riley
• We can’t “fix” the challenging feelings; our job is to validate, validate, validate feelings and help our kids know they are not ALONE in their journey to “make sense of adoption.”
WHAT MAKES IT HARD TO TALK WITH CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION?

Adoptive parents may have fears, such as,

- that the child will love the birth parent more than the adoptive parent - LOYALTY
- that the connection to birth parents will undermine the sense of belonging in the adoptive family
- that the child will be hurt, sad, confused, disappointed or afraid by talking about birth parents/the adoption story
AGES: Birth to 4 years

Adopted child does not realize differences between self and non-adopted children
## RESPECTFUL ADOPTION LANGUAGE

Constructive adoption language helps us to convey a more positive image of adoption, and gives children tools for talking with others about adoption.

### POSITIVE IMAGE
- Birth parent, first parent
- My child
- Relative, biological relative
- Make an adoption plan, place for adoption
- Child in need of adoption
- We are an adoptive family

### NEGATIVE IMAGE
- Real, natural parent
- My adopted child
- Blood relative
- Give away, surrender, put up for adoption, didn’t keep
- Hard-to-place child
- My children are adopted
THE BASIC STORY

1. There are two ways families are formed:
2. You were born to….
3. After you were born, you lived with… (include who, where, for how long and why)
4. You began to grow and you were a wonderful baby. Like all babies, you….
5. Like all babies, you needed a safe and permanent home. Adults decided that your birth parents could not provide that for you and so you came to live with…
6. Parents’ motivation for adoption
7. Our family (I) was so happy to adopt you, to become your mother/father/parents, to become your family, that you came to live with us. One of the things we/I loved the most about you right away was….
THEY MAY FEEL:

• The adoption story is special and makes them feel good
• Everyone is adopted
• They may feel confused or fearful of memories
THEY ARE LIKELY TO BE AWARE THAT...

- They do not look just like their parents, as some children do (same race or transracial)
- People often remark or ask questions about their family (transracial)
- Part of their early life was in a different place or they were with people who are not their parents today
- Some may have confused—and maybe sad or scary—memories or emotions because of their early years. (trauma)
AWARE OF...

• For most young children, these are only facts of their life.
• These facts usually do not reflect negatively on how children feel day to day, especially if those around them make them feel safe, secure, and loved.
TOOLS AND MEMORABILIA

- Lifebooks/story books
- Children’s books
- Pictures, video, special items (blanket, clothing, picture book, doll/toy, music, food)
AGES 5-6

- Child may or may not ask questions.
- Loves to hear adoption story but typically has little understanding of concepts.
THEY MAY FEEL:

- Inquisitive about the birthing experience
- Comfortable saying that they are adopted
- Confused that they have physical and racial differences from their parents
“My first family could not take care of me and I got adopted.”
AGES 6-11

- Child understands basic concept of adoption.
- Realizes that he lost something in order to be adopted, begins feelings of LOSS and GRIEF.
THEY MAY FEEL:

- “Not everyone is adopted like me.”
- Mixed emotions of sadness, happiness (Double Dip Feelings), confusion (logic is like characters in *Peanuts* Cartoon)
- Persistent question inside: “Why was I adopted?”
THEY MAY FEEL:

- Was I to blame? Were my birth parents to blame? Were my adoptive parents to blame? (kidnap fantasy)
- Curious about birth parents and fantasize about them (romance fantasy)
- Uncertain about the future: testing behavior – could my adoptive parents give me up?
- Afraid of reactions peers will have towards adoption.
W.I.S.E. UP!\textsuperscript{SM}

W - Walk away

I - It’s private

S - Share something

E - Educate
For some ...

- Fears, unpleasant memories
- Growing sense of feeling different
- Anger, mistrust of adults
- Behavior problems at home and/or at school
- Uncertain about future
- Confusion
Adopted children have many questions inside . . .

- Why did my birth mother leave me?
- Where is she now? Is she OK?
- What will I look like when I grow up?
- Was my birth father a good person?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“DIFFICULT INFORMATION”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse and neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Extra-marital) affair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth siblings (esp. being raised by birth parent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence/rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political/cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitudes toward adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown birth father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One night stand/casual relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHY DO CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW?

- Adoption is like having a “missing puzzle piece”
- It’s their story; it’s their reality
Why Do Parents Need to Share the Truth?

• You have control of the telling
• Trust
• Attachment
• Minimize your fears
• Normalize adoption
Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child

By Jayne Schooler and Betsey Keefer
SHARING THE HARD STUFF ABOUT PROSTITUTION AND DRUGS

Pre-school years

“All children need to be safe. Your first mother did not take care of you, and it is very important to be sure you were safe. She wasn’t ready to be a mommy.”
“Your mother had a lot of trouble making sure she could take care of herself. She did not have (people) to help take care of you. She could not be responsible for a small child, so a social worker and a judge made sure you had a safe family who would take care of you forever.”
“Your mother made some bad choices when she was a very young woman. She began to take drugs that were not good for her. She could not think well when she was taking the drugs. That caused her to make even more bad choices. That's why it was not safe for you to remain with her.”
HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP EMPATHY FOR BIRTH PARENTS

• Never denigrate birth parents
• Separate behaviors/decisions from who they are as people
• Explain birth parents’ circumstances as different from child’s experience in adoptive family
• Share positive information/characteristics about birth parents.
“Unless you come from someone worthwhile, it is hard to feel worthy.”

Dr. Anne Brodzinsky
Real Parents, Real Children by Holly van Gulden

- Holly talks about sharing everything by pre-adolescence.
- Children able to process difficult information while still more emotionally available to parents and before the physical and emotional changes/challenges of adolescence.
- Easier to “revisit” information instead of “visiting” for first time.
- Our advice: Know your child; determine readiness – maturity, sensitivity, other emotional/behavioral challenges, attachment.
- All information should be shared before teen/young adult leaves home.
SHARING THE HARD STUFF
ABOUT PROSTITUTION AND DRUGS

Pre-teen/Teen

Your mother could not support her drug addiction because she was not a reliable employee and could not keep a job. She had dropped out of school. Because she was addicted to drugs, she felt sick when she could not buy and use them. She was so desperate to get the drugs, she sold herself, through prostitution, to raise the money to get the drugs. While she was looking for customers, she left you alone in her apartment when you were only a baby. Neighbors were worried about you and called the police. They wanted to be sure you were safe.
KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING

- Initiate dialogue periodically
- Use books, current events/media stories with adoption themes
- Holidays/special occasions – birthdays, Mother’s/Father’s Day
- Pebble technique (Real Parents, Real Children, H. van Gulden)
52 Ways  
To Talk About Adoption

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="4" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="5" alt="Image" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="6" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="7" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="8" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="9" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="10" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="11" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="12" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="13" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="14" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="15" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="16" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="17" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="18" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="19" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="20" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="21" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="22" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="23" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="24" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="25" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="26" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="27" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="28" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="29" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Center for Adoption Support and Education

www.adoptionsupport.org
ADOLESCENCE

- Revisit loss and grief issues
- Identity
- Sexuality
- Separation/Leaving Home
C.A.S.E. publications may be purchased on our website at www.adoptionsupport.org
THANK YOU!

For more information please visit us at www.adoptionsupport.org

W.I.S.E. Up!
A book to empower children to answer questions about adoption.

Beneath the Mask addresses the unique issues faced by adopted teens and their families.

S.A.F.E. at School
presents 5 proactive strategies to help teachers and counselors create a positive adoption environment in school.

52 Ways to Talk about Adoption, a unique card game for adoptive families. Created by our adoption-competent staff, whose motto is “Talking is good for everyone”, this game encourages family discussion of adoption in a playful and interesting way. We hope that you talk, talk, and talk some more while having fun!
The 3 most popular C.A.S.E. webinars will be offered on a continuing basis:

- *Talking with Children about Adoption*
  
  *Q and A: check our website for schedule*

- *A New Definition of Family:*
  
  *Taking the fear out of open adoption*

- *Beneath the Mask:*
  
  *Understanding Adopted Teens*

Visit [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org) for program information and registration.
STRENGTHENING YOUR FAMILY
AN EMPOWERING AND INSPIRING WEBINAR SERIES

This exclusive C.A.S.E. webinar series is designed to help foster and adoptive families learn valuable skills to build strong families.

In response to participant feedback, the series features new unique topics that you have asked us to address.

Thanks to a generous grant from Jockey Being Family, Jockey International, the first 150 registration slots for webinars in the Strengthening Your Family series are FREE!

Offer expires after first 150 registrations have been filled. Thereafter, regular registration fee is $25.00.

Visit www.adoptionsupport.org for program information and registration.
CERTIFICATES OF ATTENDANCE

Email request to halder@adoptionsupport.org