



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 4

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT ADOPTION: THE BASICS

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Adoptive parents often experience some degree of anxiety about talking with their children about adoption. Some 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. Many worry about telling the difficult stories that can accompany adoptions from other countries or from foster care. Some adoptive parents want to protect their children from difficult histories or feelings. Still others fear losing their children to birth parents. Other parents understand the importance of creating an atmosphere in which adoption is freely and openly discussed, but are uncertain about when to talk with children about adoption, and even more importantly, how?

WHY SHOULD PARENTS TALK ABOUT ADOPTION?

Adult adoptees have been the best educators about the importance of honesty and openness when talking with children about adoption. They have shared with us tragic stories of discovering the fact of their adoption on their own or from someone else. The pain of deception and dishonesty destroyed their trust in their relationship with their adoptive parents, sometimes causing irreparable damage.

Adoptees whose parents had been advised to tell the adoption story once and never bring it up again unknowingly hurt their children as well, leaving them alone with their questions, feelings, and concerns. Even those parents who talk about adoption, but not the child's specific story, birth family members, or other important connections have helped contribute to feelings of loss, confusion, or distance for their children.

Many parents believe that if their children do not ask questions about adoption, they do not have any. We know that there are reasons for this silence. Children may not ask questions because they do not know how to articulate their needs and feelings about adoption. Sometimes they worry that bringing 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 carry their feelings inside alone or even try to push them away.

WHEN SHOULD PARENTS DISCUSS ADOPTION?

Now! If you have not already been talking with your child about adoption, it is time, no matter their age. Most experts advise talking with children beginning in infancy, so that adoption is simply a part of the child's life from their earliest awareness. Children should learn about their adoption and their history from their parents,

Continue Next Page

and waiting can jeopardize this. It can also make it much harder to talk about adoption when it becomes an announcement or a big reveal.

Having ongoing conversations in the early years also gives parents a chance to become comfortable with adoption discussions before they get more complicated.

Parents who have waited to reveal the adoption can and should do it now. They may need more practice and to own they did not know how to start. Consulting with experienced adoptive parents or adoption professionals can help.

Parents need to know that children's understanding of adoption is based on their developmental stage, so conversations are different based on each child's age and cognitive development. To help familiarize themselves with what children understand and feel about adoption at various stages of development please see these topical briefs:

- Children and Adoption: The Preschool Years (3–5)
- Children and Adoption: The School-Aged Years (6–11)
- Adolescents and Adoption

Children adopted at an older age are likely to have memories of significant relationships and 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 adoptees stress how important it is for adoptive parents to acknowledge all parts of their children's lives 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 throughout their lives. It can be incredibly painful and create big challenges if parents wait until adolescence when they think a child is finally old enough. 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 must lay the foundation for adoption conversations at the earliest possible moment.

Thinking about when to talk about adoption is not just about knowing when to start. Parents need to continue to have conversations about adoption—the facts about the child's situation as well as the feelings that may arise—on an ongoing basis. Adoption should be something they know about and can discuss regularly. The family should read adoption books, watch shows and movies with adoption themes, have connections with other adoptive families, etc. to ensure the child knows their parents are open to hearing and exploring their thoughts, feelings, and questions. Of course, this does not mean that adoption is all the family talks about or every time the child has big feelings they should be attributed to adoption.

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, "Families are formed by birth and also by adoption." We have learned from adoptees that their stories often left out having been born, increasing

Continue Next Page

feelings of confusion and being different so be sure to include that they were first born, and later adopted. “You grew in your birth mother’s body, and then I adopted you. I am so happy that you are my child and that we are a family.”

Laying this foundation, future discussions of adoption will include three basic parts: the birth parents’ reasons for placement, the adoptive parents’ reasons for adoption, and the children’s feelings about both. Children’s questions should be answered honestly but age-appropriately. However, this does not mean that parents should share information that a child is not ready to understand. Adoptive parents should never lie or say anything that they will later have to correct. It is OK to say that you do not know if that is true.

Stories will evolve over time with the child’s growth and development. For example:

- *For a child adopted from another country with fewer resources:* Parents may begin with the simple facts: “You were born in Haiti, and we traveled there to adopt you when you were about 18 months old.” The next phase might include more about the country: “Haiti is an extremely poor country and sadly that means some parents do not have the money or resources they need to raise children. I think that would have been hard for your birth parents.” In later years, the conversations may be about income inequality and how where a child is born can so dramatically affect their lives or how corruption in some places means children are placed for adoption even when their parents wanted to parent them.
- *For a child placed for adoption by a birth mother who was raped* — At first, parents might just say, “Your birth mother decided she wasn’t able to raise you, so she chose us to be your parents.” Later, the parents might tell their 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 time. Still later, when parents talk about sex and sexual consent, they may explain that the child’s birth mother did not consent to having sex and that was part of the reason she decided to make an adoption plan.

PARTNERING WITH BIRTH FAMILY

In families with open adoptions, conversations about birth family will be less speculative and more about reality. Whenever possible, adoptive parents can discuss with birth parents or other relatives ahead of time how to respond to anticipated questions and to get accurate information. They can decide together which parts of story each person may share or how they will explain information to the child. By working together, they can ensure the child has clarity and that both sets of parents are ready to provide any needed support.

For example, a child who is wondering why they were placed for adoption may ask their birth parent, “Why did you keep Johnny and not me?” The birth parent might respond, “As a single mom, I felt I could only manage with one child. I wish I could have raised you, too, because you are so awesome. I am so glad you have a wonderful family and that I get to be with you and see all the great things you are doing.” The adoptive parents can be ready to talk to their child about how that feels like rejection and affirm the feelings of loss while also reinforcing that the decision was not about the adopted child. It was simply that the birth mother knew she only could care for one child, and Johnny was there first.

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

- **Talk about adoption generally and about your child’s specific story enough that the child knows the door is open for questions and feelings.**

Continue Next Page

- **Understand that your child may not ask questions, but still likely is thinking them.** 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 if they wish, but the message is conveyed that it is OK to discuss adoption.
- **If you are worried about what to say or what questions you might be asked, practice with a friend or family member.** Make sure any judgments or negative feelings you may have about the child’s birth parents do not show up.
- **Look for natural opportunities to initiate discussions about adoption, including by referring to current events, movies or TV shows, or books with adoption themes.** [See the C.A.S.E. 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.
- **Share difficult information in the later school-age years so that children are not first processing this information under the volatility of adolescence.**
- **Find ways to honor children’s birth parents.** Convey empathy for birth parents and help their children see their strengths. Be careful not to make disparaging comments about people who may have similarities to the child’s birth parents (such as people who get pregnant when they are not married, who have been convicted of crimes, who are poor, who have mental illness or substance use disorders, who come from other racial or ethnic backgrounds).
- **Emphasize that reasons for placement are always about adult circumstances or difficulties or even broader systemic issues, not the child.**
- **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.
- **Know and use positive adoption language.**
- **Share all available information with children before they leave home as young adults.** As noted above, share information over time as the child’s understanding grows rather than doing a big dump of information on a child who may already be struggling with adolescence or the difficulty of transitioning to independent.

RELATED C.A.S.E. RESOURCES

- Talking with Your Children About Adoption: Sharing Difficult Information
- Talking About Adoption: The Teen Years
- [52 Ways to Talk About Adoption Deck of Cards](#)