



# TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 1

## CHILDREN AND ADOPTION: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS (3-5) WONDERING “WHO AM I?”

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

“When should I tell my child he/she is adopted?” is a question all adoptive parents mull over. The best time is to talk to their children as soon as the children enter the family, whether it is at birth or at an older age. Children should know and feel that adoption is ok and a topic the family is comfortable talking about. Early telling ensures that children hear their story from their parents and not someone else, makes adoption a natural part of the child’s life, and allows parents to model discussing adoption with their children.

By preschool age, adoptive parents who have not already been talking to their children about adoption need to introduce children to the basics of their adoption story and be ready to respond to questions. Children become increasingly more aware of their environment, family structures, and other people during the preschool years. They may notice that the mother of a playmate or an aunt or family friend is pregnant and wonder about it. As they begin to understand that being pregnant means “there’s a baby inside,” their natural curiosity may lead them to wonder about their own birth. They may ask such questions as, “Mommy, did I grow inside you?” Their play may involve themes related to pregnancy and birth.

Adoptive parents of preschoolers may explain that there are different ways families are formed including by birth, by adoption, or by marriage/blending families. They can share that the adopted child was born to another woman and man and then their parent or parents adopted them. Adoptive parents should also provide the appropriate language to their children, such as first mother/father, birth mother/father. It is important to be matter of fact—if adoptive parents do not think of adoption as something negative or less-than, children at this age will not either.

Parents can also add facts that pertain to the child’s particular story, such as:

- “You came over on an airplane from another country called Korea when you were very young.”
- “Your birth mother chose us to adopt you before you were born.”
- “We met you when you were one year old.”
- We were your foster parents and we adopted you when you were 5 years old.

**Continue Next Page**

For those adoptions where it is relevant, parents do not need to talk about details of abuse, neglect, addiction, etc. yet with young children. They can say the child’s birth parents could not take care of them.

If the adoptive family has a relationship with their child’s birth family, adoptive parents may explain that the people the child knows as “Jane” and “Jim” are the child’s birth parents. The child may ask what that means, and parents can adapt the answer to say, “You were born to Jane and Jim and then you become our child when we adopted you.”

It is normal for preschoolers to ask questions about everything. In response to their own story, they are likely to ask “Why?”— the common refrain to anything they are told at this age. Preschoolers are usually satisfied with simple, age-appropriate information: “She thought it would be best for you” “They were not ready to be parents” or “They were not able to parent you.” Birth parents in open adoptions can answer simply as well, “I did not feel I could take care of you by myself. I wanted you to have two parents. I was a single mom.”

If adoptive parents do not know the answers, they should not make anything up or lie. It is OK to say, “I do not know why. I wish I did.” “Maybe in the future we can learn more information.”

Before parents and birth parents talk with their children about adoption, it is advised they familiarize themselves with positive adoptive language using words and phrases that provide the necessary foundation to help children understand their adoption story. For example, the terms birth mother and made an adoption plan help to offset misunderstandings that can arise. A preschool child hearing she was “put up for adoption” may indeed have fantasies of having been placed on a store shelf.

## **WHAT CHILDREN UNDERSTAND**

At this age, most children can often parrot their story back to others, but it does not necessarily mean they fully understand their adoption. Children who have contact with their birth parents may better grasp and accept the concept of being born to someone else, but their adoptive parents are the people they live with and who love and take care of them.

Because children at this age do not typically have the cognitive ability to understand the meaning and significance of the story, they generally think and feel that everything is okay and maybe that their story is special and makes them feel good.

By age 4 or 5, non-adopted children may talk about the day they were born. Even if adopted children know these details about their own life, they also are aware that their story is different from their non-adopted peers. By the age of 6, adopted children typically understand that most other children are being raised by the parents who gave birth to them, and their journey is different.

## **SHARING THEIR STORY**

Children are receptive to hearing their adoption stories at this age and ask to re-tell the story. It may even become a favorite parents want to tell as a bedtime story. Children may also enjoy looking at pictures or other memorabilia that the parents have collected that reflects their story. In open adoptions, birth parents can be part of this sharing and informative process as well. Parents may begin to create special books called lifebooks, which may include the preparation for adoption, pictures of birth parents if you have them, information about the adoption itself, and space to add special memories of future occasions.

**Continue Next Page**

This is also an appropriate time to introduce your motivation to adopt. For example:

- “We couldn’t make a baby (another baby) and we wanted so much to be parents (again).”
- “I didn’t have a wife/husband to have a baby with.”
- “We wanted a daughter.”
- “We wanted another child.”
- “I knew there were children who needed a family.”

Parents are often afraid this will lead to a sex talk. If it does, that is OK! Keep it brief and factual. It is age-appropriate for preschool children to know that it takes a man and woman for a woman to become pregnant and give birth. Because of being told their story, adopted children may ask how the sperm gets to the egg earlier than their non-adopted peers. It is not unusual that they learn the answer earlier than non-adopted children.

The most important part of telling the story to preschoolers is to emphasize what they can understand: how happy you are that they are your child and that they are part of your family. In open adoptions, birth parents can share that while they may feel sad that they could not raise their birth child, they can affirm their positive feelings for their birth child and the adoptive parents/adoptive family.

To help children better understand adoption and to normalize it as a way to build a family, parents should read children’s books with varied stories about adoption.

## COMMON FEELINGS

For most children, early facts about their lives do not cause negative feelings on a day-to-day basis—especially when the adults in their lives make them feel safe, secure, and loved. But some children may experience feelings of sadness around not being born to their adoptive parents. For most children this age, the sense of loss is not related to feelings or concerns about birth parents. Adoptive parents can acknowledge this sadness and continue to reassure the child that they are loved and a part of the family.

Children who were placed after infancy are likely aware that part of their early life was spent in a different place or with people who are not their parents today. These children may have confusing, sad, or even scary memories or emotions because of these early experiences. Parents can affirm that it is normal and expected to be sad about what happened, but that they are safe now.

Especially in transracial adoption, children as young as 2 or 3 will become increasingly aware of the physical differences between themselves and their family. This may be because other people make comments or ask questions about their family that relate to differences in physical appearance. Children of a different race may express negative feelings about their skin color because of their wish to look like their parents, and they will begin to internalize that the physical appearances of family members are a defining aspect about their family. Children in same-race placements may express the wish to have their parents’ hair or eye color. Parents should validate their children’s wish to look like them, while emphasizing the beauty of their children’s skin color (or hair or eye color) and ensuring that the family’s inner circle of friends and community is multi-racial, including people of their child’s racial or ethnic heritage. In open adoption, children may have the benefit of

**Continue Next Page**

relationships with birth family members who share their racial heritage.

## LEARNING MORE

This is an ideal time to build the foundation for future, ongoing family communication about adoption. Although children understand basic concepts, parents can do a great deal to let their children know they are proud to be an adoptive family and welcome conversations about the subject. They can make it clear that adoption is a normal part of life and something the family is open about.

It is common for adoptive parents to experience some anxiety as they embark on conversations with their children about adoption; therefore, it can be helpful to plan. Suggestions include:

- Practice with a family member or friend, including responding to “why?” and other questions.
- Think about the child’s emotional make-up and cognitive development and prepare for how they respond.
- Attend an adoptive parent support group to learn what others have done. Keep in mind that not everyone does it right or shares early enough. Learn from those who are talking honestly and factually about adoption with their children from the beginning.
- Consult with an adoption professional for advice, particularly if there is concern about the need to share difficult information.
- Explore the resources below.

Over time, parents may also want to help enhance their child’s understanding and comfort with adoption through the following:

- Find (or create) a play group for children in adoptive families and those in many kinds of families, including foster, step, or single parent families.
- Build a broader understanding of adoption in your extended family or community by sharing books for children, including those with stories about diverse kinds of families.

## RESOURCES

### Related C.A.S.E. Topical Brief

- Talking with Your Children about Adoption: The Basics
- Talking with Your Children about Adoption: Sharing Difficult Information

### Books for Adults

- *Talking with Young Children about Adoption* by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher

**Continue Next Page**

- *Telling the Truth to Your Foster or Adopted Child* by Jayne Schooler and Betsey Keefer
- *Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child* by Holly van Gulden
- *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption* by Lori Holden with Crystal Hass
- *Inside Transracial Adoption* by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg

### **Children's Books**

- *Horace* by Holly Keller
- *Tell Me Again about the Night I was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis
- *A Mother for Choco* by Keiko Kasza
- *Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale* by Karen Katz