

Fall 2010

Tuscarawas County Job & Family Services Post-Adoption Link Newsletter



NAMI Tuscarawas/Carroll, Inc.
National Alliance on Mental Illness



Hand To Hand

A FREE



Mental Health Educational Class

NAMI's Hand to Hand®, a ten-week educational class, is designed to bring understanding, support, and hope to families of children suffering with emotional, mental, and neurobiological disorders such as: ADHD, Bipolar, Depression, and Asberger's Syndrome.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Understanding Your Child's Diagnosis
- Nutrition
- Counseling and Therapy
- Medications
- Developing Family Coping Skills
- Juvenile Justice
- Child Protection Agencies

For More Information Contact Paula Hixenbaugh
330-602-2444

riter@juno.com

WORD OF LIFE CURCH
1260 Monroe Street, Dover, Ohio

Classes begin
Tuesday, August 31, 2010
6 - 8 p.m.

Registration is
Required



Inside this Issue:

2010 Conference	2
Therapy How Tos	3-5
Positive Adoption Language	6
School Information	7-12
Proposed Legislation	13-16
Sharing Information	17-20

20th Annual Conference on Promoting Healthy Attachments

When:

November 18-19, 2010

Where:

Wheeling West Virginia,
Olgebay Resort

Topics:

Thursday: Bonnie McNally Brown, LPC, NCC

The Neurological Impact of Abuse, Trauma & Loss on Early Development 6 training hrs

EVENING: Betsy Keefer-Smalley from HIS, who was our first trainer 20 years ago, is going to present "Taking Care of the Caring: Parental Self-Care For Foster & Adoptive Parents;" this is open and appropriate for parents and professionals.

Friday: Greg Keck with Robert Ballard, Ph.D

Forming Adoptee & Adoptive Family Identity: Psychological & Communication Perspectives. (Robert is a Vietnamese adoptee) 6 hrs.

OR

Ev Worthington, Ph.D (from the University of Virginia commonwealth)

Forgiving and Reconciling: A Clinical Perspective.

(He has a fascinating background which includes his journey of forgiveness following the murder of his mother and subsequent suicide of his brother. His professional background includes a lot of research on forgiveness)

More info will be coming! SAVE THIS DATE! Questions you can e-mail Andy at winga@odjfs.state.oh.us

ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

A CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

Do We Need a Therapist? How to Decide—and How to Find One

We want our children to grow up to lead healthy, happy lives. But sometimes even the best parenting can't overcome the issues a child and his family face. Most children's difficulties can be chalked up to normal childhood development, rather than to problems stemming from adoption. But if you've tried different parenting and discipline methods and your family's difficulties persist, bringing in a professional for you and your child can give you the tools you need to parent him successfully.



Before going the therapy route...

There are no hard and fast rules for when to find professional help. Before you do, consider these options:

- **Read up on child development.** Your child's behavior may well be normal for his developmental stage. (See "Recommended Reading" on the next page.)
- **Consider the family situation.** Is there a change in the household (conflict, new siblings, divorce, moves) that may be prompting the behavior?
- **Seek out parenting classes or advice from a parenting expert.**
- **Make sure your child knows that it's easy to talk about adoption.** "Throw out pebbles," advises adoption therapist Holly van Gulden, "and see where the ripples go." Watch an adoption-themed movie or read adoption books together. Show your interest in talking about adoption and your availability to address any concerns.
- **Make sure your child has a chance to interact with other adopted kids.** Join a support group, attend a workshop, or take part in summer camps.
- **Join a support group yourself.** Look for community or online groups that can offer support and guidance. (Find one at www.adoptivefamilies.com/support_group.)

Is this normal?

Behaviors that are typical at one developmental stage (i.e., tantrums in a toddler) may be problematic in other phases. Although all parents are frustrated on occasion, in general, parenting your child should be enjoyable. If your frustration or anger is persistent, refer to this chart for further guidance.

BEHAVIOR	STAGE/AGE WHEN TYPICAL	STAGE/AGE WHEN PROBLEMATIC
Lying	3-6 years	Consistently at ages 3-6, frequently at older ages
Stealing	3-5 years	When excessive or at older ages
Lack of bowel and bladder control	Infant, toddler; occasional nighttime bed-wetting until late elementary	Older elementary; excessive; thought to be "deliberate" during the day
Compulsive, repetitive behavior	0-18 months and again at 3-4 years	At older ages, or if excessive
Physical aggression (temper tantrums)	11 months to 4 years	At older ages, or if excessive or violent
Fire starting	4-8 years	At older ages
Lack of remorse	Preschoolers; occasionally at 4-8 years; (true remorse not possible until mid-elementary)	At older ages

Consider professional help if your child demonstrates:

- Inconsolable, persistent crying
- Chronic worry
- Being made fun of at school
- Significant change in temperament, personality
- Persistent malaise or apathy
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Dramatic drop in school performance
- Suicidal thoughts
- Difficulty sustaining relationships

START YOUR SEARCH

You're looking for someone who neither overemphasizes the effects of adoption, nor ignores its influence. The ideal therapist should have knowledge of and experience with adoption, and should encourage you to take an integral role in your child's treatment. So, where do you start looking?

■ **USE LOCAL ADOPTION RESOURCES.** Start with referrals from your adoption agency, lawyer, or parent support group. Some states have post-adoption offices that offer referrals. Contact your local mental health association for referral to therapists who have indicated an interest in adoption.

■ **DON'T LIMIT YOURSELF TO PSYCHIATRISTS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS.** Clinical social workers, family therapists, and licensed counselors may also be able to effectively treat an adoptee.

Interview Prospective Therapists

Once you've compiled a list of therapists, arrange interviews. Prepare questions to ask; look for the attributes you would expect of any professional working with your family. "You should not feel uncomfortable or condescended to," says Anu Sharma, a Minneapolis adoption psychologist. "The therapist should answer your questions with respect. Trust your instincts—expect kindness, courtesy, and acceptance."

HERE ARE OUR EXPERT-RECOMMENDED QUESTIONS:

■ **What is your experience with adoption?** "Ask how many years, how many children, what types of adoptions," says Debbie Riley, head of the Center for Adoption Support and Education, a specialized post-adoption support organization in Maryland. "Ask the therapist what issues he believes may affect adoptees and can be helped by therapy."

■ **Are you comfortable talking about adoption?** Does she appear to know how children think about adoption at different developmental levels? Does what she says about adopted children make sense and sound right to you? Does she generalize excessively, especially about the negative impact of adoption? "Adoption should be viewed as an emotionally important event that is different for each child," says Sharma. The therapist should have a balanced view.

■ **What do you need to know about our family?** Parents are critical to a child's treatment and should be included in the plan. Ask the prospective therapist what he thinks he will need to know. Riley says these questions must include what led the parents to adopt; how they talk about adoption in the family; and what role they think adoption plays in the child's behavior. "If he doesn't know what to ask, then this is the wrong person," says Riley.

■ **What experience do you have in dealing with situations like ours?** For children in open adoptions, Riley says to look for an appreciation of openness. Has he ever worked with a family involved in a birthparent search? Has he ever included a child's birth family as part of treatment? If yours is a multiracial family, it is important that the therapist have some experience working with people of many cultures. "He must appreciate differences, and understand how differences are experienced by a child or young adult," says Sharma. Adolescent boys may benefit from working with a male therapist.

■ **How does your practice work?** Ask about the practical details, such as who covers the practice when the therapist is not available, appointment times, fees, and insurance coverage.

Help a Good Therapist Learn About Adoption

- Direct him to Web sites and information about workshops and conferences.
- Suggest that he consult with recognized adoption-therapy experts.
- Work with your parent support group to provide training for local therapists and counselors.
- Share adoption literature.

Recommended Reading

> *Ages and Stages: A Parent's Guide to Normal Development*, by Charles E. Schaefer and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo (Wiley)

> *The Yale Child Study Center Guide to Understanding Your Child: Healthy Development from Birth to Adolescence*, by Linda C. Mayes, M.D., and Donald J. Cohen, M.D. (Little, Brown)

> *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, by David Brodzinsky, Ph.D., et al. (Anchor)

> *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, by Debbie Riley and John Meeks, M.D. (C.A.S.E. Publications)

> *Raising Adopted Children: Practical, Reassuring Advice for Every Adoptive Parent*, by Lois Melina (HarperCollins)

Visit www.adoptivefamilies.com/books for more resources.

Compiled by SUSAN FREIVALDS.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

Looking for Help

Finding the right therapist for my daughter was a test of my confidence and endurance. **BY VERONICA CHASE***

One of the worst feelings I have ever had was that I might be failing as a parent. My newly adopted four-year-old, Kara, was angry and sad, and I didn't know how to handle the challenges she was throwing my way. I realized one day that I was in over my head, and that I needed professional help—in particular, a therapist. I never imagined I'd have to try so many avenues before I found the right one.

At the start of my hunt, my social worker referred me to Dr. Bennett, a local expert who worked with many adoptive families. It quickly became clear, however, that he was intent on blaming "adoption issues" for everything—even problems common to preschoolers, like tantrums and night terrors. Kara had issues that were related to her adoption and her time without parents, but Dr. Bennett seemed to find problems where none existed, and offered dire diagnoses. For example, he said my child didn't know how to read faces. So I bought a book of baby faces and tested her—Kara could differentiate between sad, happy, angry, and tired. Was I in denial, or had I found a therapist who went too far?

I next consulted Dr. Morgan, a child therapist who had no expertise in adoption, but who had a thriving general practice. Dr. Morgan's technique was strictly behavioral: She observed us and I explained Kara's problems at home. Dr. Morgan thought that Kara was a perfectly normal four-year-old who was simply testing limits, so she handed me a parenting book and recommended "time-outs" and other behavior-modification techniques. This was a refreshing change from Dr. Bennett, but I suspected that Dr. Morgan was missing a lot of what my daughter was going through. Surely her years in an orphanage, the

abruptness of her transition to a family, and the newness of everything in her life were affecting her behavior. I concluded that Dr. Morgan was not a good match for us.

I hoped that the third time would be the charm. Having heard a great deal about attachment therapy, I went to a group that specialized in attachment issues. The treatment plan they

ing which I would physically restrain my child until she cried, wet her pants, and fell asleep, "forcing" her to bond with me. When I voiced concerns about using such techniques, I was told that if I did not follow through with them, Kara would never properly attach. Frightened and frustrated, I left this appointment feeling completely alone.

In another attempt to understand my daughter's difficulties, I took her to a sensory integration therapist. She felt Kara's problems were not primarily related to sensory integration, and referred me to Dr. Katz, a child therapist. Dr. Katz was intent on forming a genuine connection with my child and understanding her world. This took quite a bit of time—she spent hours just playing with my child and narrating her activities as she played. At times, I wondered if this could actually help Kara—but it truly did.

In our adult-only sessions, Dr. Katz helped me understand—and parent—my child. She gave me strategies for aiding Kara's emotional development and adjustment to her new life: I learned to hold her during tantrums, rather than isolating her; to help her find words to express the feelings she was having; and to connect with her physically and emotionally even if she resisted. The therapist gave me discipline tools that work for children who don't understand consequences and whose emotions overwhelm their sense of logic.

Kara met with Dr. Katz weekly for more than a year and I met regularly with her, as well. We now have her as a resource when we need extra support. Today, I have a daughter who's blossoming, thanks to Dr. Katz—and I know I did the right thing by persevering until I found the right fit. **11**

*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED



I never imagined that I would have to try so many avenues before I found the right one.

recommended was nothing short of alarming. Less than an hour into our first—and only—visit, the therapist recommended "holding therapy." She ordered me to take away Kara's precious blanket, declaring that my daughter would never bond with me if I allowed her to have it. She urged me to set up a series of appointments dur-

Using Positive Adoption Language

The way we talk—and the words we choose—say a lot about what we think and value. When we use positive adoption language, we say that adoption is a way to build a family, just as birth is. Both are important, but one is not more important than the other.

Choose the following positive adoption language instead of the negative talk that helps perpetuate the myth that adoption is second-best. By using positive adoption language, you'll reflect the true nature of adoption, free of innuendo.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Birthparent►	◄Real Parent
Biological parent►	◄Natural parent
Birth child►	◄Own child
My child►	◄Adopted child; own child
Born to unmarried parents►	◄Illegitimate
Terminate paternal rights►	◄Give up
Make an adoption plan►	◄Give away
To parent►	◄To keep
Waiting child►	◄Adoptable child; available child
Biological or birthfather►	◄Real father
Making contact with►	◄Reunion
Parent►	◄Adoptive parent
Inter-country adoption►	◄Foreign adoption
Adoption triad►	◄Adoption triangle
Permission to sign a release►	◄Disclosure
Search►	◄Track down parents
Child placed for adoption►	◄An unwanted child
Court termination►	◄Child taken away
Child with special needs►	◄Handicapped child
Child from abroad►	◄Foreign child
Was adopted►	◄is adopted

Words not only convey facts, they also evoke feelings. When a TV movie talks about a “custody battle” between “real parents” and “other parents,” society gets the wrong impression that only birthparents are real parents and that adoptive parents aren’t real parents. Members of society may also wrongly conclude that all adoptions are “battles.”

Positive adoption language can stop the spread of misconceptions such as these. By using positive adoption language, we educate others about adoption. We choose emotionally “correct” words over emotionally-laden words. We speak and write in positive adoption language with the hopes of impacting others so that this language will someday become the norm.

A CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

ADOPTIVE
FAMILIESTackling Tricky
Assignments

Six projects account for most of the tricky assignments our kids face at school. Understanding the learning goals and the specific challenges each one poses will help parents and children alike find the best solutions.

Baby Picture

Assignment: Bring in a baby picture. The photos are often posted anonymously and classmates are asked to guess who's who, or may be used in year-books or graduation presentations.

Grade level: Preschool to kindergarten; junior high and high school graduations.

Learning goal: To help students get to know one another; to salute graduates.

Why it's challenging: Children adopted at an older age may not have baby pictures; the identities of children who stand out because of race or physical differences are easy to guess.

Alternatives for teachers: Have children bring in pictures from when they were "younger," or draw pictures of themselves as babies.

Approaches for parents: Let your child know that you wish you had photos, too, and say that you're sure she was a beautiful baby. Encourage her to draw a picture of herself.

How one family handled it: "My son was asked to bring a baby photo for his elementary school graduation. I wrote a letter to the teachers and included articles from AF. The team leader acknowledged that they'd just always done it this way. In future years, they'll ask for photos of the children 'at a younger age.'" — DEBBIE SCHWARTZ



Family Tree

Assignment: Draw a family tree—either as a literal tree, with branches, or in diagram form—showing family relationships.

Grade level: Elementary school.

Learning goal: To illustrate family relationships.

Why it's challenging: The format may not accommodate birth and adoptive relatives, or otherwise non-traditional family makeups.

Alternatives for teachers: Offer formats that show roots as well as branches; instead of a tree, have students create a family forest or a neighborhood of family houses.

Approaches for parents: Allow your child to choose which family or families to portray, or encourage him to design his own format.



To see examples of inclusive trees, click on "A Forest of Family Trees" at adoptivefamilies.com/school.

What Role Should Parents Play?

Our instinct will always be to step in, but, as our kids grow, we need to learn to scale back our involvement.

> Preschool and early elementary: Offer to talk with the teacher, alone or with your child, and to accompany your child to school when she's Star of the Week. At this age, children may welcome a parent's presence in the classroom and like the idea of an adoption presentation.

> Later elementary: An eight- or nine-year-old may not want his mom to come with him to school, but will probably still appreciate your offer to talk with the teacher. Involve your child in the conversation and let him make the final decision about how he'll complete the assignment.

> Middle and high school: During the middle-school years, parents should shift to providing behind-the-scenes support. Act as a sounding board as she decides what to do, then role-play conversations to have with the teacher, so she can practice explaining why an assignment is difficult.

Star of the Week

■ **Assignment:** During the child's turn as Star of the Week, create and present a poster with the child's story and family photos.

■ **Grade level:** Kindergarten to first grade.

■ **Learning goal:** To help students get to know one another; also serves as a leadership opportunity.

■ **Why it's challenging:** When our kids are placed in the spotlight, adoption often comes up, and they may not feel comfortable handling intrusive questions.

■ **Alternatives for teachers:** Instead of focusing on the child's past, let the Star of the Week talk about pets, current hobbies, and other elements of her life.

■ **Approaches for parents:** Role-play possible responses to questions in advance. Ask your child about accompanying her to school to give an adoption presentation.

■ **How one family handled it:** "After my five-year-old presented her poster, a classmate asked, 'Where's your father?' My daughter cheerfully explained that she did not have a father, that she was adopted. Then: 'Is that why you look different from your mom?' The teacher reported that what followed was a discussion about adoption—and that my daughter handled it with competence and grace." —CARRIE KRUEGER



Heritage Exploration

■ **Assignment:** Write a report, make a flag, or participate in a cultural celebration based on the student's country or culture of origin.

■ **Grade level:** Elementary through high school.

■ **Learning goal:** To learn about different cultures.

■ **Why it's challenging:** A child's ethnic or cultural heritage may differ from that of his family. A teacher may direct a student to write about her birth heritage, even though she would rather write about her adoptive family's, or vice versa.

■ **Alternatives for teachers:** Let students report on a country or culture of interest rather than one related to their family.

■ **Approaches for parents:** Provide any available resources relating to his adoptive and birth family cultures. Accompany your child to class, if appropriate, to help conduct a presentation.



Charting Genetic Traits

■ **Assignment:** Diagram or write about the presence of a particular trait in the child's family, such as eye or hair color.

■ **Grade level:** Junior high through high school; occasionally late elementary school.

■ **Learning goal:** To help children understand how genetic traits are passed along through generations.

■ **Why it's challenging:** Charting traits in an adoptive family may raise unwanted questions, and a child may not have much information about birth relatives.

■ **Alternatives for teachers:** Study genetics in insects or plants. Use historical examples, such as the prevalence of inherited diseases in the royal families of Europe.

■ **Approaches for parents:** Help your child identify friends or a biologically related family group, such as grandparents or cousins, on which to base a genetic chart.



Helpful Resources

■ adoptivefamilies.com/school.

Drawn from AF's archives, our best advice on talking to the teacher and preparing your child to answer questions, along with sample adoption presentations and family trees.

■ *Adoption and the Schools*, ed. by Lansing Wood and Nancy Ng (fairfamilies.org) and *S.A.F.E. at School*, by Marilyn Schoettle (adoption-support.org). These guides help parents and teachers work together to ensure a positive school environment.



Timeline

■ **Assignment:** Create a historical timeline using a child's own life events from birth to present.

■ **Grade level:** Elementary through junior high school.

■ **Learning goal:** To learn how to chart historical events on a timeline.

■ **Why it's challenging:** A child may be unsure of the time, the location, or even the date of his birth; he may wonder if he needs to include the dates he was relinquished by his birth family and placed with his adoptive family, or other private information.

■ **Alternatives for teachers:** Do not specify that the timeline must begin at birth. Define it generally as "past, present, and future." Allow children to create a timeline for a historical event or fictional character.

■ **Approaches for parents:** Help your child decide how to define "significant events," and to choose what she wants to keep private. Encourage her to use general labels, such as "When I Was One," rather than specific dates.

■ **How one family handled it:** "Our daughter, adopted at age 12, was assigned a timeline of 'milestone events' on her first day of middle school, and she worried that this list would be too revealing. I explained that the goal was to learn to use timelines, and that she was under no obligation to reveal private details. So she listed events—learning to ride a bike, moving to a new town, winning an award—that she was happy to share with classmates." —KATHRYN REISS

SCHOOL SAVVY

Prepare for awkward school assignments now, and you'll soon be watching from the sidelines as your children handle them with grace....

BY CARRIE HOWARD

For most parents, a new school year means the return of homework and sack lunches. For AF readers, it may also mean the prospect of assignments that ask children for information that is intensely personal, or is missing altogether, assignments that cause a child to feel uncomfortable or to stand out from her peers.

Though each family navigates sticky assignments in its own way (based on its own story), it helps to prepare. A parent's fears are easily read by young children; so, too, is our optimism. It's up to us to ensure that school's a fun, invigorating, respectful place to learn and spend the day.

Assignments ahead

In preschool and early elementary, family is a major focus of the curriculum. Students are often asked to bring baby pictures to class or serve as Star of the Week. Assignments such as these are meant to help classmates get to know one another. The later elementary-school years bring family trees, personal timelines, and heritage projects. In junior high and high school, students are often assigned genetic charts in biology and autobiographies in English class.

By using the children's lives and families as material, teachers hope to engage

their students and show them that what they are learning has practical applications. But the instructions and formats all too often reflect an outdated view, one that assumes that all children live in nuclear families, with biological relatives who share the same ethnic background. While some school districts have updated this approach, many have not.

A child faced with such assignments may feel dishonest by acknowledging only his adoptive family on his family tree or heritage report. He might not be ready to put his adoption story on public display. He may be dismayed to find that he is missing a basic piece of information (such as the name of the hospital in which he was born) that all his classmates seem to possess. And he may be frustrated by an assignment when it is impossible for him to obtain the information he needs.

How to work with schools

A proactive approach to school assignments is often best. Lansing Wood, an adoptive mother and co-author, with Nancy Ng, of *Adoption and the Schools: Resources for Parents and Teachers* (FAIR), advises parents to begin a dialogue with a child's teacher early in the school year. Share parts of your child's story (while maintaining an appropriate level of priva-

cy), and ask whether there will be any assignments that ask for birth facts, ancestry, or early history. If so, tactfully suggest ways of expanding the projects so that all the students in the class will feel comfortable completing them.

"You can't merely complain after the fact about problematic assignments," says adoptive and foster parent Sue Badeau, who talks with her kids' teachers at the beginning of each year. "It's best to build an ongoing relationship, so that your input will be accepted and valued."

Remind the teacher that your child will not be the only one affected. Without naming names, you might say, "There are several children in the class who live in nontraditional families. Would it be possible to modify the assignment to meet your educational goals without making any child feel exposed?" As Ng says, "Adoption is only one of many kinds of family formations that teachers see represented in a classroom of students."

Don't be surprised when, only weeks after meeting with your child's teacher, your child brings home a timeline project (beginning with an account of the subject's birth), for example. If this happens, let the teacher know specifically why this may be difficult for your child: "My son feels uncomfortable as the only child in the

class not to have a photo of himself taken at the hospital the day he was born. Would it be possible to use a different format?" (See the AF Clip-and-Save Guide, "Tackling Tricky Assignments," opposite page, for suggested alternatives.) The teacher most likely had no idea that this assignment would be difficult for anyone, and may well adapt it for the entire class.

On the other hand, parents who bring awkward assignments to a teacher's attention are often asked to just "do the best you can." In those cases, parents must help their children complete their homework without violating their privacy.

Helping children find their own way

"Lighthearted and free-flowing family conversations about assignments are helpful," says Ng. "Remember that this is your child's assignment, not your adoption crusade. If your daughter feels most comfortable leaving out one of her families on a project, that's her choice. What you can do is discuss the topic around the dinner table."

Although a child may decide to complete the assignment in a certain way, a parent may remain uneasy. For example, if the teacher offers your child a different family-tree format than his peers, your child may be pleased, yet you worry that she'll be teased or treated as being different. "Remember that kids are adept at picking up on their parents' feelings," says Ng. "So, if you worry, your child may worry. If you are confident that all will be well, your child will be, too." Remain optimistic!

Beyond providing a supportive sounding board for your child, your level of involvement will vary based on his age and developmental stage. As children mature, they are able—and willing—to take more responsibility for their decision-making. Here are tips to keep in mind for what's ahead in each school year.

Preschool through early elementary.

Young children usually welcome their parents' presence at school, and enjoy being the center of attention. Take advantage of this openness to give a presentation on adoption toward the beginning of the academic year, perhaps during National Adoption Awareness Month, in November. Helping schoolmates understand adoption terminology will save your child from having to explain the concepts later. Children this age may also feel more comfortable in Star of the Week presentations with a par-

Remember that this is your child's assignment, not your adoption crusade. If he decides to leave out certain information, that's his choice.

ent at their side to answer tough questions. (See "Helping Your Child Cope with Intrusive Questions," at adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=441.)

Kathy Walter, of Lititz, Pennsylvania, gives a presentation in her children's classrooms every year on each child's "Coming Home Day." "I enter the room bearing bags of snacks and items from Korea to pass around. I start by explaining adoption, and give them the chance to ask questions that they might not want to ask my child directly. Then we talk about Korea. For many children, this is their

al details she would prefer to omit.

"I offered to help both of my sons complete fifth-grade timeline projects," says adoptive mom Terry Mandeville, "but told each that it was up to him to decide how to complete it. My older son chose to include only a single date from his life before adoption. He started with his birth, then skipped to age four. My younger son diligently included the dates of his birth, his entrance into the orphanage, the death of his birthmom, and his adoption, along with his first home run and his surgeries. It's something we talk about often."

Junior high and high school. Although teens want to solve their own problems, they may still welcome some assistance. Help your child with an autobiography, heritage, or genetics project by talking through his decisions. You might ask, "Would you rather ask the teacher to modify the assignment, or come up with your own solution?" or "Are you comfortable telling your whole story, or would you prefer to edit some events?" Acknowledge his concerns, and then cheer him on, however he decides to handle the requirement.

Jeanne Patterson, of Shelby, North Carolina, says, "For years, I dreaded the day we had to face the family-tree assignment. But when it finally happened, in ninth-grade Spanish class, my son was unperturbed. He went straight to my mother and asked her for family pictures and stories to use in his project. Clearly, ours was his family!"

Think of difficult assignments as an opportunity for parents, teachers, and children to discuss adoption. Your child's experience with problem-solving may turn out to be one of the most empowering lessons of his school years. **113**

CARRIE HOWARD writes frequently on adoption and parenting. She lives near Seattle with her family, which includes three kids adopted internationally.

Most Popular AF School Articles

- > **Star of the Week**, by Carrie Krueger
- > **How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade**, by Amy Klatzkin
- > **A Forest of Family Trees**, by Nancy Ng and Lansing Wood
- > **A Memo to My Fellow Teachers**, by Leonida DiTomasso
- > **The Great Back-to-School Kit**

All available at AF's School page: adoptivefamilies.com/school.

first exposure to life somewhere else on the planet, and they are eager to learn about the culture. It's a lesson for my children's peers and an opportunity for my children to be understood and accepted."

Late elementary. Children in third through sixth grade want to be like their peers. Although your child may appreciate your meeting with her teacher to discuss alternative approaches to a project, be sure to check with her before doing so. Help your child brainstorm ideas at home for completing the assignment. Families often create their own family-tree or timeline formats with good results. Or, you might help your child identify the person-

DISCUSS COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE:
ONLINE adoptivefamilies.com/sepoct2007

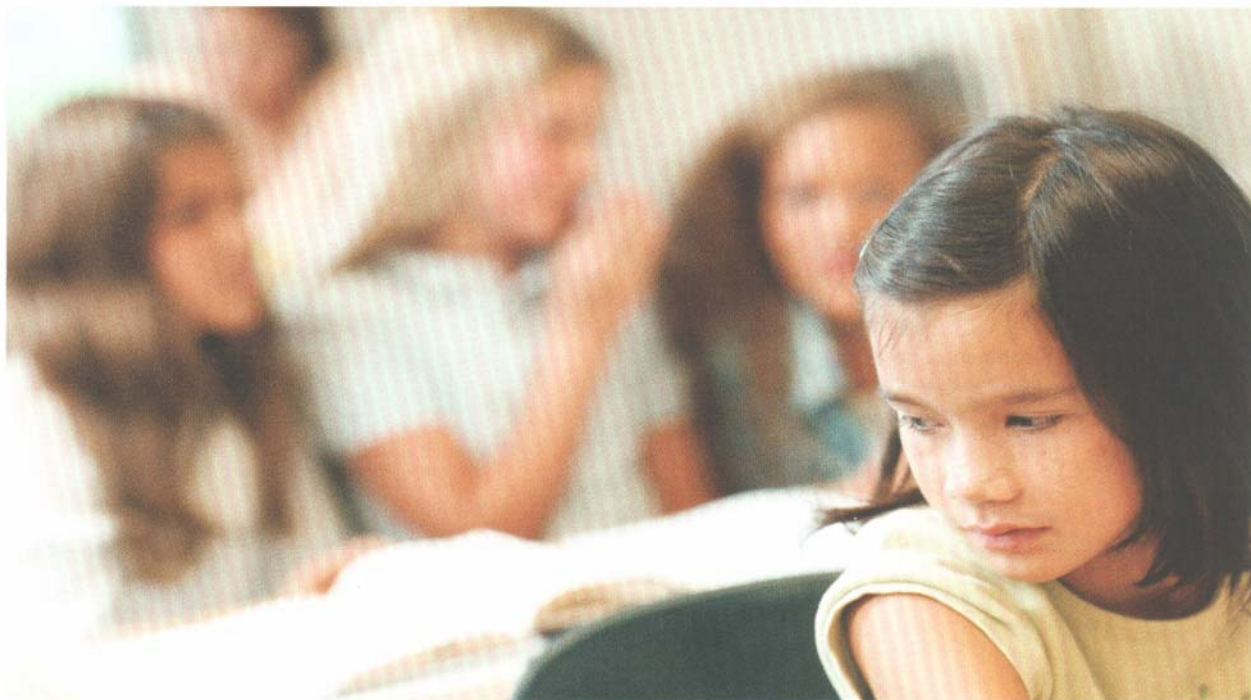
↑ AGES 6–8

GROWING UP ADOPTED

Reprinted with permission from *Adoptive Families Magazine*. For more articles like this one, to subscribe, or to sign up for the *AF* e-newsletter, visit *Adoptive Families* online, www.AdoptiveFamilies.com.

Preparing for School

Teaching your child how to handle unwelcome comments at school may be one of the most important steps you take. **BY JOANNE SOLCHANY, PH.D.**



As parents, we all do our best to educate friends and family about the joys of adoption. And we make a valiant effort to help the parents of our children's playmates understand that adoption is just another way a family is made.

As much as we educate, however, neither we nor our children are always prepared when they encounter others who do not understand adoption, or who try to describe it in hurtful ways. While this can occur at any age, the first encounters with mean or inappropriate comments usually come when our children enter school. What is it about kindergarten and first grade?

The "Real Mother" Comment

My daughter, Anna, came home upset from first grade one day. She reported that her classmate, Zachary, had cornered her at recess to say that I was not her real mother. Although Anna responded that he was wrong, he insisted that, because she was adopted, I could not be her real mother.

Anna told her teacher what Zachary had said. Luckily, Anna's teacher was also an adoptive mom, so she was able to assure Anna that I was indeed real and that I was her mother. Anna's teacher took the opportunity to use Zachary's comments to educate the class about adoption.

Anna had grown up knowing she was adopted, that she was born from her birthmother's womb, and that I had traveled "all over the world" to find my daughter. We had many conversations about adoption, as well as many celebrations of it. Our friends and family included other adoptive families. Still, Zachary's words confused and hurt my daughter.

A New Reality

Angelina, a seven-year-old girl adopted from Haiti, was thriving in her new home, having developed strong and nurturing relationships with her

DISCUSS COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE:
ONLINE adoptivefamilies.com/sepoct2007

GROWING UP ADOPTED

↑ AGES 6–8

mother, father, and younger sister, also adopted. One day, however, she returned home from school, sobbing. As her mother comforted her, she learned that Conrad, a fellow first-grader, had told her that her first mother must not have loved her, since she “gave her away.” He also added that her new mom could never love her, either, since her first mom didn’t.

Angelina was devastated. She had never thought about her mother’s love for her—she took it for granted. She, too, had known all about her adoption story and her birthmother. The reasons for her adoption hadn’t occurred to her yet. Conrad’s words brought her face to face with the question, “Why?”

Our children’s experiences at school are beyond our control as parents. When challenging moments come, all of our adoption conversations suddenly seem inadequate.

Words Can Hurt

Why do kids say such things to our children? It’s often due to the developmental stage they are in. Children in the early years of elementary school are just learning about different kinds of families. Until then, they assumed that all families were like their own. But they soon come to realize that there is a larger world out there, and experiences different from their own.

Six- to eight-year-olds are beginning to develop empathy, but hurtful words can emerge from their mouths before they think. In reality, most are not malicious. Of course, not all comments made by children, or even adults, have an innocent intent. Some children intentionally try to hurt. As they begin to notice differences in looks and experiences, some six-to-eight-year-olds deliberately call attention to the shape of someone’s eyes, the texture of their hair, their height, braces, glasses, a birthmark, or a scar.

As difficult as it is to witness our children’s pain, comments such as these are normal. If you can, respond in

What to Do?

FOR CHILDREN:

Discuss the suggestions below with your child.

DON’T tease back—it only encourages the teaser and escalates the situation.

DON’T argue. This can intensify the teasing or hurtful comments.

DO walk away. You do not have to listen to the teasing.

DO respond with “So?” No matter how many times something is said, or how many ways it may be repeated, “So?” can take the wind out of the teaser’s sails.

DO ask an adult for help, especially when cruelty or meanness, rather than curiosity, is involved. (Your child will know the difference.)

DO react calmly.

FOR PARENTS:

DO consider giving an adoption presentation or reading an adoption book in the classroom. For how-tos, read “How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade,” and other articles, at adoptivefamilies.com/school.

DO practice responses. Help your child decide whether to use humor, (“My dad doesn’t *look* pretend to me, so he must be real”), express their feelings (“It hurts when you say things about my family”), or deflect (“It’s private”). See the W.I.S.E. Up! program (available from C.A.S.E. at adoptionssupport.org) for more strategies.

DO write a letter to your child’s teacher before school starts or schedule a meeting mid-year. For sample letters, see adoptivefamilies.com/school.

DO share your experiences and tips for coping with other readers of AF by adding your comments to this article online, which you’ll find at adoptivefamilies.com/septoct2007.


a way that aims to educate about adoption in the classroom, rather than to accuse. Explain to your child that it is never acceptable to be ridiculed because of physical or other differences. Point out that she never has to answer questions that she doesn’t want to answer. Keep communication open with other parents, so issues can be discussed freely. Remember that *all* of our children have probably teased a sibling or a classmate themselves at some time, and may need their own lessons in appropriate behavior.

Positive Responses

Teasing and hurtful adoption or ethnic comments can penetrate the core of our children’s identity. How can we support our children and help them maintain healthy self-esteem? How can we stop their hearts from being broken? And how can we mend those broken hearts when they occur?

First, we can listen. Listen to their words, their descriptions of what they experienced, and to their emotional responses. Help them understand that others’ comments and opinions will often not be the same as ours. Explain that sometimes we can educate people or share our feelings, successfully changing people’s minds. Other times, it does not work, but we can hold on to our ideas and beliefs.

We can teach our children positive ways to cope with all kinds of meanness, and we can set examples by using healthy strategies, such as staying calm when negative encounters arise. When children are ready, encourage them to laugh with you later at the ridiculous comments they’ve overheard.

Although we would love to protect our children from all trauma or pain in life, we can’t. In fact, learning to master encounters such as these can help them learn to cope with life’s challenges and to become responsible, healthy, compassionate adults. 

JOANNE SOLCHANY is an infant and child psychotherapist in Seattle.

New Legislation Information for the Adoptee

Adoption Network Cleveland
4614 Prospect Avenue, Suite 550
Cleveland, Ohio 44103
(216) 325-1000
Fax: (216) 881-7510
www.AdoptionNetwork.org
Betsie Norris, Executive Director

CONFIDENTIAL ADOPTEE ACCESS TO BIRTH CERTIFICATES

Under current law, the State of Ohio creates a three tiered system for access to pre-adoption birth certificates for adult adoptees. It is our aim to allow the adult adoptee, upon request, to access their original birth certificate and adoption decree confidentially unless a birthparent denial is on file, as is currently allowed in adoptions finalized after 1996. Our goal is to allow, as much as possible, adult adoptees the same right to information about themselves that all Americans enjoy, and to equalize Ohio law regarding adult adoptee access to birth records. (When a child is adopted, an amended birth certificate is created which then replaces the original birth certificate in public record.)

Ohio's Current Three Tiered System

Adoptions Before 1964

- Adopted persons age 21 or older whose adoptions were decreed prior to January 1, 1964, have access upon request to their pre-adoption birth certificate and any documents attached to it at the Division of Vital Statistics (adoption decree).

Adoptions Between 1964-1996

- This "closed unless open" standard is in effect for adoptions finalized between 1/1/64 through 9/18/96.
- The State Adoption Registry was set up in 1986 to allow a birthparent/sibling to sign, at any time, a "Release of Identifying Information" form, which would be placed on file with the Ohio Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics. Birthparents/siblings often do not have access to the information they need to fill out this registry form. At age 21, an adopted person may file a petition with the Probate Court that finalized his/her adoption and inquire if such a form has been filed. In the event of a match, identifying information may be released to the adopted person.
- Adoptees may motion their Probate Court to, upon showing of good cause, open their pre-adoption birth certificate to them on a case by case basis.

Adoptions After 1996

- This time period has a standard of "open unless closed" regarding adult adoptee access to their original birth certificate. The birthparent can allow identifying information to be released or withheld by filing ODHS/JFS Form 1693 during or after the adoption process. If the form is not specified or not present, the adoptee is allowed access to their pre-adoption birth certificate at age 21 on request (the adoptive parent is allowed access at age 18 of the adoptee).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

While many adoptee advocates would like to see one system regarding the release of pre-adoption birth certificates in Ohio, and for that system to be the pre-1964 process, this may not be fully realistic.

We therefore recommend that:

- Ohio maintain the pre-1964 standard of adult adoptee access to their original birth record upon request, as this has worked without difficulty for that time period.
- The birthparent denial system in place starting in 1996 to the present (from House Bill 419 that passed in 1996) needs to be maintained at least for 1996 to the present. The provision allows a birthparent to request that their information not be released. If no such request is on file when the adoptive parent of the adoptee aged 18-20, or the adoptee age 21 or older, requests the original birth certificate, the original birth certificate is released in full.
- The pre-1964 access provisions be maintained for the time periods 1964-1996 and 2010 into the future with the addition of a Contact Preference Form which a birthparent can use to indicate his or her preference regarding contact should the adoptee obtain their original birth certificate and wish to search for the birthparent. In the event that a birthparent expresses wishes for no contact, a current medical history form would also be submitted by the birthparent. Many states have implemented this system over the past decade with success including Oregon, Alabama, New Hampshire and Maine. See attached information about Oregon standards and outcomes.

Reprinted with permission from Adoption Network Cleveland.

For more information, log onto www.AdoptionNetwork.org

Adoption Network Cleveland
(216) 325-1000
www.AdoptionNetwork.org

Quick Facts - Adoptee Access to Their Original Birth Certificates

**New Legislation
Information
for the Adoptee**

The sealing of birth certificates has resulted in:

- Unfair and unequal treatment of adopted persons
- Lack of information for adopted persons, including medical history
- Separation of siblings
- Lifelong difficulties related to identity formation for adopted persons
- Ultimately harming birthparents with unresolved lifelong grief

Reform is needed to:

- Put the best interest of adoptees in the forefront
- Provide adoptees with information to meet their own best interests
- Restore adoptees rights to that of all other citizens in the state
- Provide information to facilitate contact
- Support openness and honesty in adoption

History

- Ohio originally sealed adoption files in 1964 with the intent to protect the adoptive family from public scrutiny. Before that time, adoptees' original birth certificates were available to the public at large. See William B. Norris' 1994 testimony at <http://sites.google.com/site/adoptionequityohio/files>.
- As a result of this 1964 legislation, original birth certificates became sealed from adoptees and in doing so, any and all information regarding an adopted person's birth, heritage and name were permanently cut off from them, even as adults. This was the beginning of the unfair treatment of adopted adults, and the denial of their human right to their own identity.
- Ohio followed a national trend in sealing adoption records that was catalyzed by changes in social theory that emerged in the decades preceding the 1960s. The theory that adoption should be a complete substitute for a family by birth became extremely popular. The intent of adoption policies of that era was to erase any tie between the baby and the birth mother or birth family. This approach was designed to assure the adopted family that there would be no interference from the birth family and was considered, at the time, the best way to ensure a successful adoption.
- This law was not applied retroactively. Ohio adoptees born and adopted prior to 1/1/1964 have always enjoyed full access to their original birth certificates upon request.

Conditional Access

- Legislation passed in 1996 provides conditional access to a select group of adoptees. Adoptees whose adoptions are processed in 1996 or later can receive a copy of their original birth certificate only if the birthparents have not filed a request for non-disclosure.
- Ohio does not keep statistics on how many birthparents have filed for non-disclosure. In states with similar laws where statistics have been tracked, very few birthparents have requested this option.

Adoption Network Cleveland
(216) 325-1000
www.AdoptionNetwork.org

Birthparent Privacy

- Birthparents who surrendered children for adoption were never legally guaranteed privacy or anonymity.
- Original birth certificates are and were sealed upon adoption - not relinquishment. For example, if a child was relinquished into foster care, but never adopted, their records would never be sealed.
- Additionally, Ohio law provides that adoptive parents do not necessarily have to obtain a second, amended birth certificate at the time of adoption. Original birth certificates are only sealed upon the issuance of the second birth certificate.
- No parent could sign a document that would affect the human rights of their child into adulthood.
- Privacy does not equal secrecy. Privacy is about healthy boundaries; secrecy prevents another person from having information about their own identity.
- In the states where access has been granted, a very small percent of birth mothers have requested not to be contacted (less than .01% within a year of legislation passing). See statistics at http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/or_al_nh_me_contact_stats.pdf.

Adoption Professionals are supportive of access.

The Evan B. Donaldson Institute published a report recommending that all states provide unconditional access to birth records to adult adoptees. See Report at http://adoptioninstitute.org/research/2010_07_for_records.php.

Adoptive families

The fear that an adoptee will turn away from his or her adoptive family in favor of the birth family is unfounded; in fact, many adoptees report closer ties to their adoptive family after reuniting.

Identity Matters

The Search Institute found that 72% of adopted adolescents wanted to know why they were adopted, 65% wanted to meet their birth parents and 95% wanted to know which birth parent they looked like.

Anyone who believes in equal rights should care about this issue.

This issue is about the state of Ohio viewing all residents as equal, about righting a wrong that was done, changing old, outdated laws and helping to ensure that adoption laws serve to protect the rights of the adopted person into adulthood.

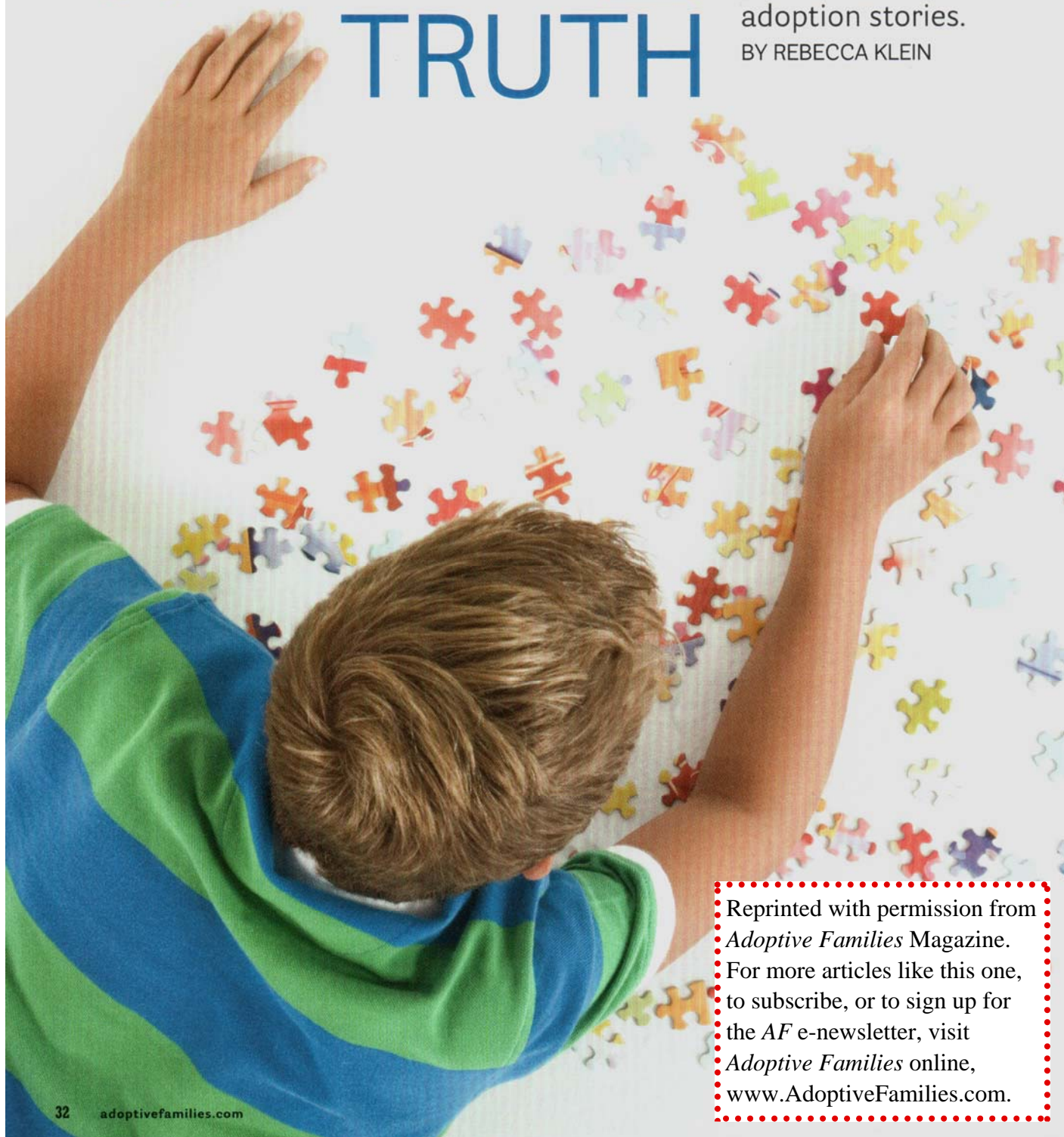
Reprinted with permission from Adoption Network Cleveland.

For more information, log onto www.AdoptionNetwork.org


The WHOLE TRUTH

Advice on revealing
any difficult details
you know about
your children's
adoption stories.

BY REBECCA KLEIN



Reprinted with permission from
Adoptive Families Magazine.
For more articles like this one,
to subscribe, or to sign up for
the AF e-newsletter, visit
Adoptive Families online,
www.AdoptiveFamilies.com.



ne of the toughest problems adoptive parents face is that of talking to our children about the reasons they were placed for adoption. Our families are so happy and loving that we hate to bring up any unpleasant information. So we've pulled together a team of experts to help you talk about the tough stuff with your kids—including how to get the conversation started.

TALKING TIPS

While you may wish you could protect your children from hard truths, the fact is, they think about their birth families and adoption stories more than you know—and they may imagine scenarios worse than the reality. "Parents think that talking about sad things will make a child sad, but they need to know that home is a safe place where sad feelings can be talked through," says Joni

Mantell, LCSW, director of the Infertility and Adoption Counseling Center in New Jersey and New York.

The conversation starters below will help you find the words to begin this serious conversation with an elementary-school-age child—when he begins to understand the concepts of adoption and birthparents. You can have your talk anywhere: in the car on an outing together, during story and snuggle time, whenever your child asks about his adoption.

Experts agree that it's best to reveal details slowly, to tell an age-appropriate story and build on it as your child matures.

"Think of it as a pencil sketch to be filled in later," says Ronny Diamond, MSW, in private practice in New York City, and a consultant for Spence-Chapin. By the time the child is in his early teens, he should know the full story.

"Your child may say, 'This isn't fair,' or 'Why did this happen to me?'" says MaryAnn Curran, vice president of social services and U.S. adoption for the World Association for Children and Parents

(WACAP). It's a big deal for a child to know that his birthparents didn't choose to parent him, and he will need time to get used to the idea. Reassure him that you will always take care of him. "One talk is not enough," says Curran.

Jayne Schooler, coauthor of *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child* and the forthcoming *Wounded Children, Healing Homes*, adds, "Children are more resilient than we give them credit for."

TOUGH TOPIC: Abandonment

In international adoptions, many documents mention "abandonment"—the legal term for one of the reasons a child would be allowed to leave the country and be adopted, says Diamond. But that doesn't make it any easier to explain it to your child.

Whatever the situation, your goal is to tell your child the truth, without painting a negative picture of the birthparents. Steer clear of the word "abandonment"—while it is the legal term used in these situations, infants who are truly abandoned (as opposed to left where they were intended to be found) usually don't survive. Tell your child that she was left in a public place, so that she would be found right away, and, in her country of birth, that is the way a woman must make an adoption plan.

And don't be afraid to talk about feelings. "Children don't just want to know the facts of what happened, they want to know how their birthparents felt," says Mantell. "Using a calm tone, say that the decision was probably heartbreaking for the birthmother, but 'she left you where she knew someone would take care of you and find you a forever family.'" **CONVERSATION STARTER:** "Your birthmother was probably very sad because she couldn't raise you, but she knew that the best place for you to be found and taken care of was the marketplace [or hospital, or wherever the child was found]. You were taken right away to the children's home, where adults fed and changed you and helped bring you to us."

TOUGH TOPIC: Criminal Behavior

Parents don't like to talk about criminal behavior by a birthparent because they don't want to give a negative impression.

They fear the child will think that, if his birthparents were bad, he is bad, too.

"Always talk about good decisions versus bad decisions," says Curran. A birthparent may have made bad choices that put her in prison, but she made a good choice to find a safe home for her child. Children know about breaking rules and getting punished, and will understand their birthparents' story if it's told in this way.

Put the birthparents in the context of their families, if you have family information. For instance, you might explain that the birthmother didn't have parents to help her learn right from wrong, says Diamond. But don't embellish details or make up a story. If you don't know the reason for bad actions, say so: "We don't know why she made these bad choices. But we're so happy she made a good choice to find a safe home for you."

CONVERSATION STARTER: "When you were a baby, your birthmother had to go to jail. She made a very bad decision and broke a law, so she had to be punished. Do you remember when you broke your sister's doll and had to go to your room? When you're a child and you break a rule, that's how you are punished. But when you're an adult and you break a law, sometimes you have to go to jail. Your birthmother knew that she couldn't take care of a child in jail, so she made

a good decision to have you live in a safe place [or the judge decided you needed to live in a safe place]."

TOUGH TOPIC: Poverty

Though poverty seems a simple explanation—the birthparents couldn't afford to provide for the child—it's rarely the only reason for adoption, and it can be scary if it's overemphasized, says Mantell. Poverty can be frightening to children, especially given the images they encounter (in animated movies, people aren't just poor, they're tattered and starving).

"Rather than saying that the parents are living in a mud hut and scrounging for meals, it is better to talk about the things that are free here in the U.S., but which cost so much overseas—things that the birthparents couldn't supply, such as education or health care," says Curran. You can also explain that, in some countries, single

"We've always told our seven-year-old about his birthparents and his grown-up birth siblings, both in conversations and with a lifebook. We explain that his mother was poor and couldn't take care of a baby, and that his father was also unable to take care of a child. We write to his mother and siblings, and they write to us. Our son seems to accept this, and it seems to make him concerned about poor people in general." —AF reader

mothers and their children don't have many opportunities—like going to school

"We say that, rather than being bad people, their birthparents were ordinary people who probably meant well, but made bad choices, or selfish choices, or, ultimately, damaging choices. We point out that they must have been smart, because the girls are so smart, but that their own upbringing and peer groups led to their making poor choices. We tell our girls that we trust they will make better choices in their own lives." —Kathryn

or even getting a government ID card—and the child's birthmother wanted to give him better opportunities than she could provide. For a domestic adoption, explain that the birthmother felt she wasn't able to care for a baby at that time—she didn't have help from her family or the birthfather, or she wasn't working and couldn't provide the things a child would need.

In addition, "Kids may need to talk through the survivor guilt they feel," says Mantell. Children may feel compelled to give to every charity they hear about, or feel guilty about having so many toys. Get them involved in donating to a charity—they may choose one that benefits their birth country—to help them feel proactive.

CONVERSATION STARTER: "Your birthmother did the best she could, but she didn't have the resources to take care of you.

"Alcohol is on the minds of all three of my children. Without prompting from me, they say, 'Vodka is bad.' They have seen me have 'grown-up drinks,' but they know that I have only one or two at a time. It is difficult to talk about alcohol, but it seems they are comfortable with the 'one is OK' approach." —AF reader

She didn't have anyone to watch you while she worked, and she knew she couldn't provide the things you'd need as you grew up, like going to school or seeing a doctor when you got sick. So she made an adoption plan for you to live with a family who could provide those things for you."

Child's response: "But why couldn't you just give her money?"

Your response: "That sounds like a very good idea, and it's good thinking on your

part, but it doesn't work that way. We didn't know your birthmother, and she made this decision to have someone else raise you, because she felt it would give you a better life. We wanted to adopt a baby, and we were told about you. But we do give money to help people in Guatemala, and we hope that we can help many families that way."

TOUGH TOPIC: Birth Siblings

How can you tell your child that his birthmother had another child whom she's raising? Surprisingly, most kids take this news very well. "Parents are afraid that the child will feel rejected because another sibling was 'kept' or came afterward," says Mantell. "But when the idea is put out there early, rather than as a surprise, it gives them time to process it as part of the big picture." The earlier you bring up the issue of birth siblings, the more easily

"We told our children everything we knew about their birthparents right from the start, in an age-appropriate way. There was some painful information in their adoption stories, and it was not easy to hear. Both kids are sad about what they know, but they understand it, and over the years we have talked about the reasons their birthmothers made the choices they did." —Chris

kids accept the information. And later on, they will probably be more at ease connecting with birth siblings than with birthparents.

When you tell your preschooler his adoption story, mention that there are other children. He won't understand that these children are his birth siblings until at least age five or six. When you retell the story when he's that age, add more details. Focus on the circumstances in the birthmother's life at that time—maybe the other children's birthfathers were involved, or the other children were older and more independent. Be clear that the birthmother couldn't care for any new child at that time.

CONVERSATION STARTER: "When you were born, your birthmother had two older boys. Those boys were in school and could take care of some things for themselves, but a baby needs much more care. Your birthmom knew she couldn't care for a baby at that time in her life. So she made a plan to find a family who would be able to take care of you forever."

TOUGH TOPIC: Drug or Alcohol Abuse

Kids usually learn about drugs and alcohol in elementary school, so it's not too early to talk about addiction. In fact, you can use their school lessons to guide the conversation. Again, you want to frame your talk in terms of bad decisions and good decisions—not bad people and good people, says Schooler.

Before your child enters middle school, have this conversation again, and this time let him know that addictions are often genetic. Trying drugs or alcohol may be more dangerous for him than for other kids. Giving your child this information before he has to deal with the peer pressure of the tween and teen years will help him make good choices.

CONVERSATION STARTER: "Your birthmother made some bad choices in her life that stopped her from creating a safe home for you. Do you remember learning about drugs in school? Your birthmother thought that taking drugs would make her feel better, but it actually made it impossible for her to take care of you. So then she made a good choice to find a safe place for you to live."

TOUGH TOPIC: Physical Abuse or Neglect

When a child has a visible scar or remembers being hurt, parents must talk about abuse. Even if your child was abused as a baby, it's still important that you talk about it with him. Many children have a strong pre-verbal memory of abuse or neglect—a child may be afraid to be alone, or afraid of small spaces, and not know why. "Kids have unfocused memories of fear or anger, and you must anchor those memories in something concrete. Parents do a huge service for their child when they help him make sense of his life," says Curran.

"My girls were both adopted from China. We know very little about their early days, and I believe in telling only what we know for sure. At my older daughter's prompting, when she was about four years old, we talked about some of the potential reasons a birthmother might make her decision, but that we did not know why her birthmother had made the decision she did. As she has gotten older, we have begun to talk about societal/family/government pressures that might influence a birthmother's decision. I explained that if a birthmom decides she will not raise the baby, then it's up to other adults to make sure that the baby has everything she needs. It is never the baby's fault that the birthmother could not take care of her—all babies cry, make messes, and so on—and all babies need grown-ups to take care of them." —Mary

Children—even older kids who remember abuse—may fear that they did something wrong that triggered the birthparent's anger. "Tell them that it's always a grown-up problem, and never because something was wrong with the child," says Mantell.

CONVERSATION STARTER: "Your birthmom never learned to be a good parent. Sometimes she hit you when she got angry—not because you did anything wrong, but because she didn't know how to control her temper. You were just a little baby, and you got hurt. I know this sounds terrible, but your birthmom made a really good decision [or a judge made a really good decision] to make you part of a forever family, where you would be safe."

TOUGH TOPIC: Rape

Rape is one of the most difficult things to discuss with a child. Mantell warns against

BRINGING UP BIRTHFATHERS


Since young children tend to focus on their birthmothers, you should make a special effort to include the subject of the birthfather in your talks. Diamond suggests these talking techniques:

- **Include the birthfather from the beginning.** The concept of a birthfather is easier to grasp when kids are three or four, before you need to explain reproduction in depth. You might say: "It takes a man and a woman to make a baby. The baby grows inside the woman, who then gives birth to the baby."
- **Add age-appropriate details.** When your child is five to seven years old, be more specific in your conversations. The key is to be neutral and use language that doesn't label either birthparent in a judgmental way. You might say: "Your birthparents didn't know each other very well, and your birthmom felt that neither of them was grown-up enough to take care of a child."
- **Remember that birthfathers care, too.** If you don't know a lot about your child's birthfather, don't assume that he didn't care. Birthfathers are often as interested in their kids as birthmothers are. Your child should know that.

though she felt she was forced," or similar words to suggest that you don't know for sure. "The message I try to give is, she felt that she said no," says Diamond.

Even if the rape was a random attack, let your child know that this isn't the only thing about her birthfather that she should remember. If you know any details about him, even what he looked like, you can help your child have a more positive image of him.

CONVERSATION STARTER: With young children: "Your birthmother didn't know your birthfather very well [or didn't know him at all]. What we do know is that she said he was very tall and had brown hair, like you."

With older teens: "We've told you that your birthmother didn't really know your birthfather. It says in her file that she said it was not consensual sex. It's hard to know what actually happened in this case. From what I know of your birthmom, I know it would have been hard for her to tell her parents that she had consensual sex. But you know that date rape can happen, too. I would hate for you to focus on just this fact about your birthparents, since there are good things about them and many good qualities they've given you." 

REBECCA KLEIN is the associate editor of *Adoptive Families*. She lives with her family in New Jersey.

UM, ER Want help explaining another tough topic to your kids? Get advice on introducing the birds and the bees to adopted children at adoptivefamilies.com/talking.

talking about rape until the child is in his late teens—not because preteens aren't mature enough to hear about it, but because the talk may make them anxious about their own normal sexual impulses.

It isn't uncommon for a birthmother to say that she was raped, when it would have been difficult for her to tell her parents that she was pregnant. Say, "It appears as

"Our oldest son was born saturated with drugs. He has always known that he was exposed. We told him his mother was going through a difficult time and didn't know that she was pregnant when she did the drugs. Because several other members of his birth family have suffered from addiction, we have told him that he can't ever experiment with drugs or alcohol, as the results could be far more disastrous for him than for others. This information can be presented as being about a person making a wrong choice, rather than as being about a bad person. We tell our younger children, who were abandoned, abused, and neglected, that their birth mommy didn't know the right way to take care of them. When they are older and ask more detailed questions about their stories, I will give them more information." —Margaret