

# Adoption Advocate



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## TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT ADOPTION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

By Nicole M. Callahan

For many adoptive parents, it is easy to talk about their first meeting with their child, the first day they brought her home, or their early memories of her; these times are usually joyful to recall. But the questions that adopted children have do not end—and may not necessarily even begin—with the day their adoptive parents brought them home.

Some children may have endless questions about their birthparents and birth families. Some will feel dissatisfied with the information provided, and long for more. Some will struggle with accepting and dealing with certain facts, especially as they grow older and learn more about their histories. And some may feel uncomfortable when questioned by others about adoption, and will need to be taught by their parents if—and how—to respond.

Following are some suggestions for adoptive parents on how to discuss these and other issues with their children, and incorporate an open and ongoing discussion of adoption into their family life.

**Talk about adoption early and often, and don't wait for the child to bring it up every time.**

"Parents have to be proactive, intentional truth tellers," says Jayne Schooler, an adoption

advocate who has authored six books and numerous training curricula on adoption, including *The Whole Life Adoption Book* (coauthored with NCFA) and *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*. "Tell your child about his adoption early on. Give him truthful answers from you, so he doesn't find things out about his adoption from others, in ways you would rather he didn't."

Chuck Johnson, president and CEO of NCFA and a former adoption agency director, agrees: "Always be ready to discuss adoption honestly. You have to start out from the beginning with a clear plan, lay the foundation by teaching children what adoption is, gradually share more age-appropriate information until the child reaches a full understanding, and continue the process throughout his life."

It's important to keep in mind that adoption is not abnormal, nor should discussions about it be stressful for adoptive parents, says Dr. Kathleen L. Whitten, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist, lecturer in psychology at Georgia State University, and author of *Labor of the Heart: A Parent's Guide to the Decisions and Emotions in Adoption*. "If parents have been well-prepared before adoption, they should have no trouble with the fact that adoption is a wonderful way to build a family. Parents who

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truly believe this will have no problems talking about adoption with anyone, especially their children.”

In “Growing Up Adopted: Birth parent contact and developmental outcomes” (H.D. Grotevant and R.G. McRoy, 1998), a major study examining outcomes for adopted children with varying levels of openness, researchers found that, regardless of the level of openness, all children in the study expressed curiosity about their birth families, regardless of the amount of information they already had. Adoptive parents must realize that this is natural, and that a child’s curiosity about her birthparents or desire to talk about them does not mean that she loves her adoptive family any less.

“Some parents may feel they are ‘off the hook’ if their child doesn’t bring up adoption very often,” says Schooler. “But that’s the wrong way to think about it. Parents should bring up adoption themselves, as the best way of letting their children know that they are always happy and able to talk about it.”

One question Schooler always poses to adoptive parents is: “When was the last time you talked about adoption in your family?” If they can’t remember, she says, then it’s time for the parents to bring it up intentionally. The family could watch a movie or read a book related to adoption, and talk about it afterwards. If their child’s birthday is coming up, they could take the opportunity to talk about her birthparents. Parents could bring out old photo albums and retell the story of their child’s adoption—as much of her story as they know.

According to Schooler, “Adopted children will ask the questions about adoption that they feel they have *permission* to ask. Parents have to think about how they communicate and what kind of environment they are establishing. Is their home the sort of place where their child can feel comfortable asking lots of questions about her adoption?”

If children sense that their parents are

uncomfortable discussing their birth families, or suspect their parents do not care about or do not want to answer their questions, it may make them feel guilty about or alone in their curiosity. Parents must respond to their child’s curiosity without fear, embarrassment, or insecurity. Their child must know that she can always come to them with questions, and they will do their best to answer and help her understand.

“Always be open to conversation and help your child understand that being adopted is nothing to be ashamed of,” says Chuck Johnson. “It is a fact of a child’s life, one that must be discussed.”

## **Allow the conversation about adoption to develop, change, and grow along with your child.**

Curiosity about their origins, birth families, and adoptions is universal among adopted children, though the intensity of this curiosity as well as the sorts of questions they have will vary and, for most, change over time. “Young children...are most interested in themselves, their own families, and their own story, not in an abstract idea about what adoption is,” says Dr. Whitten. “A mom might say, ‘Once upon a time, you were born in a beautiful country, Russia. Your birthmother was not able to take care of you, so she took you to an orphanage and asked them to find a forever family for you. They called us and asked us to be your family, so we flew to Moscow...’ and then add details about the trip, the first time you saw your child. I’ve heard from other adoptive families that children around age two to four want to hear this story *every night*.”

The same answers that satisfied a child when he was younger may not necessarily do so when he is a teenager or young adult. For these reasons, the ongoing adoption discussion should grow and change along with the child, evolving as he gains understanding and maturity. “One of the prevailing questions that most



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adoptees ask is the ‘Why?’” says Jayne Schooler. “They want to know, ‘Why was I adopted? Why did this happen?’ As they grow and develop, they need their parents to add more content and context to the ‘why.’ As a child gets older, he’s going to want more details, and you should not hide things from him. But some of the harder information will need to be shared at the right time, when he is ready. Parents are the only ones who can discern whether their children are ready to hear and understand certain facts about their history.”

Adoptive parents should not share all the information with their child from a young age, particularly if some of the information is troubling. “While discussion about adoption has to begin on day one, I think that some parents, in their efforts to be diligent, can overwhelm their child with too much information, too early,” says Johnson. Adoptive parents should share what they know when they feel their child is ready for it. Schooler advises parents that, as a general guideline, they should tell their child his entire history—as much as they know—by the time he is 12 years old. “He probably knows more than you think he does, no matter what age he is,” she says. “You want to avoid accidental disclosure about his past from other people, other family members. Another way to avoid accidental disclosure of facts is to be very aware of who you share parts of your child’s history with—there are some things that are no one’s business outside of your immediate family.”

For parents of children adopted at an older age from foster care or via intercountry adoption, who may remember their parents, members of their family, or previous caregivers, the

adoption discussion can prove even more challenging. “Parents have to remember that their children will see these people through the eyes of their adoptive parents,” says Schooler. “You have to think about how you talk about your child’s birthparents. Be aware of and control your own emotional response, even if it’s difficult. Always demonstrate compassion for your child’s former parents and family. Remember that an adopted or foster child still loves her parents, and in some way still wants their blessing—she may have her own feelings of grief and loss to cope with; she should not have to deal with your anger or your negative reaction, too. Make sure she knows she can always ask any question of you, even if it’s something unpleasant or sad.”

Adolescence often presents additional challenges in a parent/child relationship. For teenagers who were adopted, adolescence may also be a time when they experience greater uncertainty or emotions related to their adoptions. It is a time when harder facts about a child’s adoption and birth family can be talked about in greater detail, but parents should be prepared for the impact this could have on the child.

“Adolescents become able to think adoption in broader, abstract terms. However, this is very variable, and not all 13-year-olds, for example, are ready to understand the complexities of poverty and family stress and—for some children, geopolitical realities—that lead to adoption,” says Dr. Whitten.

While older children and adolescents can begin to understand some of the reasons—if known—why they were placed for adoption, Chuck Johnson warns against “blaming” relin-

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quishment or abandonment on poverty alone. “Adoptive parents, too, can lose jobs or experience financial hardship,” he points out. “It is not money or resources alone that makes someone a child’s parent. What it boils down to is that the birthmother had her reasons for not believing that she could take care of her child, and she knew that someone else could. Adoption is the merging of love and law to make a family. Adoptive parents are committed to loving and caring for their children, no matter what happens.”

## **Find ways to discuss adoption with your child even if you lack certain information.**

As there are many different levels of openness in adoption, there is also great variety in the amount of information that may be known about the birthparents. In open adoptions, the adoptive family is in contact with the birthparent(s), who can assist in answering adoptees’ questions about their origins. Other adoptions are more closed, with less contact or no contact at all, and the birthparents may have chosen to disclose far less personal information to the adoptive family. In adoptions out of foster care, the child’s biological family is often known and remembered by him, and he might maintain contact with biological parents or other kin. In many intercountry adoptions, by contrast, far less may be known with certainty about a child’s birthparents or birth family, particularly in cases of child abandonment.

Dr. Betsy Vonk, Ph.D., an adoptive mother and a professor of social work and director of the MSW program at the University of Georgia, says, “If less is known about the birthparents or how the adoption came about, parents can explain some of the reasons why birthparents place their children for adoption. They can tell their children that it is usually a very hard decision to make, but that they don’t know exactly why their birthparents made that decision. This allows the child to express fantasies they might

have about their early histories, and for parent and child to share their feelings about the ‘not knowing.’ This kind of discussion can mature with the child’s understanding.”

Jayne Schooler recalls a conversation she had with a group of parents that had adopted children from China: “They told me, ‘We don’t know anything.’ I said, ‘You know more than you think. You know when you first thought about adoption, how you made that decision. You know when you first visited China and saw the orphanage and met your child’s caregivers. You know what you did when you first visited your child—the hotel where you brought her, the things you gave her, all the circumstances of when and where and how you ended up bringing her home.’”

“It can be very painful to be unable to provide our children with their early life stories,” says Dr. Vonk, “but I don’t think it is fair to make one up for them. Instead, we can provide empathy and support for their feelings about the ambiguity.”

For many children, says Dr. Whitten, the central question in their minds—and the one for which their parents might not have answers—is “Why didn’t my parents keep me?” She explains, “The underlying question behind this is, ‘What is wrong with me?’ Of course, the best answer is the true one, about the circumstances of your child’s adoption... [R]eassure your child that her adoption was because of a decision that had nothing to do with her as a person, and everything to do with her birthparents’ lives, concerns, abilities, etc.”

If children know less about their birth families and express sadness about this, Dr. Whitten says it is important to empathize with them, and not try to talk them out of feeling the way they do. “You can share with them your own sadness, by saying something like ‘I’m sad that we don’t know more about your birthparents/don’t know why they made an adoption plan/can’t see them more often, too.’ You can also emphasize that the birthparents are prob-



ably sad, too—sad that they weren't able to be parents when the child was born, and sad that they may not know what happened to the child or what the child's life is like now."

At the same time, Dr. Whitten adds, parents should not simply assume that all adopted child are equally "scarred" by feelings of sadness or loss or grief. "Sometimes this is overemphasized in adoption practice," she says.

## **Make a real effort to educate yourselves and understand the context in which the adoption decision was made.**

It is important, says Chuck Johnson, for adoptive parents to help their child consider his adoption in the right context. "There's a tendency, sometimes, to want to evaluate a decision as if it were being made today," he notes, "but it is crucial to think about the time the decision was made and the unique people involved. There may have been stigmas of the time that do not exist to the same extent today. There were almost certainly enormous challenges facing the child's birthparents. You always have to consider the personal attributes, the time, the sacrifices, and the unique situation of the person or people involved."

Research conducted by NCFCA in recent years has shown that many birthmothers choose to make an adoption plan because they believe it is in the best interests of their children. For many birthparents, adoption is a choice reflecting a birthmother's love and willingness to sacrifice on behalf of her child.

"Adoptive parents have to try to help their adopted child think about that—the birthmother's choice—and what a sensitive, difficult, and weighty decision was made, in many cases for the sake of the child," Johnson explains.

It is also necessary, Jayne Schooler adds, for adoptive parents to attempt to gain real understanding of the cultural circumstances involved in an intercountry adoption. This, too, might be information that their child will want to know.

"Many birthmothers know that they cannot care for their children; they do not have the support or the resources. So some of them make a plan and take the children where they might be found and cared for," she says. "Of course, adoptive parents can't always know for certain what their child's birthparents might have done—and if they don't, they shouldn't claim to know—but they should educate themselves, and try to imagine the difficult circumstances faced by so many birthparents when they have these discussions with their adopted children."

## **Talk with your child about how to respond to questions from others.**

"When children are older...many questions will come from their peers," says Dr. Whitten. "Parents can prepare their children by saying, 'Not all kids are adopted, and kids at school might ask you about it. You can decide if you want to tell them anything or not.'" She adds that parents should also be prepared for questions themselves.

It is common for adopted children and their parents to receive questions from their peers, extended family members, teachers, friends' parents, even total strangers. This can prove uncomfortable at times, even for those children who generally find it easy to talk about their adoptions. For children who are more shy, or those who are currently struggling with different aspects of their adoptions, it can be far more disconcerting.

Adopted children, says Dr. Vonk, should be taught that the choice of when, where, and how to respond to questions about adoption is entirely theirs. No matter what sort of questions they receive, or who asks the questions, they should not feel that they must give a particular answer, or any answer at all. "One of the things I've found to be most helpful to children is for them to understand they are not obligated to answer every question that is asked of them, particularly if the person asking is a



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stranger, or is asking in a way that feels like teasing or hostility,” she says.

She says that it is important for parents to model responding to questions, so their children can see how they can choose to answer—or not answer. “We can show our children that sometimes we share a bit of information about our own experience, or about adoption in general; sometimes, we might invite the person to talk with us at another time when we are not with our children; and, at other times, we must become comfortable saying to a stranger in a store who asks an intrusive question that there are private matters that we don’t talk about outside of our family,” she explains. “Always, after an encounter with someone, especially if it’s an intrusive question, it’s important for parents to talk with their children about their perspective of what happened, how they felt about it, and how they would like to handle something similar in the future.”

Parents can help their children practice using role play, rehearsing various situations and conversations with them, so they are empowered to handle different questions that may be asked. Says Dr. Vonk, “This will help them learn that there are different times and places for different sorts of responses, and they

have the power to choose what their response will be based on what feels right to them.”

## Conclusion

Every child is unique, as is every adoption, and therefore every adopted child will approach his or her adoption in a different way.

Most of the questions and issues that are unique to adopted children can eventually be resolved over time—just like most issues faced at various times throughout childhood and adolescence. Research shows that the majority of adopted people successfully work through their questions and feelings surrounding their adoptions—though some will need extra help in order to do so—and feel happy, safe, and loved in their adoptive families.

Adoptive parents must consciously work to encourage and maintain an open and ongoing conversation about adoption with their children. It will not always be possible to answer every question a child may have about adoption, but through honesty, empathy, and self-awareness, parents can help their children to grow in their understanding of adoption, their histories, and their place in their birth and adoptive families.

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