

May 2009

## Tuscarawas County Job & Family Services Post-Adoption Link Newsletter

### Happy Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day to All of Our Adoptive Parents!

Many articles in previous newsletters have emphasized the importance of adoptive parents communicating with their adopted children regarding feelings about adoption and about their birth parents. Two holidays, Mothers' Day (May 11) and Fathers' Day (June 15), provide opportunities for adoptive parents to initiate discussions about birth parents and to create annual rituals for remembrance of the birth parents who gave life to the adoptee.

Most sensitive church services on Mothers' Day remember mothers whose children have died or mothers who have had miscarriages, but rarely are birth mothers remembered. In 1990, Seattle birth mothers who had endured previous Mothers' Days invisibly or in isolation started the practice of celebrating **Birth Mothers' Day** on the eve of Mothers' Day. Thus, it is suggested that adoptive families consider initiating private rituals in which the adoptee can participate on the eve of Mothers' Day. Separating Birth Mothers' Day from Mothers' Day allows the adoptee to honor his birth mother without taking away from honoring his adoptive mother on Mothers' Day. This can help the adoptee learn that he can acknowledge and recognize both women who have played, and continue to play, significant roles in his life.

For adoptive families who have contact with their child's birth mother, rituals for celebrating Birth Mothers' Day could be as simple as the adoptee making a card or purchasing a card to be sent to the birth mother.

For adoptive families who do not have contact with their child's birth mother, the adoptee could still make a card for the birth mother and store it in a special container to be saved for the future when the adoptee is an adult (and each year another card could be added). Another ritual could be lighting a candle for the birth mother, and use a reading, poem, or song to communicate the importance of the birth mother in the adoptee's life and in the creation of the adoptive family.

Our agency is not aware of a formal practice of celebrating **Birth Fathers' Day** on the eve of Fathers' Day, but would recommend that adoptive families consider creating private rituals for birth father on the eve of Fathers' Day. Adoptive parents at times are reluctant to discuss the birth father with the adoptee, as sometimes his role seems to be limited to that of conception, which can bring up a variety of uncomfortable sexual issues for the adoptive parents if they have infertility issues. This is particularly true for an individual who sees fertility as tied to masculinity.

Although an adoptee seems to feel a greater connection to the birth mother, since there is a physical connection to the child through pregnancy, the birth father is also important to the formation of the adoptee's identity. Even if the birth father is unknown, it is still valuable to the adoptee to recognize the importance of the birth father for giving him life. Again, this can help the adoptee learn that he can acknowledge and recognize both men who have played, and continue to play, significant roles in his life.

The same rituals that are established to honor the birth mother can be transformed into rituals to honor the birth father.

By Gayle Hahn MSW, LISW-S



#### Inside this Issue:

Article	2-5
2009 NACAC Conference	5
Article Ages 3-5	6
Article Ages 6-8	7
Article Ages 9-12	8
New Book	9

# *Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children*

Permission to be Reprinted from the Winter 2009 issue of Adoptalk, published by the North American Council on Adoptable Children; 651-644-3036; www.nacac.org.

*Adapted, with permission, from two articles by Jae Ran Kim (“Understanding Ambiguous Loss” and Adoption and Loss”) in MN ASAP Family Voices, a publication of Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation. MN ASAP is a collaboration of the Minnesota Adoption Resource Network and NACAC.*

Ambiguous loss—a feeling of grief or distress combined with confusion about the lost person or relationship—is a normal aspect of adoption. Parents who adopt children with special needs may feel ambiguous loss related to what the child could have been had he not been exposed to toxic chemicals in utero, or abused and neglected after birth. Birth parents experience loss when a child is removed from their home.

For children placed in foster care, this type of loss tends to happen over and over again and is incredibly hard to process. To help children better manage these repeated traumas, foster and adoptive parents, as well as child welfare workers, must be sensitive to the role ambiguous loss plays in foster and adopted children’s behavior.

## **Ambiguous Loss and Child Welfare**

Ambiguous loss occurs in two situations: when a person is physically present but psychologically unavailable, or when a person is physically absent but psychologically present. The latter type is most common in foster care and adoption.

Children who enter foster care lose contact with their birth parents, physical surroundings, and sometimes their siblings, and enter an extremely tenuous situation. Will the child be reunited with the birth parent and siblings? Will the parent fight to get the child back? How long will this take? Will the child remain with the same foster family until he goes home, or will he move again? What if the child can never go home?

A child who is placed with a family of a different race loses something else. As editors Sheena McCrae and Jane MacLeod point out in *Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections*, transracial families cannot hide. The anonymity of being in a regular family vanishes when the “conspicuous family” goes on any public outing.

School can be another source of unsettling grief. When a child moves among several schools, both social and educational continuity is broken. The child loses chances to develop lasting friendships and keep up with peers academically. If a child has FASD or another learning disability, or simply missed a lot of school earlier in life, school is an environment in which the child can feel out of place, cut off from same-age peers and their activities, or even looked down upon. Youth may mourn and be angry that prior circumstances or disabilities now keep them from fitting in at school and having a positive school experience.

The symptoms of ambiguous loss often mirror those of post-traumatic stress disorder. A child will commonly experience:

- difficulty with changes in transitions, even seemingly minor ones
- trouble making decisions
- psychic paralysis or the feeling of being overwhelmed when asked to make a choice
- problems coping with routine childhood or adolescent losses (last day of school, death of a pet, move to a new home, etc.)
- a sort of learned helplessness and hopelessness due to a sense that he has no control over his life
- depression and anxiety
- feelings of guilt

Even children adopted before age one, who have no conscious memory of their birth parents, may experience symptoms of ambiguous loss as they approach their teens. In *Ambiguous Loss: Coming to Terms with Unresolved Grief*, author Pauline Boss states, “Although the birth mother is more conscious of the actual separation than is the baby . . . the birth mother is thought about often and kept psychologically present in the minds of both the adoptive mother and the adopted child.”

Children whose adoptive parents rarely discuss the absent birth parents or birth siblings feel the loss more keenly. In a study of young adult adoptees published in a 2005 issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, socio-cultural researchers Kimberly Powell and Tamara Afifi correlate heightened ambiguous loss symptoms with children and youth who lack information about their birth parents and have lived with a family who failed to honor the adoptees’ connection with their family or culture of origin.

As Pauline Boss suggests, “the greater the ambiguity surrounding one’s loss, the more difficult it is to master and the greater one’s depression, anxiety, and family conflict.” This holds true for the following reasons:

- **It is hard to resolve grief when one does not know if the loss is temporary or permanent.** Children in foster care, and even some in adoptive families, often feel great ambivalence about accepting a new family when there is even the slightest chance the birth family may still reclaim them.
- **Uncertainty about losses prevent children from easily reorganizing roles and relationships in their family.** Children who served as their younger siblings’ caregiver in the birth family, for instance, can find it exceedingly hard to relinquish that role in a new family. In fact, separation from the birth family may make a child even more determined to fulfill the task of caring for her siblings.
- **Clear, symbolic rituals do not mark foster care and adoption losses.** Society recognizes death through funeral ceremonies, but there is no somber equivalent to observe losses caused by separation from the birth family. Knowing that a parent or birth siblings are still somewhere out there can be confusing and anxiety-inducing for foster and adopted children. Will they run into members of their birth family by accident? Will their parents or siblings contact them someday?

- **The lost relationship is not socially acknowledged or is hidden from others.** For adoptive families and their relatives and friends, an adoption is cause for celebration. Children who are adopted, however, may feel confused or guilty about expressing happiness over being legally disconnected from their birth family. Extended family members and members of the community may not fully appreciate that adoption is directly tied to losing one's birth family.
- **Others negatively perceive the circumstances that led to the loss.** When children are removed from families in which they are neglected or abused and placed with foster or adoptive families, many believe that the children are being rescued. Children, however, even when parents mistreat them, often feel a fierce loyalty to their birth families. After all, life with the birth family may be all they know. It is familiar. Social workers and foster/adoptive parents who believe children should be grateful for being placed in better functioning families need to understand how very differently children in foster care may view their situation.

### How to Help Children Deal with Loss

When children—like those in or adopted from foster care—experience multiple losses, the psychological damage may extend well into adulthood. Ambiguous loss can erode trust, and adults who cannot trust typically struggle with relationships—sometimes avoiding closeness to forestall loss, sometimes clinging to a bad relationship due to deep-seated abandonment issues. The sooner children can address issues raised by ambiguous loss, the more likely it is they will learn better ways to deal with the fallout.

Below are some suggestions that can benefit children troubled by loss:

- **Help your child to identify what he has lost.** In addition to losing birth parents, he may have lost extended family members and old friends, his home and neighborhood, contact with people who share his heritage or looks, his family surname, or even his home country and native language.
- **Give voice to the ambiguity.** Acknowledge and validate your child if she expresses feelings of loss. Show that you understand and sympathize.
- **Redefine the parameters of what constitutes a family.** Boss writes, “Acting as if the membership list of an adoptive family is etched in stone may in the end be more stressful than explicitly recognizing that the family has some ambiguous boundaries.”
- **Give your child permission to grieve the loss of his birth family without guilt.** Suggest times and places where your child is welcome to express his grief and ways in which he can grieve. Talking, journaling, drawing, or venting feelings through intense exercise are just a few options.
- **Create a “loss box.”** Debbie Rile, a therapist and author who works with adopted teens, guides clients as they decorate a box into which they can put items that represent things they have lost. By creating the box, youth participate in a ritual that acknowledges their loss and construct a controlled vehicle for revising their losses in the future.
- **Include birth parents and other birth family members in pictorial representations of the adoptive family tree.** One option would be to depict an orchard where trees grow side by side. The birth family, former foster families, or other significant people in the child's life can be other trees in the same family orchard.

- **Be conscious of how certain events—birthdays, holidays, adoption day, etc.—may trigger intense feelings of loss.** Add or alter family rituals to respect the child's feelings. On birthdays, for instance, you could add an extra candle to the cake in memory of the birth family. Or you might make a point of saying something like, "I bet your birth mom and dad are thinking about you today."
- **Keep your expectations reasonable.** A child's need to grieve over ambiguous losses will not be fully cured, fixed, or resolved in any predetermined time frame, if ever. Let your child know that feelings related to these losses will come and go at different times in her life and provide a safe person to whom she can express those feelings.
- **Model normal, healthy responses to loss.** If you or your parenting partner suffers a loss, share your feelings openly. Let your children see you mourn, so they can learn how you express sadness and anger about loss. For boys, seeing a grown man cry can be especially instructive.

Losses may loom especially large when children approach adolescence. Missing pieces of their history make the task of developing a confident self-identity much more complicated. Some will feel that they are destined to make the same mistakes as their birth parents, so foster and adoptive parents must be especially careful to avoid unflattering comparisons between the teen and a birth parent and stress that a large part of an individual's identity is a matter of personal choice, not some preordained fate.

Parents must also recognize that, by parenting a child who has experienced staggering losses, they will realize losses in their lives too. Support from other parents who are struggling with similar issues is key. Conversations with other foster/adoptive parents may bring to light a new way to approach issues linked to ambiguous loss, or just help you to feel less alone. Loss is an inevitable part of adoption; acknowledging the role of ambiguous loss in children's perceptions and actions is the first step in the long journey of healing.



## 2009 35TH ANNUAL NACAC CONFERENCE

### AUGUST 13-15, 2009; COLUMBUS, OHIO

PRE-CONFERENCE SESSIONS AUGUST 12

Check out the NACAC website: <http://www.nacac.org/>

The NACAC Conference—the most comprehensive adoption conference in North America—will feature close to 100 workshops by expert professionals and parents addressing a wide variety of topics, including:

- \* parenting
- \* race, culture, and diversity
- \* therapeutic techniques
- \* agency issues and concerns
- \* parenting children with challenges
- \* kinship placements and birth family connections
- \* post-adoption services
- \* international adoption

***Don't miss the 35th annual conference of the North American Council on Adoptable Children!***

Former NACAC Attendees' comments:

"As an adoptive parent and adoption professional, the conference was excellent, refreshing, and uplifting."

"This conference has reignited the passion for children and families in me! Thank you!"

"I came with the expectation that I would obtain a wealth of knowledge related to adoption issues, and I was not disappointed! The days flew by!"

"This training conference was phenomenal. I'm so grateful to you and my agency for allowing me to come."

## “DID I COME FROM YOUR TUMMY?”

Preschoolers ask the darnedest questions, but don't be afraid to answer them.

By Joanne Solchany, R.N., Ph.D.

Reprinted from *Adoptive Families* June 2005

Three to five year olds are making sense of a large, complicated world in which they command center stage and their imagination runs free. They have an incessant desire to understand how things work now. But their questions can come up at any time, often taking us by surprise.

### What It All Means

Developmentally, the questions preschoolers ask are right on target. Their minds are expanding as they begin to connect ideas and apply these concepts to themselves. Even if you've shared your child's adoption story a hundred times, new questions will still arise: "How come I have a birthmother?" "How come I was born in China?" Cognitively, the preschooler's capacity to understand things in different ways is rapidly growing, which leads to a desire to have new questions answered. Some preschoolers begin to grasp the concept of adoption and what it means: "How come my birthmommy didn't keep me? Will she take me back?" Others begin to consider their birthparents in new ways: "Did my birthmommy die?" "Does she miss me?" Expect such questions and be prepared to respond in age-appropriate ways. Here's how.

**Do** answer your child's questions, but try to use a few short, simple words. Your child will ask another question if he needs more information.

**Don't** tell her about traumatic circumstances related to her adoption. Kids this age cannot make sense of things like poverty or government rules.

**Do** have fun with the moments your preschooler presents to you. Expand on them and explore them with enthusiasm.

### Keep It Short and Sweet

Preschoolers don't require lengthy explanations.

The best answers are simple, honest, and direct.

Here's a sample dialogue.

**Child:** "Didn't my birthmother love me?"

**Parent:** "Yes, she loved you very much."

**Child:** "How come she didn't keep me?"

**Parent:** "She was too young to take care of a baby but wanted you to have a wonderful family."

**Child:** "Why?"

**Parent:** "She wanted you to be with us, because she knew we'd take good care of you forever."

**Child:** "Why?"

**Parent:** "Because we love you so much and want the best for you."

**Don't** worry about why your child is asking about pregnancy and adoption. Preschoolers are naturally beginning to wonder about how they came to be.

**Do** expect issues to be brought up again and again. As your child gains a larger vocabulary and furthers his understanding of relationships, he will think of more questions.

**Don't** be afraid to choose a better time to discuss issues and to give your child your full attention. For example, say, "This is important to talk about. Let's wait until we get out of the bank and in the car."

**Do** continue to provide the nurturing environment you've already established. Your child would not be asking these questions if she didn't trust and feel safe with you.

**Don't** worry about the words you choose to talk about reproductive issues ("tummy" vs. "uterus," for example). Use the words most comfortable to you and your family.



## Birthparent Fantasies

Your child's birthmother looms large in her imagination now.

What's your grade-schooler really thinking?

By Fran Eisenman

Reprinted from *Adoptive Families* June 2005

Over the years, seven-year-old Amy and her mom have had several "birthmother" talks. As a small child, Amy wondered aloud about what her birthmother looked like, whether she would come to visit, and how big her belly was when Amy was in it. But now that Amy has school friends, she understands that not all children were adopted. This realization has led her to think more about her birthmother and, often, to miss the woman she never knew.

### What It All Means

Though adoptive parents sometimes feel threatened by talk of a birthparent, it's important to keep the discussion open. Children who can talk to their parents about their thoughts, fantasies, and feelings have a better chance of forming a realistic impression of their birthparents. They can bounce their ideas and questions off a trusted adult and, in return, receive age-appropriate responses. But what about kids who do not or cannot talk to a parent about their birth families? What if they perceive sadness or anger whenever they bring up the subject? These kids will sometimes spin fantasies, without the reality check a grown up can provide.

Adopted children will often grieve for their birthparents or for the lost opportunity to have known them. If left alone with their thoughts, they may fabricate a naïve and unrealistic perspective. Uneducated in the legalities of adoption, they may hope for their birthparents' return or fantasize about going to live with them in a home without chores, homework, or annoying younger siblings. Some children who are not sufficiently assured of their value or place in the family may fear being returned to the birthparent involuntarily, as punishment or out of indifference.

School-age children who are asked how often they think of their birthparents sometimes answer, "Every day," "Whenever I am alone," or "When I go to bed." These responses demonstrate normal thought processes. Children in this age group are anxious to talk about their thoughts and to have help exploring their ideas. The best help is from a parent who does not feel threatened by the mention of a birthparent, so be open to talking. As a backup, another close adult or a professional counselor well-versed in adoption issues can be a vital resource.



### Speaking of Birthparents . . .

How do you broach the subject and encourage your child to keep talking?

**1** Casually mention your child's birthparents from time to time early in her life, preferably soon after she joins your family, regardless of her age. Smile. Your child will catch your emotional tone even if she doesn't understand all the words.

**2** Let your child know that you will not be upset by birth-parent talk. (Your child's interest in her birthparents is not a threat to you.) Keep your tone neutral and your facial expression calm and welcoming. Practice your reaction in a mirror if you have initial discomfort.

**3** Encourage your child to keep talking whenever he brings up the topic: "What do you think?" "How does that make you feel?" "You sound sad (or angry)."

**4** Accept your child's feelings as valid. Don't try to talk her out of feeling sad or hurt. This will shut down the conversation and force your child to deal with her feelings alone. Accept the fact that there are some things parents can't fix—just be there.

## To Share or Not to Share

How should preteens respond to personal questions from friends?

By Marybeth Lambe, M.D.

Reprinted from *Adoptive Families* February 2006

**I**t's no secret that "tweens" want to be popular. But in an effort to be liked and accepted by friends, our kids sometimes feel pressure to answer questions about their adoption, even ones that are prying or pushy. How do we help a child decide which details to share and which to keep private? And how do we do so at all when many preteens would rather face a firing squad than have an earnest talk with Mom or Dad?

### What It All Means

Throughout our children's lives, we've likely been honest with them about their adoption stories, however painful or sad. We've also been discreet when sharing their personal history with others. But some of this burden shifts onto our preteens as they develop deeper friendships outside the family and interact more independently with peers.

Although some are mature enough to decide with whom they want to share their personal information, they must realize that, once they reveal certain things, they can't take them back. As our kids approach the teen years, we should strive for open communication and recognize "teachable moments." For instance, our tweens may send out signals that something is on their minds when we're driving to soccer practice, watching a movie together, or shopping for school supplies. During such moments (or at any time), we can reinforce our willingness to listen, by saying, "If you want to talk about your adoption, Dad and I are always happy to listen," or "We haven't talked about adoption lately. Now that you're in sixth grade, you might be thinking about it in a more grown-up way."

### Nosy Questions

**When your child is asked a question that he deems too personal, he can:**

- Ignore it, switch the topic, or walk away.
- State that he chooses not to share such information by saying, "That's private," "Let's not talk about this right now," or "Gosh, that's too personal a question."
- Respond with a question, such as "Why do you ask?" or "Why would you want to know such a personal thing?"
- Choose to share information. Let your child practice relating the facts he's willing to share with friends.

Let your kids know that *they* are the experts on adoption. (This may give them confidence in facing unwittingly hurtful comments from peers.) There may be times when our preteens feel unprepared to deal with questions from friends, and times when they're upset or embarrassed by what they said, or did not say, during an exchange. Though we can't always be there to intervene, we can give them the means to handle sticky situations themselves, and help them decide how much of their adoption story they want to share.

### Tools for Preteens

**Here are five ways to empower your child:**

- 1** Help her learn boundaries and remind her that she doesn't need to reveal anything that makes her uncomfortable.
- 2** Stress the importance of privacy. Tell your child that it's OK to put her personal values and concerns above the curiosity of others.
- 3** Demonstrate and practice response options.
- 4** Suggest that she put a temporary hold on a conversation by saying, "I have to think about your questions." This gives her time to decide how to respond.
- 5** Remind your child that at times we've all been upset or dissatisfied with the way we've responded to unexpected questions or circumstances.





## *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption* by Arleta James

### **Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family**

Arleta James, a clinical therapist at the renowned Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio, has created a rich resource for any parent or professional who is invested in adoption. Sibling issues are the focus of *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family*, and topics like preparing waiting siblings and discussing difficult details are explored in depth. But the book's scope extends beyond the title. James offers a wealth of information for the entire continuum of adoption, from the initial considerations (are we the right family for this child?) to the wait to post-placement. Adding a child to a family is never a seamless transition, and James offers realistic advice to help parents prepare for all the challenges they'll face—transferring an older child's possessions, maintaining a sense of routine for the children already at home—while assuring sensitivity and respect for everyone involved.

There's a chapter on dads—what they may be thinking, the roles they play, and the incredible impact they have on our children. One section explains how children's grief varies at each age, and how parents can help them heal past trauma, as well as how siblings can learn to understand what their new brother or sister has experienced. Perhaps the book's most important contribution is its view of joining a family “through the eyes of the child.” In one exercise, James helps the reader imagine what the child (or sibling) might be feeling, thinking, or expecting. Becoming aware of what it would be like to be taken somewhere new or foreign can deepen a parent's understanding of the child's experience.

Ms. James writes with empathy and deep passion for what the child, and every member of the family, experiences before, during, and after the adoption process. The book is a must for those seeking knowledge and tools for creating strong, loving families.

---

#### **Table of Contents for Arleta James' *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption***

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Development of Realistic Expectations: Myth or Actuality?

Chapter 2: Pre-placement Preparation: The Child's Past is Important

Chapter 3: Taking Stock: Are We a Family for a Child?

Chapter 4: “Getting to Know Him:” Dads in Adoption

Chapter 5: Joining “Waiting” Families and “Waiting” Children: Matching is not an Exact Science

Chapter 6: Moving to the Adoptive Family: Through the Eyes of the Child

Chapter 7: When a Child Leaves the Family: Displacement, Disruption and Dissolution

Chapter 8: Post-placement: The Family Becomes Immobilized

Chapter 9: Mobilization: Becoming a “New and Different” Family—Part I

Chapter 10: Mobilization: Becoming a “New and Different” Family—Part II

**Chapter 11: “We're All Grown Up:” Turning 18 and Beyond**

Acknowledgments

Appendices



**For additional information, visit: <http://www.perspectivespress.com>**