



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 5

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT ADOPTION: SHARING DIFFICULT INFORMATION

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

When a child's or birth parents' stories include abuse, neglect, drug use, criminal convictions, mental illness, rape, or other serious challenges, it can really be hard for parents to talk with the child about the adoption. Some parents may want to withhold information to protect their child or avoid hard conversations and questions. Other parents may want to share, but do not know how to proceed.

WHY TO SHARE

Most adoption professionals and adoptees agree that withholding information is not in the child's best interests. Instead, they believe that children have the right to know everything that the adoptive parents know about the child and birth family. They advise parents to consider the ways in which all aspects of the adoption story help children better understand and accept 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. Sharing truths and supporting children to understand and deal with related emotions can help build a sense of trust between parent and child. If a child senses their parent is lying or withholding information, it can:

- Reduce their sense of trust in their parent
- Increase their confusion about what happened, why it happened, and when it happened
- Increase their sense of responsibility or shame about their foster care or adoption story
- Cause them to feel at fault or to blame

HOW TO SHARE

Of course, sensitive information must be shared carefully and thoughtfully. Parents should consider the following suggestions.

- **Consider the child's age and ability to comprehend information, maturity, and individual personality (extremely sensitive, easygoing, etc.)** — Holly van Gulden, author of *Real Parents, Real Children* suggests that children be told more difficult information during the later school-aged years (9 to 12)

[Continue Next Page](#)

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. Parents will need to revisit issues during the child's adolescence, but information may be easier for teens to grapple with if they have already dealt with them during an earlier developmental phase. Other professionals suggest that parents can wait to share certain details that might be better understood with the maturity of adolescence. In either case, the level of detail is likely to grow over time. For example:

- *For children adopted from foster care due to parents' excessive drug use* — For a younger child, parents might say: "Your birth parents weren't able to take care of you, so we adopted you." For a younger school-aged child, the story might get more specific: "Your parents had an illness where they could not stop using drugs, so you were taken away from them. When they did not get better, we adopted you." For older children, parents can get into a more detailed discussion of substance use disorder and how it affects someone's ability to be a safe parent.
- *For a child who was abused by a birth parent who had a mental illness* — At first, parents might just say, "Your parents weren't able to safely care for you, so we adopted you." Later, the parents might tell their child, "You entered foster care because your father hit you and your siblings. I do not know if you remember that, but I think it must have been scary. Unfortunately, he had an illness that made it harder for him to understand that no one should hit a child. I wish he had been able to get the help he needed." Over time, the parent can share more information about what happened and the circumstances that may have contributed to the birth father's actions, including how hard it can be to get help for mental illnesses.
- **Always be truthful** — Although you will choose how you say something or the level of detail based on the child's age, development, and personality, you should never lie, including saying you do not know something you know. If you truly cannot explain to the child right now, say, "I do not know how to explain that to you right now, but I promise I'm going to figure it out and get back to you." Then you can work with other adoptive parents, family or friends, or adoption-competent professionals to help you figure out how to respond.
- **Create a safe space for the discussion and questions** — When possible, think about your child's specific comfort and style before starting hard conversations. Will they have time to process afterward, or do they have a class or appointment coming up? Are they feeling loved and safe? Can you turn off your phone and have time to really focus on them? Is this one of those conversations where they would prefer not to have to look at you, so it is best to do in the car or on a walk? If your child asks a hard question and it is just not the right time, explain that to them and make the time as soon as you can: "That is a good question and I want to share what I know with you. Can we do it after school so we really have time to talk?"
- **Help children make sense of the information** — After a hard conversation, your job is to provide support for your child. Tell them you love them and that this does not change anything about your relationship. Open the door to questions, concerns, and feelings. Ask questions such as, "How does that make you feel?" "What do you need from me right now?" "What questions do you have?" It might take time for the child to process what they have heard, so be sure to check back periodically. For older children who may have memories of what happened to them or their birth parents' struggles, be sure to ask what they remember and how it aligns with what you have shared. If their memories are all positive, affirm that their parents loved them and the positive moments are a very real part of their story too.

Continue Next Page

- **Respect and show empathy for birth parents** — Parents should help their children 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.” “Addiction is a medical issue and too many parents like yours don’t get the help they need to get better.” Messaging like this helps children 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 can make choices about their own lives that may be different from those made by their birth parents (or their adoptive parents, for that matter). As stated in the Talking with Your Children About Adoption: The Basics topical brief, parents should emphasize that the reasons behind a child’s placement for adoption are never about the child, but always about adult (birth parent) circumstances or difficulties or systemic challenges.
- **Practice until you are comfortable** — Many parents struggle with what to tell and how to do it. If you are not comfortable, your child will know it. Make the time to practice with a friend or family member or other adoptive parents. Ask them to think about the questions they will ask, so you are as ready as possible. They should also take the opportunity to tell you if something you said felt judgmental, negative, or angry so you can try another way.
- **Partner with birth parents when possible** — 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 of the reasons why they were placed in an adoptive family. Adoptive parents may want to discuss with birth parents how to respond to the child’s questions or concerns and to jointly decide who will tell which parts of the story. Note that children may feel guilty or want to help their birth parents. Adoptive parents must think in advance about how to respond in these circumstances.
- **Get professional help if you need it** — 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.

SHARING WITH OTHERS

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 their 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.

Parents can use examples from their own lives to make this distinction. For example, a parent might have a medical condition that they talk about with friends and family, but that they do not post about on social media or tell their coworkers. Or perhaps one of the child’s siblings has a tutor to help with school. It might be helpful for teachers to know that, but other classmates do not need to know. Using examples that are not related to adoption can help the child understand privacy is not all about them or their adoption.

Continue Next Page

RESOURCES

C.A.S.E. Articles and Fact Sheets

- Talking with Your Children About Adoption: The Basics
- Talking About Adoption: The Teen Years
- [Difficult Conversations](#)

Books

- [W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook by Marilyn Schoettle](#)
- *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 Smalley and Jayne Schooler
- *Making Sense of Adoption* by Lois Melina
- *The Family of Adoption* by Joyce Maguire Pavao
- *Making Room in Our Hearts* by Micky Duxbury
- *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption* by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass