November 2009

Tuscarawas County Job & Family Services Post-Adoption Link Newsletter

Happy Thanksgiving!

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HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Tune into the 11th Annual "A Home for the Holidays" special this December on CBS (online site—CBS Express states broadcast will be 12/23 at 8 p.m. EST). This program, presented by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Children's Action Network, features information about adopting from foster care, touching stories, and celebrity appearances. Over the years, the show has inspired thousands of viewers to open their hearts and homes to waiting children.

ONLINE RESOURCE

There is a new online resource for sharing between adoptive families

The ***Adoptive Families*** magazine is launching a new online community for adoptive families during November 2009, which is National Adoption Month.

At **adoptivefamilies.com/community**, you can create a profile and join groups to share your interest—everything from starting out, to waiting families, to country-specific groups, and more. There are forums for discussion and interaction with other members—the perfect place to ask a question, explore an issue, and find adoptive families in your area. There are fun features, blogs, and photo and video sharing—and the *Adoptive Families* magazine will be selecting photos from your online albums to print in magazine.

Vanishing Family Faces

By Rita Price

With a few clicks of his computer mouse, Ray Lees saw the face, read the story, and fell a little in love.

"He came home with us in June," said the Worthington resident and adoptive father of 14-month-old Kalis.

The Web site listing Ohio foster children in need of homes is gone now, their smiling faces replaced by a gray directory of county agencies. State officials had touted the site as efficient and effective, one of the best ways for parents and professionals to search for waiting children.

"It listed photos and stories," said Greg Kapcar of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. And it's one of the casualties."

Slashing of the state budget eliminated the Adopt Ohio program and took away $43 million for adoption services—about a 40 percent cut—over the next two years, Kapcar said. Money for recruiting and training parents is down, one-time assistance for adoption expenses has been cut in half, and the state has reduced its share of subsidies for families who adopt low-income or special-needs children through public systems. Kapcar said the 3,000 Ohio children waiting to be adopted will pay a price.

He and other advocates covered the Statehouse steps yesterday with hundreds of photo frames—many of them empty—to symbolize the children who wait for a place in a family picture. Christine Johnson told the crowd that she spent four years in foster care and was moved ten times before she and her two brothers were adopted. She's now 24, but the pain still isn't gone.

SHARI LEWIS | DISPATCH

Two-year-old Josiah Townsend, who is adopted, wanders amid hundreds of photo frames -- many of them empty -- set on the Statehouse steps to symbolize the 3,000 Ohio children who wait for a place in a family picture. The state cut $43 million for adoption services, about 40 percent of funding.

"I learned that you had to start over each time with each family to try to earn their love," she said.

Declining subsidies are likely to have a chilling effect on adoption, which costs taxpayers less than foster care, said Ron Browder, executive director of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. Many of the children who are adopted have expensive needs, while many of the families who take them in have incomes in the middle– to low-middle range, he said. "Why wasn't there some thought to finding ways to hold these families harmless?"

Monthly subsidies vary from less than $250 to more than $1,000 for a child with disabilities. The state has dropped its maximum contribution to $240 a month, down from $300. The rest of the amount comes from federal or local funds, and county child welfare agencies are struggling to make up the difference.

"Some counties are asking families to renegotiate their subsidies," Kapcar said.

State Senators John A. Carey, Jr., a Republican from Wellston, and Dale Miller, a Democrat from Cleveland, have sponsored a bill to restore about $8 million that was cut, advocates said.

Marynell Townsend, a mother of five from new Concord who adopted two children, said Ohio can't afford to go backward. Families who want to know about available children might turn to other states with better online resources, she said.

"We're a technological society. There are wonderful families in Ohio who are going to adopt. We want them to know about our children here."

Reprinted from Columbus Dispatch Saturday, November 7, 2009

30 WAYS TO CELEBRATE

National Adoption Awareness Month

NOVEMBER 2009

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 Start a tradition of taking a family photo each year on the same day, so you can see how everyone's changed. Share your shot with *AF* readers at adoptivefamilies.com/community.	**2** Ask your library to display adoption books to commemorate National Adoption Awareness Month. Find editors' picks for great titles at adoptivefamilies.com/books.	**3** Talk to your employer about offering an adoption assistance plan. Learn more at adoptionfriendlyworkplace.org and adoptivefamilies.com/topcompanies.	**4** Invite local adoptive families to your home for hot chocolate and cookies or a multicultural buffet. Announce the event in your community newspaper.	**5** Find out where your representatives at the state and national level stand on adoption issues. Write to them regarding your concerns.	**6** Ask your local television or radio station to feature a waiting child in your state. See adoptuskids.org for more information.	**7** Create a scrapbook with your child. Talk about significant events as you record them together. Get started with tips and tools at adoptivefamilies.com/scrapbooks.
8 Make an effort to help someone who is considering adoption. If you're a parent, tell them about the highs, the lows, the unforgettable moments. Tell them why you'd do it all over again!	**9** Find an adult adoptee or a person of color—a coach, a teacher, or a babysitter—who can serve as a mentor for your child. Arrange for them to get together monthly.	**10** Print the handout "8 Myths and Realities About Adoption" from adoptivefamilies.com/outreach. Distribute it in your community, school, and place of worship.	**11** Spend some time celebrating your child's heritage. For recipes, activities, and other ideas, visit adoptivefamilies.com/heritage.	**12** Help your place of worship organize a service to give thanks for children. Find an adoption liturgy at adoptivefamilies.com/rituals.	**13** Give an adoption talk at school. See "How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade" at adoptivefamilies.com/school.	**14** Pass along an adoption-related article to another adoptive parent or friend. While you're at it, buy your friend a subscription to *Adoptive Families* magazine.
15 Rent a DVD that portrays adoption in a positive light for your family to watch and discuss. Try *Hotel for Dogs*, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, or *The Tigger Movie*.	**16** Print "Accurate Adoption Language" from adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/stylebook.pdf, and send it to your local newspaper.	**17** Send a thank-you note to your child's teacher for allowing you to share adoption information. Send a copy to the principal.	**18** Develop a family ritual to show thanks for your family and the special way you've found one another. See adoptivefamilies.com/rituals for ideas.	**19** Find a family adoption event near you—or add your own—at adoptivefamilies.com/calendar.	**20** Become an adoption advocate. Learn how at adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/adoptionadvocate.pdf.	**21 NATIONAL ADOPTION DAY! Courts across the country will finalize thousands of adoptions today. See nationaladoptionday.org for more information.**
22 Join an adoptive parent support group. Find a group near you at adoptivefamilies.com/supportgroup.	**23** Let your child contribute a portion of his allowance to an orphanage or foster family.	**24** Organize a holiday toy drive for children waiting for permanent families. Involve your child's class, team, or Scout group.	**25** Send a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" letter to a media outlet or company, applauding or critiquing the way they address adoption. Send a copy to *AF*.	**26 THANKSGIVING!** Write a thank-you letter to the judge, social worker, or other professional who made your adoption happen.	**27** Together, light a candle in honor of your child's birthparents. Turn off the lights and hold hands as you watch the flame.	**28** Make holiday crafts that incorporate designs from your child's heritage.
29 Write an account of a local family that has done something noteworthy for adoption, and send it to your local newspaper.	**30** Make a donation in your child's or birthmother's name to an adoption-related charity or organization. See adoptivefamilies.com/givingback for a reader-nominated list.					

Download this calendar as a PDF from adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/2009calendar.pdf.

Holidazed No More

AGES 0-2

By Diana Schwab, M.Ed.
November/December 2008 *Adoptive Families*

Baby, it's cold outside, but you're having a meltdown from the seasonal stress and caring for a new child. Here's how to keep your cool.

You may have just received the best gift of all—a child—but that doesn't mean your spirits will be soaring. Holidays are a hectic time, especially for new parents not use to the demands of a baby. But with a little planning, you can make it to the new year, sanity in tact.

Holiday Sanity 101

All babies—especially those who were adopted—need a safe, stable home environment to develop trust, form healthy attachments, and adjust to the family.

But, during the holidays, our home lives (and routines) get tossed about as we try to fit shopping excursions, social events, baking marathons, and decorating sprees into our days. What's more, we're expected to love the holidays and be happy throughout the season, especially if we're new parents with longed-for-babies. Pressure can turn holiday pleasure into stress. How to cope?

1 **Prioritize your wish list**. Now that you have a baby to tend to, rethink your expectations for the weeks ahead. Make a list of what you'd most like to do during your first holidays with your child—have pictures taken with Santa, decorate a tree, buy gifts for each night of Chanukah, bake cookies, and so on. Stick to your list and don't try to squeeze in anything else. (If your child was adopted internationally, you might want to add a new tradition to honor his country of origin. If he was adopted domestically, you might add one to honor his birthparents.)

2 **Stick to your regular schedule.** If you're going to a holiday party, stop by when it fits your child's eating and sleeping schedules. And make sure your baby gets enough sleep. Overtired (and hungry) children get cranky. According to the National Sleep Foundation, infants ages three to eleven months need 14-15 hours of sleep a day, including naps; toddlers need 12-14 hours.

3 **Simplify, simplify, simplify—and then delegate.** If you don't have a lot of time for shopping, give friends and relatives a framed family photo, starring your new addition. When people offer to lend a hand, ask for help with baking, decorating, shopping, cleaning, or laundry. With their help, you can have some quiet time to bond with your baby—or take a nap!

Pass the Baby!

Family and friends can't wait to get their hands on your new bundle of joy. But before Aunt Edna starts pinching baby's cheeks, keep a few things in mind:

⇒ Be aware of "stranger anxiety." Babies go through this normal stage at around eight or nine months of age. Even if your child was adopted at birth, he may suddenly get shy around anyone who isn't Mom or Dad. (Don't worry, babies usually outgrow this phase by two years.)

⇒ Let friends and relatives meet the new baby while you hold her in your arms. Tell them that your baby needs some time to warm up to them and may not want to be hugged or picked up right away.

⇒ Even though the holidays will be busy, try to be the one who feeds, changes, and soothes your baby and puts him to sleep. Infants need to know that their parents will meet their needs in order to feel safe and securely attached.

Santa vs. Scrooge

AGES 3-5

By Joanne Solchany, Ph.D.
November/December 2008 *Adoptive Families*

If only it were easy to set limits for our preschoolers. But, giving into their tantrums won't help them in the long run.

"I don't like you!" "You're mean!" Or worse: "You're not my *real* mom!" Sure, we'd like to be confident parents who can ignore such outbursts, knowing that our preschooler's anger will pass. But, sometimes a parent—wounded by such remarks—may feel that the bond between her and her child has been threatened and will do anything to restore that bond.

Love Them, Don't Spoil Them

When our child is placed in our arms, we open our lives and hearts to him. Whether he came to us at birth or later, many of us believe that, if we keep on giving, we can make the painful parts of our child's past disappear and protect him from ever thinking about them. Sometimes, parents "give" by lavishing their child with things, such as stacks of holiday gifts. We are too lenient, too guilty, or scared to set limits—as if saying "no" will add to a child' s emotional pain. But our three- to five-year-olds need to know what's expected of them. Setting limits and gently enforcing rules make them secure.

Learning to Push Our Buttons

Preschoolers quickly learn to devise strategies to get what they want. Kids this age are learning about feelings—their own and others'—and they begin to understand emotions like pride and guilt.

One day, they're in a boastful "look-at-me" stage; the next, they're learning to manipulate and negotiate, using guilt to get what they want. They might tell a pal, "If you let me have your swing, I'll be your friend," or say to you, "If you loved me, you'd buy me this toy." Sometimes preschoolers combine words with actions. As you head out to an adults-only holiday party, they might plead, "Don't leave me," while crying and clinging to you.

Such behaviors are normal for preschoolers. Sometimes we can give in, but what we should remember is that normal behaviors need to be met with normal parental responses, which include saying "no" and setting limits. If your child fusses, acknowledge his anger, then proceed calmly with your plan. If you back off, your child will attempt the maneuver again.

It's our job to help our children become socially acceptable human beings. Have faith in the bond between you and your child, even if it's new. Build the connection with affection and reasonable limit setting. This entails saying "no" and sticking to it. It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it!

Greed-Free Holidays

Stacks of gifts and platefuls of cookies give preschoolers a case of the "gimmes" (as in, "Gimme more toys!"). Setting limits helps them feel safe. Here's how:

⇒ Teach desired behaviors during calm and quiet times. You can't expect kids to learn table manners at Thanksgiving dinner or proper bedtime rituals during a hectic Christmas Eve sleepover at Grandma's.

⇒ Set up predicable daily routines, and stick to them, even during the high-stress holiday season. consistency keeps everyone calm and organized when excitement runs high.

⇒ Don't buy peace or affection with overindulgence. If you always give into your child, you'll pay for it later.

⇒ Remember that our children will love us, even if we say no. giving into their whims makes them less secure. If they run the show, who will protect them?

Traditions, Take 2

AGES 6-8

By Marybeth Lambe, M.D.
November/December 2008 *Adoptive Families*

Start a new ritual this year with your family—your child is at the perfect age to help.

Our children, whether they come to us as infants or older, whether born in this country or another, often bring a different ethnicity, culture, or religious background to our families. Celebrating their diversity can create a powerful, inclusive, and unique holiday season. As children learn to appreciate their own cultures and those of other siblings, they gain pride.

Traditions are the glue that bonds a family, and rituals affirm a family's uniqueness. Children treasure these customs and need them, to know who they are, what they stand for, and their place in the world. Family traditions are particularly crucial as kids enter the grade-school years and begin to venture from the comfort and security of their home.

Create New Traditions

Holiday rituals strengthen the sense of belonging to their family and, at the same time, offer the family a connection to the larger community. This year, why not create some new traditions for your family?

- ✓ Start a tribute ceremony. Every Saturday in December encourage each family member to describe something kind that another member has done in the past week.
- ✓ Encourage your child to use some of his allowance to help a homeless family or to donate some of the clothes he's outgrown or gently used toys to a orphanage or a local foster home.
- ✓ As a family, plant a tree in someone's honor.
- ✓ With your child, bake a loaf of bread or a dessert that represents her birth culture. Together, give it to neighbors of a different culture.
- ✓ At Thanksgiving dinner, have family members each recite a part of George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation or read a story about the very first Thanksgiving dinner. Go around the table and have each family member name something for which they're thankful.
- ✓ Candles are used in the holiday celebrations of many cultures. Develop a family ritual of lighting candles to honor the way you became a family, your multi-culturalness, your child's birthparents, and so on.

Long after your child has forgotten what he received for Christmas or Chanukah, he'll recall the way the holidays were celebrated. By itself, each little custom may seem trivial, but the sum of them is the season's best gift.

Reading About Rituals **Now's a great time to share books about different cultures and religions with your child.**

- ➲ **Many Ways: How Families Practice Their Beliefs and Religions**, by Shelley Rotner and Sheila M. Kelly (Millbrook). Religions may have their differences, but they also have a lot in common.
- ➲ **What Makes Someone a Jew?**, by Lauren Seidman (Jewish Lights). This book features a wide range of diverse Jewish families.
- ➲ **Moonbeams, Dumplings & Dragon Boats**, by Nina Simonds and Leslie Swartz; illustrated by Meilo So (Gulliver). Recipes and crafts to help children learn about Chinese culture.
- ➲ **My First Kwanzaa**, by Karen Katz (Henry Holt). The author (an adoptive mom) provides a good general introduction to the holiday.

Talking Matters

By Lois Melina *The Adopted Child*
March/April 2006 *Adoptive Families*

If you look like your child, you may be spared inquisitive glances or nosy questions about adoption from strangers. But that doesn't mean you don't have to discuss the topic.

Fifty years ago, adoptive parents often kept up the pretense that their children had been born to them. Some adoptive moms even wore padded maternity clothes for months prior to the arrival of the baby.

Obviously, these families were not adopting 10-year-olds.

The adoption process of that time enabled this pretense. There was an "oversupply" of white babies and the practice was controlled by social workers. Thus, adopting parents could feel confident of both an arrival date and a child whose hair and skin tones would match their own. And for some parents, this deception continued even as their children grew.

Adoption talks won't necessarily be intimate chats over cocoa. More likely, the topic will come up while you're driving the car pool, watching TV, or grocery shopping.

Talking isn't optional

Today, there's a wealth of information on talking to children about adoption. Conflicting advice on how and when to begin, what to say, and how to say it, can leave parents confused as to what is right for them. And if parents look similar to their child, they may wonder how much of this advice applies to their families. Some parents rationalize by saying, "I forget to talk about it because I forget he was adopted" or "People never ask us about the adoption."

Adult adoptees who grew up with secrecy talk about feeling that something wasn't "right" about them, about feeling both betrayed and relieved when they learned the truth. Others interpreted their parents' reluctance to talk to mean that adoption was taboo. Meanwhile, their lack of questions were mistaken by their parents for healthy disinterest.

We cannot build healthy relationships with our children on secrecy and lies—and this includes lies of omission. Rather, we must help them discover who they are in an atmosphere of unconditional love. Consequently, it's important to know how children process information about themselves at different developmental stages, and to take natural opportunities to give them this information.

When to talk

When you are evaluating advice on talking about adoption, consider what's driving the advice and measure it against an honest appraisal of your own motives. For example, some people say, "Don't call the woman who gave birth to your child a 'birthmother.' It confuses a child to think she has two mothers." If you find yourself eager to accept this advice, consider whether, at some deep level, you fear that the attachment between a child and the woman who gave birth to her is stronger than it can be with an adoptive mother.

If you try to force opportunities to talk before you are ready, you might go too far to the other extreme: talking excessively. There's no numerical value to indicate that you've crossed this line; it's too much whenever it is inappropriate. For example, if your child selects a video that has an adoption storyline, that can be an opportunity to compare that story to your child's. However, if you rent several videos featuring adoption scenarios solely to "make" your child ask about adoption, think twice before screening them. Such overexposure can leave a child feeling that there is something wrong with being adopted or that adoption is the most important part of his identity.

Once you are comfortable with the topic, you will see natural, appropriate opportunities to talk. This doesn't necessarily mean intimate chats over cocoa. Instead, the topic will more likely come up while you're driving the car pool, watching TV, or grocery shopping. In such settings the "talk" will probably be brief and to the point. You can always return to it later.

As your child gains in understanding, you can add details to her story. You should think of adoption talk as an ongoing family conversation. One rule of thumb: If a comment, event, or TV show causes you to think about adoption, say so—your child may have had the same reaction.

Most likely, you'll probably find that you are talking about adoption a lot for a while, and then not much at all. That's not uncommon, and there's no monthly "quota" you have to met.

Starting the conversation

Keep these guidelines in mind as you prepare to talk to your child about adoption:

- ***Explore your own discomfort with any parts of the story***. Children are uncanny about sensing their parents' discomfort. If they detect your unease in discussing their adoption, they may conclude that something is wrong with them.

  People work through feelings in different ways—some by journaling, some through an adoption support group, and some with counseling. Just remember that discomfort needs to be addressed so that discussions aren't awkward or avoided.
- ***Decide what you will tell and how you will begin***. With young children, start with the "bare bones" that will allow you to add age-appropriate details without having to contradict anything you said before. If you know the child's birthparents were unmarried, for example, don't imply that they were. Or, if you know your child was conceived by rape, don't tell him that his parents loved each other very much.

  For a very young child, you may just introduce the idea that he was born to a birthmother and a birthfather, without indicating anything about their relationship. The reason they chose adoption can also be simply stated: "They couldn't take care of any child born to them at that time in their lives."
- ***Don't let yourself delay***. No matter how much you prepare, no matter the setting for the talk, you can expect your child to feel some confusion, anger, or sadness. If you are waiting for the magic words or the perfect time that will deflect these honest, human responses, you're going to have a long wait. Instead of waiting, seize the natural opportunities to talk with your child about who she is.

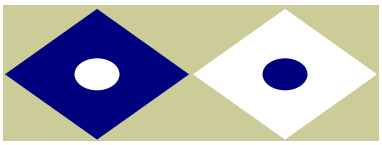
Revisiting the topic

There will be times when we stumble. If someone in the park asks you where your child got her beautiful red hair, and you blurt out, "She's adopted," find a time later to revisit the exchange with your child. Explain that, when children are born into their families, they often have the same hair color as their parents. Continue by asking your child if she ever wonders what her birthparents look like. If you have any photos of her birthparents, show them to her.

You might also tell your child that the person at the park was probably only remarking on how beautiful her hair is. 'Next time, I'll just say that I think your hair is lovely, too. Then, you can decide if you want to tell her that you were adopted."

Sometimes, you may think your response was appropriate, but your child will have an emotional reaction. She might become rambunctious or irritable. It is natural to think you've handled the topic incorrectly if your child becomes sad or angry. But sadness and anger are authentic responses. The best approach may be simply to provide comfort in whatever way seems right for as long as it takes. Think about the kind of support that *you* need when you've received unsettling information.

Above all, remember that what matters most is not the smoothness with which we talk about adoption, but the sincerity; not the words, but the heartfelt commitment to help our children to know and love themselves.



Putting the story on paper

Writing and illustrating your child's adoption story in book form is a good way to begin. In the process, you'll get more comfortable with the storyline, and you'll consider different ways to relate difficult information. If you're anxious about your drawing ability, use photos, scap-booking aids, or an online photo-book service. You may even enlist the help of an artistic friend. Don't worry too much about the finished product—your child will be thrilled to have a book in which he is the main character.

START TALKING

Not sure when—or how—to bring up adoption with your toddler or preschooler? Here's where to begin.

By Lee Tobin McClain, Ph.D. March/April 2006 *Adoptive Families*

HE SAID . . .

Our son, Cody, started asking questions about babies and adoption last year, when he was three. We told him he didn't grow in Mommy's tummy, but grew in our hearts. Our son nonchalantly said, "Yeah, I didn't come out your belly, **I came out your chest**." It was so cute we couldn't stop laughing.

You've attended workshops, read all of the expert advice, rehearsed the story, and you plan to tell your young child about his adoption . . . any day now.

Except that your mother questions the need to talk about the subject ("He's too young to understand"). And your best friend suggests waiting until your son brings it up ("so you don't put ideas in his head"). And you find yourself stuttering when you try to say "birthmother" or "you didn't grow in my tummy."

The first couple of times my daughter asked about adoption, I felt tongue-tied by a flood of emotion: sadness for her birthmother, discomfort about my infertility, fear that I would say the wrong thing to her and damage her tiny psyche.

Even though adoption has moved toward openness, telling young children about it can be hard. Yet all the experts agree: We have to do it. And the younger we start, the better.

Why Should You Talk About It?

Babies don't stay babies forever—and it doesn't take long for children to reach the age when they start to wonder where babies come from and whether they were "in your tummy." At about three, your child begins to comprehend pregnancy and birth and will ask you about his birth story. But you can start the conversations even earlier.

"The best experiences are when children say, 'I just always knew I was adopted,'" says Ronny Diamond, director of the Adoption Consultation Team at Spence-Chapin in New York, City. She compares adoption to gender: There's no one time to inform your child that she is a girl. Most children can't remember a time they did not know their gender.

But even if your child understands the basics of his story, he'll probably misunderstand a few parts of it. By talking about adoption early and often, you'll also be able to get misconceptions out into the open, so you can clear them up.

Young children think the whole world revolves around them and that they magically cause the events in their lives, so some may believe they brought about their own adoption. A child may think that her birthmother didn't "keep" her because she was flawed in some way. Another common misconception of young adopted children is that they weren't born like others, but that they somehow sprang to life in an airplane or an orphanage.

Kids also tend to think everyone else is like them. When I drove my daughter through my hometown, telling her I was born there, she asked if my birthmother still lived there. Until that moment, I 'd never realized that she thought everyone was adopted.

It's good to foster positive attitudes about adoption while your child still thinks you know everything. "Children will spend their lives hearing from the rest of the world that adoption is somehow second rate; it is very important that parents instill a more positive view of adoption in their young children, before they start to encounter those negative views," says Sarah Springer, M.D., chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Section on Adoption and Foster Care and an adoptive mother of two.

Sometimes negative societal views even impose themselves on us as adoptive parents. Research conducted by Mary Watkins and

SHE SAID . . .

Grace asked, "What is 'adopted'?" Then, before I could say anything, she said, "**It's when your parents love you very much!"**

HE SAID . . .

Last year I attended a baby shower with my three-year-old son, Logan. He said (pointing at the mommy-to-be): "She has a baby in her tummy." I said, "Yes, she does." He said, "But I was never in your tummy, was I?" I said, "No, sweetie, you weren't" (preparing myself for an in-depth conversation about biology). He said, "**That's cause you didn't eat me!"**

Susan Fisher for their useful book, *Talking with Young Children About Adoption*, suggests that many parents feel sadness, dread, and anxiety when they think about discussing adoption with their children.

I'll admit that I'm one of those parents. The first time I said "your birthmother" to my daughter, the words stuck in my throat. Luckily, she was two, and too young to notice, but the experience made me aware that I needed lots of practice. Out came the books, and I read *I love You Like Crazy Cakes* until I could get through the last page without choking up.

"Early discussions about adoption are as much for the parent as they are for the child," says Jayne Schooler, coauthor of *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*. "By talking about it early and often, parents will grow in their comfort level of sharing more details with the child."

The good news is that most parents who talk openly—even if they have to force it at first—will become much more comfortable and matter-of-fact about the realities of adoption. "Starting to talk about it early is probably the best thing," says reader Christina Katos. "When the time comes for questions, you aren't as nervous. It seems as normal as talking about what's for dinner."

If you can't recall the last time you talked about adoption, you're due to another talk.

How Do I Start?

Okay, so you've decided to start talking. But your child is as interested in hearing about adoption as in reading *Crime and Punishment*. She'd rather play. What do you do? Some smart parents incorporate play into their adoption talk. Reader Stephanie Nasso, of Buffalo, New York, tells her young daughter's adoption story in short sentences, with airplane sound effects, and ends with, "Who is our baby girl?" That's Lily's cue to shout, "Me," and run to hug her parents.

Books are another easy way to bring up adoption. Most libraries have picture books about adoption, but it's a good idea to own a few, so that they're available when the time is right. Springer advises mixing adoption books in with the child's other favorites, rather than keeping them on some special, out-of-reach shelf. That way, the child can choose when she wants to hear an adoption story.

And you can make your own book. I typed out a simple version of my daughter's adoption story, illustrated it with a few snapshots from the adoption journey, and bound it in a plastic folder. It's on her bookshelf, beside *My Princess Treasury and Squids Will Be Squids*, and every month or two she pulls it out for us to read.

"Even the books the child doesn't fully understand can help create the warm, ongoing message that adoption is a wonderful way to come into a family," says Schooler. "Books make a great foundation for storytelling as parents move from the stories to the child's own special and unique history."

And then there's real life, full of pregnant neighbors and breastfeeding mothers and extended families that share, or don't share, genetic traits. When you hear, "Mommy, why is that lady's belly so big?," it's time to talk about women's special place where babies grow. You can talk about a cousin's inherited talents or features to discuss the birth-family origins or your adopted child's traits.

My daughter's preschool class became fascinated with nursing after several of the kids got younger siblings. This led to a bathtime

conversation about "is there milk in my chest? In yours?" I could have stopped with "No," but I'm learning my lesson about openness. We had a nice little chat about birthmothers before moving on to washing Barbie's hair.

What Exactly Do I Say?

Preschoolers need the bare-bones story, according to Diamond—the story any adoptive parent would give any adopted child. Even if you have much more information, start with the universal beginning: birth.

Example: You were inside your birthmom's womb, waiting to be born, and she was worried because she couldn't take care of any baby. So she took you to a place where people could take care of you. At the same time, we wished and hoped for a baby. When we heard about you, we knew you were our forever baby. We were so excited to meet you!

Other lines I've found useful:

- **Some families are formed by birth, and some are formed by adoption**. This helps your child learn that there are many different ways to create a family, and they're all equally wonderful.
- **Your birthmother couldn't take care of any baby**. This statement stresses that your child did nothing "wrong" that led to her adoption.
- **We will be your forever family, even when you're a grownup**. Kids sometimes worry that you could decide to place them for adoption, too. Make sure you let your child know that adoption is for keeps, and that you'll be there for her for the rest of your life.
- **I wish you'd grown inside my tummy, too, but that's not what happened**. This last line responds to the common reactions a child begins to understand adoption: "I wish I'd grown in your tummy." He's too young to understand genetics, to realize he wouldn't have been the same person if he'd grown in your womb. But the desire for closeness is one you can meet with empathy. And with the reassurance all children need: "I love you just as much as if you'd grown in my tummy."

You may want to think about which phrase you'll use to describe your child's birthmother. There are many different terms: birthmother, first mother, tummy mommy, China/Korea/Russia/Guatemala mommy, or even "the woman who gave birth to you." "If you have an open adoption, and the child has seen photos or had visits with the birthmother, you'll probably refer to her by name.

Some parents agonize over whether to include the fact that the birthmother has other children she is raising. For a preschooler, you don't need to . . . unless you are the type who will worry about this fact until it's out in the open. If so, put a photo of the birthmom with her other children in your child's lifebook, and explain it simply: "Here's Rhonda with her son, Jeremy. Jeremy was two when you were born, and she knew she couldn't take care of a second baby, so she chose us to take care of you."

Some details can wait until the child is seven or eight years old, when her questions will let you know that she can understand reproduction, telling them about unplanned pregnancy, rape, or even birthfathers won't make much sense. For now, "general and happy" is better.

Springer uses the analogy of airplanes: Children love them, but they go from pointing them out in the sky as toddlers, to realizing that the giant plane at the airport is the

HE SAID . . .

My friend (an adoptive mom) was explaining to her six-year-old that lots of birthmoms parent their babies. She mentioned me as an example by saying, "Lauren's mom is also her birthmom" He responded, "Oh, gross!"

SHE SAID . . .

Quite loudly at the supermarket, my daughter exclaimed, "**Mommy, I told you I want a baby sister from China,** not a baby brother from Russia." (As though I'd put Fruit Loops in the shopping cart instead of Honey Nut Cheerios.) Quite a local assumption, given her frame of reference.

HE SAID . . .

My son, Lucas, has pictures of his birthmother, Rhiana. A few months ago he said to me, "I was in Rhiana's tummy, right?" I said yes. Then he asked, **"How did I get in there?"** After my fumbling answer, he asked the $64,000 question: *"Where was I before I was in Rhiana's tummy?"* That one had me stumped!

SHE SAID . . .

I recently overhead my daughter being asked where she was from as we waited in line. She looked up at the stranger and brightly responded, **"From an airplane!"**

same vehicle when they're school-aged, to learning the physics of flight in high school or college.

"Since children won't *really* understand airplanes until high school, does that mean we shouldn't talk about airplanes until then?" she asks. "Of course not! Talking about adoption is the same way: Start with what they can understand, and let the details unfold over years, as the child's development unfolds."

What about the sweet line parents use: "You didn't come from my tummy, you came from my heart"? "Too abstract for preschoolers," says adoption counselor and author Holly van Gulden. "The same loving thought can be said differently: We did not conceive and give birth to you. We searched for you, and when we met you, we grew to love you."

Springer agrees. "Preschoolers are very literal, and they can easily misinterpret the 'you came from my heart' idea," which can evoke bizarre images of birth. She adds: "It's also important for kids to know that they started out in life the same way everyone else did."

A better way? "You grew in your birthmother's tummy, like all babies grow in a woman's tummy. But she wasn't able to be a mom then, so she looked for someone else to be your parents, and that's how we found each other. I'm so happy that we did!"

How Often?

If your preschooler doesn't bring up adoption, you should. He may not have the words to phrase a question, or he may sense that the topic makes you uneasy. According to one expert, if you can't remember the last time you talked about adoption, you're due for a talk.

That doesn't mean sitting down for an Official Discussion. In fact, Watkins and Fisher found that the best times for adoption talks were during informal transition times: car rides, chores, and bath times. During such periods, the relaxed togetherness lets the child's mind roam to whatever is important to him, and adoption will sometimes top the list.

Putting Ideas into Her Head?

What about the worry that you're putting ideas into her head or that you are somehow overemphasizing adoption?

"Adoption is an emotionally-loaded topic for parents, but it's really not, yet, for toddlers and preschoolers," says Springer. "Children can and do switch the subject from adoption to the big yellow truck driving by in an instant." If they know they can have questions answered anytime, they will tell you when they're not interested in talking.

Diamond reminds us that adoption isn't something you're putting into her head; it's a fact about her life. So talking about it as easily as you talk about Grandma, or grocery stores, or her favorite television show makes sense.

Of course, openness can make for some interesting encounters. Ready Tracy Watson discusses adoption frequently with her four-year-old son, Quinton, who recently learned about birth and "where babies come from." Quinton has taken to stopping women at Walmart to ask whether their young babies were "dopted or pushed out."

His mother's good-humored acceptance of this conversational gambit makes the most important point of all. "I don't ever want him to be afraid to talk about birth or adoption openly," she says. "There's nothing about either one to be ashamed about."

For additional information and articles, visit the Adoptive Families website:

www.adoptivefamilies.com

Lifebook Lessons

November/December 2007
Adoptive Families

Your child's story begins before you met. It may contain a large cast of characters, perhaps a touch of mystery, and more drama in a month than many people experience in years. And it's up to you to record this story before the details begin to fade. Need more incentive? Writing a lifebook will help you find the right language to talk about adoption and birth families as your child grows and will jumpstart many a conversation. Our panel of lifebook experts answer the most frequently-asked questions, offering advice on the topics every lifebook should address, how to deal with difficult information, and how to get started on this important project. Read on, and write on!

Meet the Experts

- **Jennifer Demar** is the founder of scrapandtell.com, a scrapbooking and lifebook resource for adoptive families.
- **Joni Mantell** is director of the Infertility and Adoption Counseling Center and a psychotherapist specializing in adoption.
- **Beth O'Malley**, an adoptee, adoptive mom, and adoptive social worker, is the author of *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child* (adoptionlifebooks.com)
- **Roberta Rosenberg** is a mom to three, through birth and adoption, and owner of adoptshoppe.com, a gift/bookshop featuring lifebooks and adoption baby books.
- **Jayne Schooler** is coauthor of Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past (Bergin & Garvey).

❶ Should parents who adopt newborns create lifebooks? What are the key topics?

Beth O'Malley: There is always a role for a lifebook, and the key topics are generally the same: growing inside another lady's tummy; growing in a special place called a uterus; being born; birthmother; birthfather; birth siblings; and reason for the adoption.

Domestic adopters should realize that birth-family contact levels can change. If you have met your child's birthparents, you may not see the need for a lifebook, but imagine that, years from now, your letters to them are returned with no forwarding address. You'll wish you'd asked every question and preserved every bit of information. If you have an ongoing relationship, ask the birthmother to create some pages.

If you have photos of the birth family, I suggest sharing them from day one. Speaking as an adoptee, I know that never seeing anyone genetically related to you can make you feel lonely at times. Having even one photo makes a big difference.

Joni Mantell: A key topic for any lifebook is to acknowledge that, like all children, your child was born. Too often, adoption stories begin when the parents and child met, which results in some adopted children believing that they came from a plane or an adoption agency. Whether or not you have specific information about your child's birth, it's important to acknowledge that his birth happened.

❷ Adoptive parents wonder how to begin a lifebook if they know little about their child's birth family, about his first months, or even the exact date or location of his birth. How can they get started?

Beth: I always tell families that they know more than they think they do. Begin with the few facts you have and with universal truths. We all begin with being born. Before that, a baby grows inside his first mother's uterus.

Not knowing a child's exact birth date will make that part of a child's story unique, but you can "normalize" it by incorporating it from the beginning. "Then Mr. Chang, the orphanage director, gave all the

babies their birthdays (or names) when they weren't known for sure."

Jennifer Demar: When little is known about a child's birth family, talk about genetics, and how children inherit certain physical and character traits from their biological family. Try using reflective cardstock paper on a lifebook's birth-parent page. Ask the child to imagine adults who look similar to him.

Also, it is perfectly acceptable to write, "I don't know . . . when you are missing some crucial data. I don't know exactly where you were born, but I do know you lived in Guatemala City from the time you were one month old until we adopted you at eight months. Perhaps your birthplace is close to Guatemala City."

❸ Should parents incorporate their child's birth family and heritage? How? Is it different when they know the birth family?

Jayne Schooler: Incorporating as much information as possible about your child's birth family achieves a number of important things. First, it sends the message that you recognize and honor your child's birth family. It says, we validate who you are by embracing those who gave you life. Second, it captures critical information that, over time, might otherwise be lost or forgotten. Third, it creates a sense of connectedness and continuity for a child.

Beth: It's important to acknowledge your child's birth heritage, whether the adoption was domestic or international. Parents of the same race as their child may forget to talk about heritage, but the subject is critical to a child's development of self and identify. In international adoptions, conditions in the birth country may be part of the reason the child was "available" for adoption.

Joni: It's also important for parents to acknowledge and respect a child's culture, to support these aspects of the child's identify. But be careful that focus on heritage doesn't become a way of overcompensating for or avoiding other adoption topics. Children are not born to a culture, they are born to parents. That is what their adoption story is really about, and that is what should be addressed in their lifebooks.

❹ How should parents address the extreme poverty that forms the backdrop for many children's adoptions?

Beth: First, I'd try to help a child understand that poverty takes different forms in different countries. Being "poor" in Vietnam may mean that there isn't enough food to feed even one more child. But you don't want your child worrying that his birth family is going hungry, so it might make sense to say something like, "We believe that your first family had just enough food and clothes for themselves, but not enough for even one more person.

Jennifer: Here's how I treated the poverty issue in my daughter's lifebook: I made a grid and labeled four squares "food," "clothes," "education," and "toys." I explained that children need all of these things to learn and grow. When her birth family realized that they could not provide these things, they made an adoption plan. This made it easy for her to understand.

❺ Many parents keep paper memorabilia from their child's early life. Should this material be incorporated? Or should a lifebook be straight narrative?

Jennifer: Generally, I recommend keeping adoption documents and paper-based memorabilia in a safe place, separate from the lifebook. Straight narrative flows better, but the use of a document that adds to your child's story can be a great visual effect. For example:

- ☞ A birth certificate on the page about your child's birth
- ☞ A foster mother's or orphanage director's notes about your child's likes and dislikes or his daily routine
- ☞ An adoption decree to substantiate the legality and permanence of your union

- ☞ Doctors' notes or linked footprints to reinforce that your child was once "that small."

Roberta Rosenberg: I believe that children will want every document, every form, every scrap of paper about themselves. Use any mementos (or copies) that will help ground the story of your child's life before joining your family in a concrete timeline.

❻ When and how often should a parent read a child's lifebook to her? Where should it be kept?

Roberta: There are no age guidelines. Read it as often as your child wants or needs to hear it. My children, 10 and almost 9 years of age, still ask me to read their stories to them. We keep their lifebooks on their bedroom shelves.

Beth: My daughter's lifebook lived on our coffee table at first. As playdates and babysitters arrived, later in her life, it moved upstairs into our bedroom. Lifebooks aren't secret, but they should be kept private, for your child to look at and share as he feels comfortable in doing.

❼ Do you recommend writing your child's story from his perspective? From yours?

Beth: Unless the child is older and is actually writing his own lifebook text, I'd stay away from "I" as the voice. It feels as though I'm putting words in his mouth. I write as though I am speaking to the child: "You were born on a bright day in January . . ."

Joni: I don't think it's possible to speak from the child's perspective. A child and parent may read different things into the same photo, and a parent's interpretation can be at odds with the child's. For example, a parent might caption a photo, "We were all so happy on the day we met," while the child might observe or remember, "I was terrified in that picture." Your own perspective, at least, is something you can gauge. It is your understanding of the story.

Roberta: Sometimes, writing in the first person is a good way to keep the story on track and to make sure it focuses on the child's story and not on the parents' own narrative. Start with the idea, "Tell Me About Me," and take it from there.

❽ How should negative information be addressed—in the pages of the lifebook and in reading it to a child? Is it OK to fill in more details as he grows?

Jayne: While it's never OK to lie, omitting some details until the child is developmentally ready is appropriate. Adoption experts suggest that a youngster should know his complete history by the time he is 12 years old. By this age, extended family members often know the child's history. A family who thinks withholding information is protecting a child's heart is only leaving his heart vulnerable to accidental disclosure.

Beth: Explanation must always be truthful and appropriate to the child's age and memory of events. Before explaining something like abuse or addiction, my first question is, ""What does the child remember?" Trauma can act as a natural eraser of memory, or it can magnify and intensify memories.

For younger children, use simple explanations, such as, "Your birthmother wasn't able to take care of herself. How could she take care a little baby?" or "She was having grown-up problems and couldn't take care of any baby at that time." You can never go wrong by adding, "Babies can't cause grown-up problems." Your child shouldn't feel responsible for her birthparents' problems.

Never tell a child that his birthmother was "sick" unless she had a physical illness. Kids hear "sick" and start worrying about all sorts of questions (that don't always get expressed), such as *Will I have to leave my mom if she gets sick?*

Jennifer: Try the "hidden journaling" technique. Document the difficult details from the beginning but hide them away (between pages, tucked in an envelope

or pocket, hidden behind a flap), until the child is ready to process them.

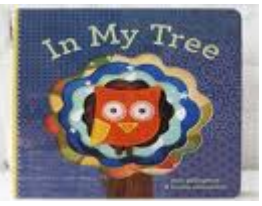
It's important to point out that the birthparents' difficult circumstances resulted in your child's relinquishment. Reinforce the fact that *nothing* was your child's fault and that she should not feel responsible.

❾ The page that explains the relinquishment or abandonment is often the hardest for parents to write. Can you suggest ways to explain it?

Jennifer: Parents might write something like, "There are times in our lives when we are faced with difficult decisions. We can't truly know what is best for us or for others, so we only hope that we make the right choices. I imagine that the decision to allow another family to raise you was very difficult to make, and that your birthmother was very sad because she couldn't raise you herself. At that time, she must have felt that she had no other options and wanted you to have more than she could provide."

Beth: If you don't know all the details, say, "From what I know" or "It seems," But don't pretend to have or know information, feelings, or intentions you don't.

Perhaps the best way to explain abandonment is to tell only the facts you know for sure. Use words that are objective and nonjudgmental. "Four days after you were born, your birthmother left you in the busy marketplace. We think she chose that spot because she knew you would be found immediately and would be well-cared for."



CREATING A LIFEBOOK

Sit down with your journal, piles of papers, and photos to get yourself in the mood to do some writing," advises Beth O'Malley. "Start with a page based solely on a funny picture. Write a stream-of-consciousness account of the day you first met your son or daughter. It's all about getting past that stuck point." Once you've gained some momentum with the project:

- ✓ Buy a three-ring binder, with plastic page inserts, so you can add to the lifebook and rearrange pages as your child grows.
- ✓ Involve your child in creating the lifebook. A two– or three-year-old child can choose photos and page decorations. An older child can narrate parts of her story.
- ✓ Duplicate everything of value—certificates, newspaper clippings, and letters—that you put in the lifebook. Store document originals and photo negatives separately.
- ✓ Keep the text short and provide a visual focus, such as a photo, a drawing, or a document, on each page.
- ✓ Color-copy the pages of the completed lifebook and place the copies in the binder. Store the original pages in a safe place.
- ✓ You can end the lifebook at your child's adoption or keep adding to it as he grows.

Adopted Child

May/June 2005
Adoptive Families

A Family Affair

By Lois Melina

Lois Melina is an internationally-recognized authority on adoptive parenting and the author of *Raising Adopted Children, Making Sense of Adoption*, and other classic adoption books.

As more of us live with open adoption, we're seeing how it plays out in daily life—and bumping into some unanticipated wrinkles.

With no firm rules of etiquette or real-life examples to follow, families in open adoptions wonder how to share troubling information, set boundaries, and deal with birth relatives who may have very different life experiences and values. If this sounds like your situation, it may help to reframe the relationship. Instead of thinking of your open adoption as a new, untested kind of adoption, think of it as just another family dynamic. In our book, *The Open Adoption Experience*, Sharon Kaplan Roszia and I suggest that families use their relations with in-laws as a model.

If you're chuckling, you're on the right track. *Everybody Loves Raymond* is such a popular TV show because most of us can relate to a family trying to get along with each other despite their flaws, different values, and occasional offenses. While some people have close, warm relationships with their in-laws, for many others, in-laws are the people we have to get along with because we are connected through the one person we all love. Likewise, in an open adoption, an adoptive and a birth family form a relationship because they all love the same child.

Questions Received From Readers in Open Adoptions:

- How can we tell our son's birthmother that my husband and I are getting a divorce? We never expected this to happen 18 months ago when we adopted.
- How do we tell our daughter that she has birth siblings, who live with her birthmother?
- I was just diagnosed with cancer and don't know how to tell the birthmother. How should we share this information?
- We're happy with our present level of openness, but our son's birth-grandparents want to become even more involved with his life. What should we do?
- We're unsure of how to introduce ourselves and our daughter at her birthmom's wedding. What do you suggest?

Vision and Boundaries

Chances are, birth and adoptive families will have differing ideas of how they see the relationship developing. In an ideal situation, the two families meet early in the relationship to reconcile the two visions. Generally, the more restrictive vision (e.g., monthly letters and photos) becomes the starting point for the relationship, which may evolve into the more expansive one (e.g., Sunday dinners together). But it's never too late to have that conversation. You can say, "Now that we've been at this awhile, we have a clearer idea about how we see our relationship developing. We thought it would be a good idea to talk, so that we can be on the same page."

This is also a good time to share (or reinforce) your values and to state any non-negotiable rules. Differing values shouldn't keep you from respecting each other's rules. For example, Pam and Todd, an adoptive couple, value nonviolence. For them, this includes an objection to hunting or any recreational gun use. Their son's birthparents, Ben and Michelle, also value

nonviolence in settling disputes, but they don't think of hunting as conflicting with that value. Pam and Todd recognize that the families share the same underlying value, even though they interpret it differently. Ben and Michelle respect the adoptive family's rules: They don't' give their birthson toy guns, and they lock up the guns in their homes when he visits.

If you believe your rules are not being respected, let generosity come into play. Rather than cut off the relationship, try to find a way to stay connected. This may mean allowing visits only in public places or scaling communication back to letters and phone calls for awhile. In making a decision like this, you must weight the relationship against your responsibility to your child. The best solution may involve pushing your own comfort zone while maintaining boundaries around your family's value.

Difficult Information

An adoption is often based on the fact that the birth family could not raise a child at the time, whereas the adoptive parents had the economic and marital stability to do so. In preparing to share problematic information (e.g., a divorce, an illness, the loss of a job), indicating that their situation is no longer as "stable" as it was at the time of their child's placement, it's quite common for adoptive parents to fear, however irrationally, that the adoption itself is threatened.

In an open adoption, it is essential that everyone understand that the adoption is *not* conditional. The fact that the birth family is accessible does not mean that the adoptive parents are "caretaking" until the birth family's situation stabilizes. Adoptive parents are not perfect and needn't pretend to be to justify their ongoing parenting role.

In sharing information, the same guidelines apply. Push your comfort zone while maintaining boundaries. Be honest without oversharing. As long as the child is not in danger, everyone should understand that no child's life is free from stress, changing circumstances, and family crises. The birth family can provide support, as extended family should do, without being critical.

Some adoptive parents find that, despite their reluctance to tell the birth family about their pending divorce or a financial crisis, the situation brings them closer. The birth family often understands all too well that crises happen and that, when they do, unconditional love is needed.

Adoptive parents are not perfect, and needn't pretend to be to justify their ongoing parenting role.

Sharing With Outsiders

Adoptive parents and birthparents often wonder how to describe their relationship to those outside their families. Perhaps the birthfather will come to a school function or the adoptive family will be attending the birthmother's wedding. Or someone at the park may ask the birthmother, "And how do you know the Andersons?"

Some situations can be anticipated. For these, the families should develop a plan that they are all comfortable with. When in doubt, however, "close friend of the family" accurately reflects the quality of the relationship while not revealing too much private information.

Sharing Within the Family

Generally, adoptees should grow up knowing their relationship to the birth family. Until he is old enough to understand reproduction, a child may not completely understand his relationships with members of the birth family or the difference between the siblings he lives with and the siblings to whom he is biologically related. Nonetheless, he can understand the significance of the relationships from an early age. By the time he understands the terminology that defines them, he will already be comfortable with the relationships.

Within a birth family, grandparents are frequently the relatives most involved with the adoptee. Even if birthparents are not ready to parent, grandparents often welcome their roles. The quality of relationships may vary, but, in general, an abundance of grandparents in a child's life is not a source of confusion. Rather, it is one of the real blessings of open adoption.

As a guiding principle, remember that *all* relationships are enriched when everyone involved is willing to be generous, give the benefit of the doubt, and forgive, when necessary, for the sake of what is valuable to them all.

OPEN ADOPTION

By Kathleen Silber,
associate executive director of the Independent Adoption Center in Pleasant Hill, California, and coauthor of *Dear Birthmother* and *Children of Open Adoption* (Corona)

"We always think about our eight-year-old son's **birth family at this time of the year.** What should we share in a holiday letter?"

From Thanksgiving to the end of the year, everyone's focus is on family. Even TV commercials show happy families celebrating the holidays together. As a result, this season can be painful for birthparents, especially if their contact with their children is minimal. And parents in open adoptions deliberate over what and how much to share with them. Will detailed information be painful—or reassuring—to the birthmother?

What you should keep in mind is that your son's birthmother is a relative. You don't have to love her, and she doesn't have to be your best friend (as with some of your other relatives!)—but you should think of her as an extended family member. This is what open adoption is about. Knowing that he's happy will help your son's birthmother continue to feel good about the difficult decision she made eight years ago. And the holiday season is an especially important time to let her know you are thinking about her.

What to Share

How can you let your son's birthmother know she's in your thoughts? The type of contact will depend on the relationship you have maintained over the years. If you have been in regular contact, whether by mail, phone, or visits with the family, your son's birthmother will expect a detailed update or a get-together. If your contact has been more limited, I'm sure she'll appreciate a letter and a photo.

Your son's birthmother will enjoy hearing the details about his life—who he is at eight years old—his personality, his interests, his accomplishments. Parents might worry that details would be painful or would make the birthmother regret that she placed her child for adoption. The reality is that the adoption plan was made out of love. She chose not to parent him, but she will always love him. So go ahead and tell her about the wonderful things your child does—that your son won the spelling bee at his school last year, for example, or that he's learning to play the guitar.

You might ask your son what he'd like to share in a holiday letter to his birthmother. At his age, many children write their own letters to be enclosed in the holiday cards sent to the birth family. Or your son may want to draw a picture to send with your letter. By including him in this project, you gain an opportunity to talk with him again about his adoption story. You can remind him of the permanence of your family, as well as the love of his birthmother. A 10-year-old I know, David, doesn't visit with his birthmother, but he enjoys writing his own letter to her at holiday time. This year he talked about his accomplishments on the soccer field, and he asked her what her favorite sport is.

Many families also exchange gifts with their children's birthparents at holiday time—as they do with other family members. If you have a close relationship with the birth family, consider a gift exchange. To children your son's age, a gift from a birthparent is concrete evidence of her love; it attests to the fact that she thinks of him often. Katie, an 8-year-old child I know, loves the teddy bear her birthmother gave her last Christmas. The bear sits on Katie's bookshelf, and she tells visitors that it is from her birthmother, Susie. If you wanted to send a gift to your son's birthmother, she'd surely cherish a framed photograph of him.

Whatever level of communication you have with your son's birthmother, the holidays provide a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child about family and about all the people in his life who love him.

ONLINE: Find more resources about open adoption at **adoptivefamilies.com/experts**

November/December 2007 *Adoptive Families*

OPEN ADOPTION

"We lost touch with our son's birthmother two years after his adoption. He's seven and asking lots of questions about her—should we try to contact her?"

By Kathleen Silber,
associate executive director of the Independent Adoption Center in Pleasant Hill, California, and coauthor of *Dear Birthmother* and *Children of Open Adoption* (Corona)

People often assume that the most common problem families face in open adoptions is an intrusive birthparent. In fact, the opposite is true. The concern voiced most frequently by parents is that they don't hear from the birthmother as often as they would like, or that they have lost contact with her.

Your losing touch with your son's birthmother is not unusual nor is it unusual for your son to ask new questions about her. He's at the age when children really start to understand adoption, so questions are to be expected.

One child I know, Carrie, had photographs of her birthmother, but the families hadn't been in touch since she was a baby. When she was 10, Carrie began asking her mom about meeting her birthmother. Carrie's mom attempted to contact her when she realized how important this was to her daughter.

Your son's birthmother remembers him as a baby. I'm sure she'll be pleased to hear about the boy he is today!

Getting back in touch

A letter is probably the best way to reestablish contact. If you don't know the birthmother's current address, see if you have contact information for any of her relatives. Perhaps you met her parents at the time of the adoption. Although it's possible the birthmother has moved, chances are that her parents have not.

If that doesn't work, enlist the help of your adoption agency or professional. My agency frequently gets such a request, and we've helped many birth and adoptive families reconnect.

In a letter, list some of your son's questions and encourage her to write back to you and him. Since you haven't been in touch since your son was a toddler, he does not have a relationship with her, so I recommend starting slowly. He can write about his interests, and ask about hers. When a six-year-old I know, Jason, wrote to his birthmother, he described his pets and asked if she had any.

You may eventually decide to meet in person, but I recommend building a relationship through letters, e-mails, and/or phone calls before taking that step. You might decide to continue contact through letters and wait to meet when your son is older.

Helping your child understand

Parents may wonder how the birthmother will react to contact after several years without communication. They may even fear that she may not want to have a relationship with your child. If you're concerned, have your agency or another intermediary make the initial contact for you.

As you wait to hear back or to find out whether contact is possible, satisfy your son's curiosity by sharing the concrete information you already have. Since you met your son's birthmother at the time of the adoption, you probably have stories to tell. Even though he's probably heard them before, he'll want to hear them again now. Don't leave anything out; the smallest details will mean a lot to him. Let him look at any photographs or letters you exchanged during the two years you kept in touch.

If you can't locate your son's birthmother, let him know that you will try again later. You can suggest that he write periodic letters (perhaps an annual letter on his birthday), and tell him that you will save the letters and photographs he selects for her. In this way, your son can share his interests as he grows and changes over time. If you reestablish contact with his birthmother some day, she will treasure this chronicle of his childhood. It will be good for your son to express his thoughts and questions, even if you can't deliver the letters now.

My experience is that most birthparents welcome renewed contact. Your son's birthmother would probably delight in hearing about his personality, milestones, and interests. Share anecdotes and send pictures. She remembers him as a baby. I'm sure she'll be pleased to hear about the boy he is today!

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NACAC
North American Council on Adoptable Children

. . . because every child needs a permanent, loving, and culturally sensitive family

Claiming the Federal Adoption Tax Credit for Special Needs Adoptions

(Updated March 2009)

Families who adopt a child with special needs from foster care can claim a federal adoption tax credit without needing to incur or document expenses. The per-child tax credit is $11,650 for adoptions finalized in 2008, and $12,150 for those finalized in 2009*, and families have six years to use the entire credit. (If you finalized your adoption between 2003 and 2007, read *What If We Finalized an Adoption before the Current Tax Year* below.)

Are We Eligible for the Credit?

To qualify for the credit without documenting expenses, families must:

- have adopted a child with special needs from foster care and
- have a modified adjusted gross income of a certain level.

Then to be able to use the credit, families must also have federal tax liability.

Does my child have special needs?

Children who are harder to place for adoption—older children, children of color, sibling groups, and children with medical conditions or disabilities—are often determined to have special needs. NACAC interprets the IRS instructions to mean that if a child receives adoption subsidy (assistance), the adoption subsidy agreement (or application and agreement) is evidence that the state has determined that child has special needs. (See Line 1, Column (d) of the 8839 instructions for the IRS's language.)

If your child does not receive an adoption subsidy, NACAC believes the state has not determined that your child has special needs and you will have to document adoption expenses to claim the credit.

Are we financially eligible for the credit?

How much, if any, of the credit you can use is based on:

- your income — Families with federal modified adjusted gross income above $214,730 in 2008, or $222,180 in 2009, cannot claim the credit at all; families with incomes above $164,730 in 2008 ($182,180 in 2009) can claim partial credit.
- your total federal tax liability (line 46 of form 1040) — In one year, you can use as much of the credit as the full amount of your federal income tax liability (which is your tax liability less any other credits). Even if you normally get a refund, you may still have tax liability and could increase the amount of your refund.

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* The amount of the adoption tax credit and income restrictions here are based on 2008 and 2009 amounts. There are cost of living adjustments each year, so for tax years 2010 and beyond the numbers will change. Form line numbers may change as well.

Sample Family Situations

Below are some examples of how the tax credit might benefit families who finalized adoptions in 2008 (these are simplified examples, which do not take into account the Child Tax Credit explained below).

- A couple adopted a sibling group of two children with special needs. They had $6,500 in federal income tax withheld from their paychecks, and their tax liability is $7,000, which means they would owe $500 to the IRS. With the adoption tax credit, they have $23,300 in credits, and this year they could use up to $7,000 of the credit (the amount of their federal tax liability). They get a refund of the $6,500 they had already paid, and can carry over $16,300 of the tax credit for up to five more years.

- A single mother adopted a sibling group of three children with special needs. She had $5,000 in federal income tax withheld from her paychecks, but her tax liability is only $4,000, which means she would receive a refund of $1,000. For the three children, she has $34,950 in adoption tax credits. This year she could use $4,000 of the credit. She will get a refund of the $5,000 she paid, and can carry over $30,950 of tax credit for up to five more years.

- A couple with five children adopted a sibling group of two children with special needs. They had $1,000 in federal income tax withheld from their paychecks, and their tax liability is $0, which means they would receive a refund of $1,000. They have $23,300 in the Adoption Tax Credit, but they cannot use it this year since they have no federal tax liability. They should still file Form 8839 with their 2008 tax return so that they can then carry the credit forward for five additional years if their tax liability is greater than zero in those years.

How Do I Claim the Adoption Tax Credit?

To claim the credit you need to complete IRS Form 8839 in addition to filing your usual IRS Form 1040. You can find Form 8839 at www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f8839.pdf or by requesting it from 800-829-1040.

What do I do when the IRS asks for qualifying expenses on line 5?

Because you do not need to document expenses for children with special needs, simply enter $11,650 for adoptions finalized in 2008 (and $12,150 for 2009) as long as your child receives adoption subsidy. If you claimed any credit for expenses associated with this adoption in previous years, you need to deduct those from the total credit. The IRS instructions for 2008 taxes state: "If you did not claim any adoption credit for the child in a prior year, enter $11,650 on line 5 even if your qualified adoption expenses for the child were less than $11,650 (and even if you did not have any qualified adoption expenses for this child)."

What if my tax liability is less than the Adoption Tax Credit?

To carry any part of the credit forward to future years, fill out the Credit Carryforward Worksheet in the Instructions for Form 8839. This documents the amount of the credit you can carry forward for up to five additional years or until it is used up, whichever is sooner. You do not need to submit this worksheet, but you will need to complete and submit Form 8839 for any year in which you claim the credit you carried forward.

How does the Adoption Tax Credit affect the Child Tax Credit?

If you can claim your child as a dependent, then you should also look into the Child Tax Credit. The Child Tax Credit and the Adoption Tax Credit interact and may reduce the Child Tax Credit you can claim. To determine

the amount of the Child Tax Credit you can use, you must complete the Child Tax Credit Worksheet in IRS Publication 972.

If you answer Yes on the last line of the Child Tax Credit Worksheet, you may be eligible for the Additional Child Tax Credit, which is a refundable credit (meaning you can claim the credit regardless of your tax liability). To claim the Additional Child Tax Credit, complete IRS Form 8812.

What If We Finalized an Adoption before the Current Tax Year?

If you finalized an adoption in 2003 or a later year for which you have already filed your taxes, you can amend your return to take advantage of the federal adoption tax credit.

If you finalized an adoption before 2003 you probably won't amend your return because:

- you can only get credit for expenses you paid and can document for the adoption process, and
- it has been more than three years since you filed your original return and the instructions for form 1040X state: "Generally, for a credit or refund, Form 1040X must be filed within 3 years after the date you filed the original return…"

In the rare case that you had significant expenses, you might be able to carry the credit forward to returns less than three years old as explained below.

How do I decide if I should amend my previous tax returns?

Your ability to benefit from the credit depends on your federal tax liability in any given year, so first you need to check if you could have benefited from the Adoption Tax Credit in the year you finalized the adoption or in later years.

If your tax liability minus your credits is greater than zero in the year you finalized the adoption—or in any of the next five years—you will benefit from the credit and should amend your taxes. The chart below shows where on your tax form (1040 or 1040A) you can find your tax liability, your credits, and your liability minus your credits. It also lists the maximum amount of the credit per child for that year.

Tax Year	Tax Liability	Total Credits	Liability minus Credits	Maximum Adoption Tax Credit
2003	1040 – Line 43 1040A – Line 28	1040 – Line 53 1040A – Line 35	1040 – Line 54 1040A – Line 36	$10,160
2004	1040 – Line 45 1040A – Line 28	1040 – Line 55 1040A – Line 35	1040 – Line 56 1040A – Line 36	$10,390
2005	1040 – Line 46 1040A – Line 28	1040 – Line 56 1040A – Line 35	1040 – Line 57 1040A – Line 36	$10,630
2006	1040 – Line 46 1040A – Line 28	1040 – Line 56 1040A – Line 34	1040 – Line 57 1040A – Line 35	$10,960
2007	1040 – Line 46 1040A – Line 28	1040 – Line 56 1040A – Line 34	1040 – Line 57 1040A – Line 35	$11,390
2008	1040 – Line 46 1040A – Line 28	1040 – Line 55 1040A – Line 34	1040 – Line 56 1040A – Line 35	$11,650

What if I finalized more than three years ago?

If you finalized before 2005, there is a complication. If you are seeking a refund, the Revenue Code only allows you to amend your tax returns for the last three years. (The three years is calculated based on the date

the taxes were due. A 2005 tax return was due by April 15, 2006, so you can amend 2005 taxes for a refund until April 15, 2009.)

If your tax liability minus credits was or will be greater than zero in any of the years from 2005 on, however, you should still amend your taxes, starting with the year you finalized your adoption. For example, if you finalized the adoption of one child with special needs from foster care in 2004, you should amend your 2004 taxes, figure out how much of the $10,390 credit you *would* have been able to use that year (which you *cannot* get a refund for), and carry forward the remainder. You would then amend the 2005, 2006, and 2007 taxes (until you've used up the entire credit).

How does the Child Tax Credit affect amended returns?

As described above, you need to complete Publication 972 for each year you are amending to figure out the Child Tax Credit and how much of the Adoption Tax Credit you can claim in that year (and then how much you might carry forward). If you already claimed the Child Tax Credit, you will still need to work through Publication 972's Worksheet to figure out the proper amount of the Adoption Tax Credit you are able to use for a given year. Claiming the Adoption Tax Credit may affect whether you can claim the Child Tax Credit for the year for which you are amending. If your Child Tax Credit is reduced because you claim the Adoption Tax Credit, you should check to see if you can claim the Additional Child Tax Credit instead.

How do I amend my returns?

If you paid someone to prepare your taxes, you should ask them to amend your taxes for free since they failed to include the Adoption Tax Credit.

To amend your own taxes, complete Form 1040X, which can be found at www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f1040x.pdf or by calling 1-800-829-1040. You will need copies of the returns you filed for each year you amend, plus blank copies of Form 8839 (the Adoption Tax Credit form) for each year you amend. Access previous year's forms at www.irs.gov/formspubs/article/0,,id=98339,00.html.

If you are only amending the tax credits, you can start with line 6 of Form 1040X. The amounts on line 6 should remain the same, but you will note changes to the amounts on lines 7, 8, and 10 (Columns B and C). If you take the Child Tax Credit and/or Additional Child Tax Credit, you may have changes to line 14, Columns B and C, and line 18. Line 23 is the amount of your refund, which you should receive in four to six months.

What If I Have Additional Questions?

If you receive an adoption subsidy (assistance) for your child and have questions on whether it is taxable income or if you can claim that child as a dependent (and receive the Child Tax Credit), read NACAC's fact sheet, *Tax Issues Related to Adoption Assistance and Adoption*, which can be found at: http://www.nacac.org/adoptionsubsidy/factsheets/taxes.html.

If you have additional questions on the Adoption Tax Credit or adoption subsidy, contact the North American Council on Adoptable Children at 651-644-3036 or adoption.assistance@nacac.org.