



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 7

HELPING ADOPTED CHILDREN RESPOND TO QUESTIONS

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Particularly by the time they enter school, adopted children may be asked a variety of questions by their peers and other adults. Adoptive parents need to know how to help their children answer these unavoidable questions with dignity, confidence, and consideration of privacy.

To help prepare children to respond to questions, parents need to first be aware of what their children are going to experience. Children will do their best if they have had a chance to prepare and practice before any questions come up. Parents can brainstorm the types of questions their children may be asked, such as:

- “Why didn’t you stay with your real family?”
- “Why didn’t your parents want you?”
- “How come you look different from your mom? Is she your real mom?”
- “Is that your real brother? How come you’re Black and he’s white?”
- “Why were you adopted?”
- “How do you feel about being adopted?”

While it is impossible to prepare your child for every situation, the following suggestions can help:

- **Be a model for your child.** Your child can learn the most useful and appropriate responses by listening to you field questions and comments about adoption. Your responses should be calm and respectful, even if you determine that you need to let the questioner know that either the question being asked is “not appropriate” or that it is private. Being hostile teaches others that adoptive parents are too sensitive and isn’t a great model for kids. One great response for a question that is intrusive or offensive is for parents or children to calmly and politely say, “Wow. Why would you ask that?” or “I’m surprised you asked that.” This often makes the questioner realize the question should never have been asked.
- **Pay attention to—and talk to your children about—how other children learn about adoption or adoptive families.** Look carefully at children’s books for adoption themes (including fairy tales with evil stepmothers and stories about orphans), movies, and TV shows. How adoption is handled can lead

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other children to think adoption is bad or that adopted children or adoptive families have done something wrong. Also, be aware of how other adopted children in school might be handling their adoption stories—will their choices have an impact on how all adoption is understood? What does the school do to acknowledge adoptive families?

- **Teach your child positive adoption language.** For example, adoptive parents and siblings are “real.” If someone asks, “Is that your real brother?” or “Who are your real parents?” children can respond, “Yep, they are real. Adoption makes us family!”
- **Ask your child if they would be willing to help you choose how to respond or if they would like to respond themselves.** This helps children build confidence with your support and makes it a family partnership. After a situation occurs, you can discuss other possible responses to help the child learn that there is no one correct response and that they have choices about how to handle each situation.
- **Help your child consider the source and meaning of the question before the response is chosen.** Was it well-meaning but invasive? Curious and friendly? Ignorant? Unkind? If a question is unkind or intrusive, you can help the child have the courage to respond that the question is not appropriate. You can also help them learn to answer questions about adoption in general, rather than their specific situation. For example, if someone asks the child, “Why didn’t your parents want you?” your child can respond, “Adoption isn’t about that. It’s about parents making a decision that is the best for them and their child.” If a question isn’t well-meaning, offer the child some responses to offer politely such as:
 - “I don’t think you should ask me that.”
 - “I’m sorry, but that is private.”
 - “I’m not going to answer that question.”
- **Acknowledge the often painful or frustrating feelings that go along with being perceived as “different” by others and encourage effective coping skills.** Help children realistically assess problems, anticipate consequences of their actions, make the best choices, and learn from those choices.
- **Give your child the tools to handle any situation that might come up.** Teach the [W.I.S.E. UP! program](#) and then practice it together. This is also a way to continue to open communication about adoption over the years, as you can also share your own experiences with the questions and comments.
- **Find a place where your child can be with others in adoptive families.** Children and teens enjoy sharing experiences and learning that they are not alone. In-person or online support groups or social activities with other adoptive families can be a great option.
- **Help your child develop a broader under-standing of the history of adoption, how it is currently presented by the press, and how literature and movies affect the way that others gain knowledge about it.** This kind of background can ease the tendency to personalize the way that others view adoptive families and can help them be ready for what may be negative views of adoption.
- **Help your child identify the names of people who might be able to help at school, during neighborhood play, or in various social situations.** Help them think about the most supportive teachers, aides, or administrator as well as their friends’ parents or friends who will have their back.

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- **Advocate for your child by educating other parents, school counselors, or teachers about adoption** (including on the use of positive adoption language) so that they may understand the need for them to step in to assist your child if necessary.

RESOURCES

- [C.A.S.E. blog](#)
- [W.I.S.E. UP! Powerbook](#)