

# Positive Adoption Conversations

An **Adoptive Families** Guide

*Everything you need to know about*

- POSITIVE ADOPTION TALKS AT EVERY AGE
- EXPLAINING BIRTHPARENTS & BIRTH SIBLINGS
- TALKING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY
- EXPLORING TOUGH TOPICS
- ANSWERING QUESTIONS AT SCHOOL



From the editors of *Adoptive Families* magazine

# Positive Adoption Conversations

## An Adoptive Families Guide

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# Starting the Adoption Conversation

Keep talks with your child simple and relaxed. Your ease with discussing adoption lays the groundwork for a lifelong dialogue.

BY FRAN EISENMAN


**T**alking to young children about adoption is an opportunity to shape attitudes and expand knowledge before influences outside the family come into play. Such discussions build self-esteem and give a sense of safety and security to a child. Every child who was adopted should be able to talk about it. This is true even in placements where the child resembles the parents and adoption is not evident to observers. In such cases, parents are not likely to have adoption-related conversations with strangers in public places—and their children miss chances to listen and learn.

Preschoolers are concrete thinkers. They see things as black or white, and cannot appreciate the gray areas in between. They interpret what is said to them literally; metaphor and innuendo are lost on them. They do not have the experience or the abstract thinking to see the bigger picture. It is no wonder that parents struggle to find the right words to launch this lifelong conversation.

## Teachable Moments

Sometimes the best way to talk about adoption is to use a common experience as a teaching tool. For example, in a walk through your neighborhood, you might see a neighbor's new puppy. As your child talks about how cute the puppy is, you can point out how young animals, like young humans, need care day and night. Someone must protect and shelter them. This might prompt your child to wonder aloud what it might have been like if the puppy had no one to take it to the veteri-

narian, to feed it, and to keep it warm. Together, you can share your relief and joy that this puppy now has a home and everything it needs to grow up healthy and happy. Casually, accompanying your words with a hug or a quick kiss, you can say that children need care, too, and that you are thrilled to be her mother. Thus, a casual observation about an everyday event becomes a feel-good lesson about adoption for your child.

Other teachable moments may occur when your child notices a pregnant woman; overhears a comment or is directly asked about differences in his appearance from a parent; or when a new baby comes home, either by birth or adoption, to a family you know. Use snuggly times, like bedtime or reading time, and a calm tone of voice to share the story of how your child came to be adopted into your family. He'll associate pleasant emotions with the words, creating a foundation for later exploration of more complex issues. 



Use everyday experiences to help a young child understand what adoption and caring mean.

FRAN EISENMAN is a New England-based social worker with two internationally adopted children.

## STARTING ADOPTION CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR PRESCHOOLER

- Use simple language and examples familiar to children (like pets or neighbors).
- Keep your tone casual and relaxed.
- Accompany discussion with feel-good actions: snuggles, smiles, laughter.
- Use positive adoption language.
- If you're questioned by a stranger about your child, say that you'd love to chat, adoption has been great for your family, but this is not a good time. If appropriate, take the person's phone number and offer to call later. Your upbeat response lets your child know the topic is not taboo, while protecting his privacy.
- End each adoption talk with your child with an affirmation of how happy you are to have adopted her.

# Talking with Children About Adoption

Is it what you say, how early you say it, or how often you say it that matters most to your child? **BY BARBARA RUSSELL**

**C**atherine Brunson clearly remembers the day she learned she was adopted. After being approached by a classmate at school, her brother asked their mom about adoption.

“My mom took both of us by the hand, led us into the bedroom, and proceeded to tell us the facts of life,” she says. “She went through the whole thing—conception, pregnancy, the birth process, and so on, then segued into how this happened to someone else, not to her and Dad.”

“We were looking at each other going, ‘Wow,’” explains Brunson.

Misguided? Comical? Perhaps, by today’s standards. Effective? Definitely, according to Brunson, who says the incident was key in developing her matter-of-fact attitude about adoption. “After that, we were extremely open about the topic in our family.”

Just like Brunson’s mother 30 years ago, today’s adoptive parents face a similar challenge: helping your children achieve a level of comfort and confidence with their adoption. And the most effective way to accomplish that is by talking to them.

“Children can’t move forward into the future unless they have a grasp of what happened in the past,” says Jane Brown, M.S.W., an adoption educator, consultant, and author. “Talking openly enables them to get their feelings about having been adopted out on the table.”

If talking were all about cozy chats by the fireside, it’d be a snap. But many times,

it involves fielding a question while you’re driving the kids to soccer practice, fending off a stranger’s comment, or deciphering your child’s angry outbursts.

The following techniques, developed by adoption experts, can make talking a little easier and a lot more effective—whether a heart-to-heart conversation or a spur-of-the-moment surprise.

■ **Begin talking when your child is young.** Early talks—starting in infancy—help your child to learn the language of adoption and to begin to grasp his own story. These discussions will benefit both parent and child.

“Tell them early and tell them often,” says Tom Swanson, a dad to four grown children, two adopted domestically and two adopted from Korea. His wife, Linda, adds, “Part of it was to get us accustomed to using the words, before they really even knew what we were talking about.”

Practice the story in your mind, or role-play your responses to questions your child might ask.

It’s important for partners in a two-parent family to coordinate their stories, says Debbie Riley, executive director of the Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE). “They both have to be committed to talking and sharing the story,” she says. “It takes away a lot of the stress.”

■ **Keep your conversations developmentally appropriate.** Susan Fisher

and her coauthor, Mary Watkins, found a common thread when they interviewed families for their book, *Talking with Young Children About Adoption*. “Conversations often started when a kid would ask, ‘Was I in your tummy?’” Fisher says. That’s a common developmental question that usually appears between ages three and four. So, you need to answer in language that can be grasped by a four-year-old.

Think carefully about how to discuss difficult issues without lying. “For example, if you know your child was conceived by rape, you don’t want to start with, ‘Your tummy mommy and daddy loved each other very much,’” says Lois Melina, author of *Raising Adopted Children*. “Say something that implies that her birthparents didn’t know each other very well.”

■ **Be honest.** The adoption story belongs to the child, and the child has a right to know that story.

Developmentally appropriate storytelling isn’t license to replace missing facts or soften harsh ones. “As adoptive parents, we want to make it all better,” Riley says, but we can’t. “What might fly at age six may not fly at 13. That’s why you have to be careful about what you say. Don’t make anything up; just admit you don’t know.”

■ **Talk often, and show that you’re willing to talk whenever your child wants to.** Children absorb concepts through repetition. “We’re asking children to understand complexities that many



adults can't understand," Riley says. "Sometimes the information is too emotionally laden for the child, or he might not have been able to process it developmentally. So it's important for the parent to revisit the information often."

Make sure the conversations are relevant. "Talk about adoption when it seems to be a significant piece of whatever's going on," Melina says. "At some times in a child's life, that's going to be frequent, and sometimes it's going to be infrequent."

■ **If your child isn't talking, consider using techniques to spark conversation.** An indirect conversation allows parents to keep the subject open without forcing the child to participate. "It's meant for the child to hear, but it's not talking to the child," says Joyce Maguire Pavao, Ed.D., founder of the Center for Family Connections and author of *The Family of Adoption*.

For example, Pavao says, a father—knowing his child is within earshot—might ask his wife, "I always think of Lisa on Mother's Day because she's Sally's birthmother. Should we buy flowers for Lisa and put them on the mantel, or send her a card?"

Or comment about a topic casually and see if your child responds. Adoption expert Holly van Gulden calls these indirect conversation starters "pebbles." For example, Brown says, a stranger's nosy questions could prompt you to say later, "I felt so awkward when that woman asked me about our family." Use your child's response (if any) to set the course of conversation.

Sometimes, however, a direct approach works best. "Occasionally we'd simply ask our kids, 'Do you have any questions about adoption?'" Linda Swanson says. Sometimes the children would ask a question, other times, they wouldn't.

■ **Help children learn to express their feelings.** "Help your children develop a feeling-word vocabulary from the time they're toddlers," Brown says. "Expose them to an extensive vocabulary so they can identify feelings that get jum-

bled up and get them out in words."

Look for nonverbal ways to help your child work through adoption issues. Some children might benefit from drawing pictures about their adoption story, Riley says. Older children can write in a journal. "It's a good way to work out a lot of grief and process abstract thoughts," suggests Melina. Of course, the journal is the child's property—no snooping.

■ **If you adopted your child at an older age, make sure he's receiving the explanations and support he needs.** If language is a barrier, Pavao says, talk with the child through a reliable translator. Start the process in-country and continue it at home.

She also encourages families to hold adoption ceremonies to help children understand what's staying the same and what's changing. "Ceremonies are very important," Pavao adds. "Especially when children arrive at an older age."

Don't try to make your child forget her past. "Often, parents think *That was a hard life; we'll bring the child here and make everything better*," Riley says. "But nine years of one's life is nine years. The child should remember—and feel comfortable talking about—everything, both good and bad."

■ **Learn how to respond appropriately to others' questions and comments and teach your children the same skill.** "If somebody walked up to you in the grocery store and asked how much money you make or how often you have sex, you know where the boundaries are," Melina says. "It's important for parents to recognize that being honest and open with their children about their histories doesn't mean they have to be honest and open with everybody they meet."

That can be difficult to do when it comes to adoption. "We're so overjoyed to have our child and so proud of having gotten him home that we're eager to talk," Brown says. "We radiate that. But if we allow the focus to stay there when it shouldn't, we're doing that at our child's expense."

Pavao suggests practicing a stock response to deflect nosy comments. For example, she proposes: "We love to talk

about our personal matters in our family, but we don't talk to strangers about that." Then redirect the conversation or simply say goodbye in a pleasant manner.

Once you're back in the car, give your child an opportunity to talk about the incident if he wants to. Seize the teachable moment, too: "Remember, we don't talk to strangers about personal matters."

■ **In an open adoption, discuss topics with the birthparents, but don't allow them to set the agenda.** "In open adoptions, I think what's most important is to realize that the adoptive parents are the parents forever," Pavao says. "Adoptive parents shouldn't defer parenting to the birthparents. That's not what adoption is. It's not joint custody."

She recommends treating birthparents as extended family members who must be "on board" with the adoption agenda. Be sure that they are aware of your approach to the adoption story and will work with you as your child asks questions.

Now that you've learned those rules, here are the two most important ones:

■ **Don't talk too much.** Every child is different. "If you have four adopted children," Pavao says, "you're going to deal with each one differently. It won't work to follow a template."

You shouldn't force the topic on any child. "I see kids in therapy who tell me their parents never stop reminding them that they're adopted," Pavao recalls.

So how do you know what the best approach is for your child? Simple: You're the parent. "Parents know their kids," Pavao says. "I constantly remind them that they're the experts on their child."

Listen to your children, Fisher advises, and give them what they need, not what you need. A tall order, perhaps, but it's the essence of parenting—adoptive or otherwise.

■ **Feel free to adapt, revise, break, or ignore the rules.** ■

BARBARA RUSSELL is a freelance writer and editor in Charlotte, North Carolina. She and her husband are the parents of two internationally adopted daughters.



# Let's Play Adoption

Fantasy play can be a comfortable way to explore adoption with your child.

BY SUSAN TOMPKINS

I smiled and listened closely as I overheard my daughter, Lillianna, and her friend, Rachael, playing with their dolls the other day. Lilli said, “Let’s play orphanage.” There was no hesitation. Rachael picked up the theme in a heartbeat and said, “I’ll be a mom coming to take my baby home.” And thus began an hour of play between these two adopted seven-year-olds and their dolls.

Adoptive parents have made it a practice to talk with our children about their

adoption stories. We retell them, discuss them from time to time, and add facts and information when it seems appropriate.

We find that younger children freely ask questions or bring up details about their adoption stories. As they grow older, we know they continue to think about how they joined our family. But, ironically, as their thinking becomes more concrete, they tend to ask fewer questions and engage less in discussion about adoption. And, for our part, the pressures of parenting may cause us to

forget about keeping up the conversation.

But, as Lilli and Rachael teach us, there is another way for children to work out their feelings about adoption, and that is through play. Playing is easy, natural, and more fun than talking. And, lucky for us, parents can be a big part of it.

## Barbie’s Homestudy

This realization came to me one day when Lilli asked me to play Barbie with her. I had never been a big fan of Barbie and her friends

(although I admit that they now come in plenty of great colors). On this day, I decided to put my own agenda into the mix. Accordingly, I suggested to Lilli that Barbie and Ken wanted to adopt a baby from China. Usually, Lilli doesn't care for my imposing on her fantasies of dress-up, princesses, and the like. However, on that day she took my suggestion.

We played for quite a while. Lilli took the lead in the dialogue between Barbie and Ken about adoption. I proposed that a social worker come to Ken and Barbie's house for a homestudy, so we could be sure they would be good parents. (I played the social worker.) Barbie and Ken did well in the interview and seemed to have a perfect marriage. The happy couple then flew to China in the pink convertible that is all the rage for Barbies this year (and every year). They went to an orphanage and came home with a beautiful baby.

So when I heard Lilli say to Rachael, "Let's play orphanage," it was music to my ears. Hearing her suggest this on her own meant that my daughter was comfortable enough to share her feelings and beliefs about adoption with her friend. It probably helped that her playmate had a similar adoption story. Still, the playing gave Lilli and Rachael another way to work out their feelings. It has helped Lilli to understand and accept her past.

Playing adoption gives me a gentle and effective way to provide my daughter with more information. Lilli knows that families have to pass a social worker's scrutiny to adopt. Later, I will add more bits about the adoption process and her own story.

## Many Ways to Play

I like everything about playing adoption. It is a positive way for my daughter to explore her own beginnings. You can play about adoption in general, or you can reenact and explore parts of the child's own adoption story.

You can also use playtime to probe your child's feelings. Explore how it must have felt to be in a new place, to come home to a new family, and ask how it feels now. There are many levels to the play. You and your child can decide what you want to do. When you ask questions or suggest scenarios, the child can go with it, if she wishes. If she feels threatened by the direction the play is

## HOW WE PLAY

**We asked AF readers to describe their children's imaginative explorations of the way their families were formed. You said:**

"Our daughter, age five, has been 'giving birth' to her numerous stuffed animals for the last year. She will carry them around under her shirt until they are 'born,' and then my husband and I comment about her being their 'birthmother.' At other times, she will 'adopt' animals. Both games have resulted in some great conversations about her birth family and adoption experience." —Kim, North Carolina

"When my son was about three, we went through six months of playing 'Baby in the Orphanage' almost daily. He would lie in his bed and be the baby, then I would 'fly' to the 'orphanage.' I would have to beg the 'director' to let me see my baby, then pledge to care for Ethan, and to take him to Chuck E. Cheese (the pledges changed frequently). I loved this time and am sad he has grown out of it." —Judy, California

"When she was three, Payton began exploring the idea of adoption with Barbie, Ken, and her Happy Family Midge doll (the doll has a magnetic tummy with a baby in it). She would say: 'Birthmommy has the baby, and then Mommy and Daddy go to meet her. Everybody is so happy.' We must have played this nightly for six months, and I never tired of watching or participating." —Paula, Ontario, Canada

"When my daughter was three, she invented a game that we played after her baths. She would sit on my lap and poke her face out from her towel, and I would say, 'What a beautiful little baby!' The game gradually became more involved, with scripted lines. When she was five, she added a surprise ending—when I started to peel away the towel, she'd burst out, and I'd exclaim, 'My goodness! You're not a baby, you're a BIG girl!' Now that she's 10, and really a big girl, the game has faded away. From time to time, though, she'll bring it up fondly, with lots of giggling." —Mary, New York


taking, she can end it or change the storyline. You'll know what is working when you see it.

## Not Just for Girls

Dolls are perfect tools for playing out scenarios. So, what about our boys, who may not want to play with dolls, G.I. Joe or otherwise? Do boys prefer to sublimate their feelings rather than discuss them? I decided to try other strategies with Tino, my son, who is 11 and does not care to discuss his adoption story very much. Legos are my son's "thing." He plays out stories constantly as he builds and rebuilds. Star Wars, rescue missions, World War II battles, and current events are his realms. I entered this world one evening by asking, "Can I play Legos with you?" He was surprised, since I do not venture into this arena often. "What would you want to play?" he asked. "I was thinking of building your orphanage," I replied. A

barrage of questions ensued. How many stories would it have, did we have any baby Lego people, and what about a crib? Tino was delighted to play with me.

Our play was part reality, as I recounted details of the day I met him, and part fantasy, as we played out a rescue mission with a Lego car that turned into an airplane. Tino had built it specially for this event. During our time together, I shared new details about his story. These were minor things, but every one became important to him. At the end of our play, Tino said, "I'm just so happy I got to come home to this family."

Our children need to accept the past so they can grow and become emotionally healthy adults. Playing adoption with them can help get them there. 

SUSAN TOMPKINS is the executive director of Journeys of the Heart Adoption Services. She lives with her family in Oregon.

# Play by the Rules

As your child explores her world through fantasy play, you'll find plenty of opportunities to weave in parts of her story.

Playing adoption one-on-one with your child can help him process his feelings and start talking, while bringing you closer and providing hours of fun. If your child hasn't wanted to discuss adoption in the past, or has recently stopped asking questions, playing might be the way to get him to open up. Use dolls or puppets and some simple dialogue to act out parts of your child's story and explore different family members' roles. Let the games begin!

## COMMON QUESTIONS

Here are some questions that might come up during play scenarios that involve adoption or different types of families, along with suggested responses you can adopt:

### **"Why wasn't I born in your tummy?"**

"Your dad and I couldn't make a baby but we wanted a baby to love and take care of very much. You were born from your birthmother's tummy, and then Daddy and I adopted you. I wish you'd been born in my tummy, too."

### **"Why did you adopt me?"**

"We wanted a child to love and take care of."

### **"Why didn't my first mother keep me?"**

"Sometimes a man and a woman give birth to a baby, but they can't take care of any child right then. It's not because of anything about the child. It's for grown-up reasons. So they find another family that can take care of the child."

### **"What does my first mother look like?"**

"You are wondering what your birthmother looks like." If you know what she looks like, describe her after you've acknowledged the question. If you don't know, you might say something like, "She must be very beautiful if she looks like you." Together, imagine what she might look like, or invite your child to draw a picture.

## SAY IT SIMPLY

- "Every baby is born to a man and a woman." (A key concept for three- to five-year-olds to understand)
- "Families form in different ways: Babies can live with the family they were born in, or they can live with the family that adopts them."
- "Sometimes a woman can't grow a baby, so she adopts a baby."
- "Sometimes a mom and dad can't take care of a baby who is born to them, so they find another family to raise their child."
- "Sometimes families adopt children from far away."

## TALKING MATTERS

Susan Saidman, program director at Adoptions Together, in Silver Spring, Maryland, advises parents that preschool-aged children need:

**...to know they were wanted and loved**—and that nothing they did or didn't do led to their being placed for adoption.

**...to know that we are here for them.** As they grapple with what adoption means, help them understand that they can bring any question to you.

**...to know that adoption is forever.** They will not be "un-adopted" if they don't behave well.

**...to hear that adoption is not shameful or secret.** This is just one of the ways families are formed.

**...to normalize adoption as a way to build a family.** Even though most children are not adopted into their families, adoption has been around since human beings first formed communities. Children are remarkably clear about relationships, and accept as normal what we present as normal.

**...to hear our respect and compassion for their birthparents.** Even if we know troubling information about their birthparents, we should send the message that they did their best. Our children need to feel that they were born to good and loving people, and to know that they have two families.

**...to hear our acceptance of their ambivalence or sadness about having been adopted.** Sad feelings don't compromise our family's closeness. Talking about them brings us closer.

**...to hear positive adoption language.** They were not "given up," "put up," or "given away." Their birthparents made a plan so that they could be cared for in a safe, loving home forever. When we hear adoption concepts stated in a negative way, by other people, or even by our children, we can rephrase what they say in positive terms.

**...to be assured of our willingness to keep discussing adoption,** even as they grow, and the questions and feelings become more complex and difficult to express.



**ONLINE:** Find many more resources from the AF archives on talking with your child about adoption at [adoptivefamilies.com/talking](http://adoptivefamilies.com/talking).





# Talking to Your Three- to Five-Year-Old About Adoption

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

**T**hree- to five-year-olds are curious. Their burgeoning cognitive and language skills are tools for figuring out what life is about. The questions they ask offer insight into how much they want to belong, to be accepted, to be safe and secure. They have short attention spans and will change the subject or ignore us once their curiosity is satisfied or our talk goes on too long.

The best approach to adoption questions is to answer only the question your child is asking, in the simplest possible way. Offer words for expressing feelings, and let your child know that you're always game for talking. Talking calmly and matter-of-factly about adoption sends your child the most important message of all: that adoption is OK and he can feel completely comfortable discussing whatever is on his mind.

**Here are some questions preschoolers are likely to ask, along with some answers you might offer:**

### *"Why wasn't I born in your tummy?"*

- "Your dad and I couldn't make a baby, but we wanted a baby to love and take care of very much. You were born from your birth-mother's tummy, and then Daddy and I adopted you." "I wish you'd been born in my tummy, too."

### *"Why did you adopt me?"*

- "We wanted a child to love and take care of."

### *"Why didn't my first mother keep me?"*

- "Sometimes a man and a woman give birth to a child, but they can't take care of any child right then. It's not because of anything about the child. It's for grown-up reasons. So they find another family who can take care of the child."

### *"What does my first mother look like?"*

- "You are wondering what your birthmother looks like." *If you know what she looks like, once you've acknowledged the question, describe her. If you don't know, you might say something like, "She must be very beautiful if she looks like you." Imagine together what she might look like, or invite your child to draw a picture.*

## SAY IT SIMPLY

- "Every baby is born to a man and a woman." (A key concept to impart at this age.)
- "Families form in many ways: Babies can live with the family they were born in; babies can live with the family that adopts them."
- "Sometimes a woman can't grow a baby, so she adopts a baby."
- "Sometimes a mom and dad can't take care of a baby who is born to them, so they find another family to raise their child."
- "Sometimes families adopt children from far away."

## A SAMPLE CONVERSATION

**When my three-year-old, Sasha, adopted as an infant in Florida, first noticed a pregnant woman, our discussions of life and birth began.**

**SASHA:** "I was in your tummy, too, Mommy."

**ME:** "You were in Linda's tummy. Your birth-mother gave birth to you, and then Daddy and I adopted you."

**SASHA:** "But how did you and Daddy get me from Linda's tummy?"

**ME:** "Linda couldn't take care of any baby, and we needed a baby to love and take care of. So we adopted you to be our baby."

**What if a child doesn't ask about adoption?** Some of us believe that if a child does not ask about adoption, she does not want to know. In fact, a child who does not ask may simply be keeping her thoughts to herself. Your casual mention of adoption—"Did you know that Janie was adopted from Guatemala?"—gives her permission to ask.

## Talking Strategies

- ◆ **Make sure you know** what your child is really asking before answering a question.
- ◆ **Offer concrete ways** of expressing feelings. Suggest that your child dictate a letter to a birth-parent, to send or to put in a special place. Have her draw a picture. Use dolls to act out feelings and questions.
- ◆ **Read books together** about adoptive families. Bedtime reading can be a warm and affectionate experience—a time when your child feels secure and open to questions.
- ◆ **Reflect and repeat** what your child says. Paraphrasing her words demonstrates that you are paying attention and are interested.



## Adoption Books for Three- to Five-Year-Olds

- ◆ *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperCollins)
- ◆ *Susan and Gordon Adopt a Baby*, by Judy Freudberg & Tony Geiss (Random House)
- ◆ *How I Was Adopted*, by Joanna Cole (HarperCollins)
- ◆ *We're Different, We're the Same*, by Bobbi Jane Kates (Random House)
- ◆ *Love You Forever*, by Robert Munsch (Firefly Books)
- ◆ *Through Moon and Stars and Night Skies*, by Ann Warren Turner (HarperCollins)
- ◆ *The Day We Met You*, by Phoebe Koehler (Aladdin Paperbacks)

## WHY IS TALKING IMPORTANT?

### Children at this age need:

...to know they were wanted and loved—and that nothing they did or didn't do led to their being placed for adoption.

...to know that we are here for them. As they grapple with what adoption means, help them understand that they can bring any question to you.

...to know that adoption is forever. They will not be "un-adopted" if they don't behave well.

...to know they have two families. (The details can come later.) My daughter delights in listing all the family she has, both birth and adoptive, even though she has met only a few of them.

...to hear that adoption is not shameful or secret. This is just one of the ways families are formed.

...to normalize adoption as a way to build a family. Even though most children are not adopted into their families, adoption has been around since human beings first formed communities. Children are remarkably clear about relationships and accept as normal what we present as normal.

...to hear our respect and compassion for their birthparents. Even if we know troubling information about birthparents, we should send the message that they did their best. Our children need to feel that they were born to good and loving people.

...to hear our acceptance of their ambivalence or sadness about having been adopted. Sad feelings don't compromise our family's closeness. Talking about them only brings us closer.

...to hear positive adoption language. They were not "given up," "put up," or "given away." Their birthparents made a plan so that they could be cared for. When we hear adoption concepts stated in a negative way, by other people or even by our children, we can rephrase what they say in positive terms.

...to be assured of our willingness to keep discussing adoption, even as they grow and the questions and feelings become more complex and difficult to express.

*Susan Saidman is a mother by adoption to Sasha. She directs a domestic adoption program for Adoptions Together in Silver Spring, Maryland.*



# Talking to Your Six- to Eight-Year-Old About Adoption

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

**I** think things that you don't know about!" my daughter, Sasha, informed me soon after she turned six. She was letting me know that she was becoming aware of herself as a person separate from me. By this age, children are starting school. Peers and teachers begin to influence their view of the world and of themselves. Children take on new roles—of pupil, classmate, friend—and they begin to question where, exactly, they fit in the world.

At this age, your child is likely to realize that most children were not adopted into their families. Remember: Your child isn't the only one tuning into the world outside his home. Your child's classmates, too, are becoming more curious about the people around them. They are likely to ask your child blunt questions about himself and his family. The more prepared your child is with answers, the better.

Understanding why their birthparents were not able to raise them is an important task for children this age. They may connect being adopted by one family with being "rejected" by another. If you've been talking about adoption in a loving way, you'll be ready for this stage, but you'll face more direct questions now. Answer honestly, and be as concrete as you can in your descriptions of your child's birthparents, what their life was like, and why they weren't able to raise a child. These discussions go hand-in-hand with reassuring your child that you will always be there to take care of him—that adoption is forever. This message is more important than ever before.

### T.I.P. = Tell, Ignore, Keep It Priate

This acronym helps children remember that they can choose with whom they do and do not share personal information. For example, if a schoolmate asks, "Why did your real mother give you up?" your child will know that he can choose among the following options:

**TELL:** "My birthmother was not able to take care of me."

**IGNORE:** Don't answer; change the subject or walk away.

**KEEP IT PRIVATE:** "That's a private story."

*Susan Saidman is a mother by adoption to Sasha. She directs a domestic adoption program for Adoptions Together in Silver Spring, Maryland.*

### WHAT'S GOING ON WITH MY CHILD?

**Identity is more complex. Children at this age think more abstractly, asking:**

- "Who am I apart from my parents? How am I like my birthparents?"
- "How am I different from my classmates?"

**Associating "special" with "different."**

- A preschooler may see her adoption as special, but an older child sees the other side of special: different.
- At school age, children grasp that most children live with their birthparents. They begin to process the fact that their birthparents chose not to raise them.

**Mingling fantasy and reality.**

- Changing facts is a strategy children use to protect themselves from realities they aren't ready to cope with.
- Your child might say, "My birthmother was a princess."

**Emerging fears.**

- Children this age understand how helpless they'd be if their parents were to die.
- Fear of kidnapping may reveal deeper fears that he was kidnapped from his birthparents—and could be kidnapped back.

### AND WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

**Help your child gather what you know about her birthparents.**

- Highlight attributes she might share with them: "Your birthmother must be very beautiful and athletic."
- Make a scrapbook.

**Normalize your family by socializing with other adoptive families.**

- Be open to ambivalence about having been adopted. You might say, "It's OK. We all feel sad when we've lost something or someone."
- Show how to express feelings constructively: "It's OK to say you are mad. It's not OK to hit your sister."

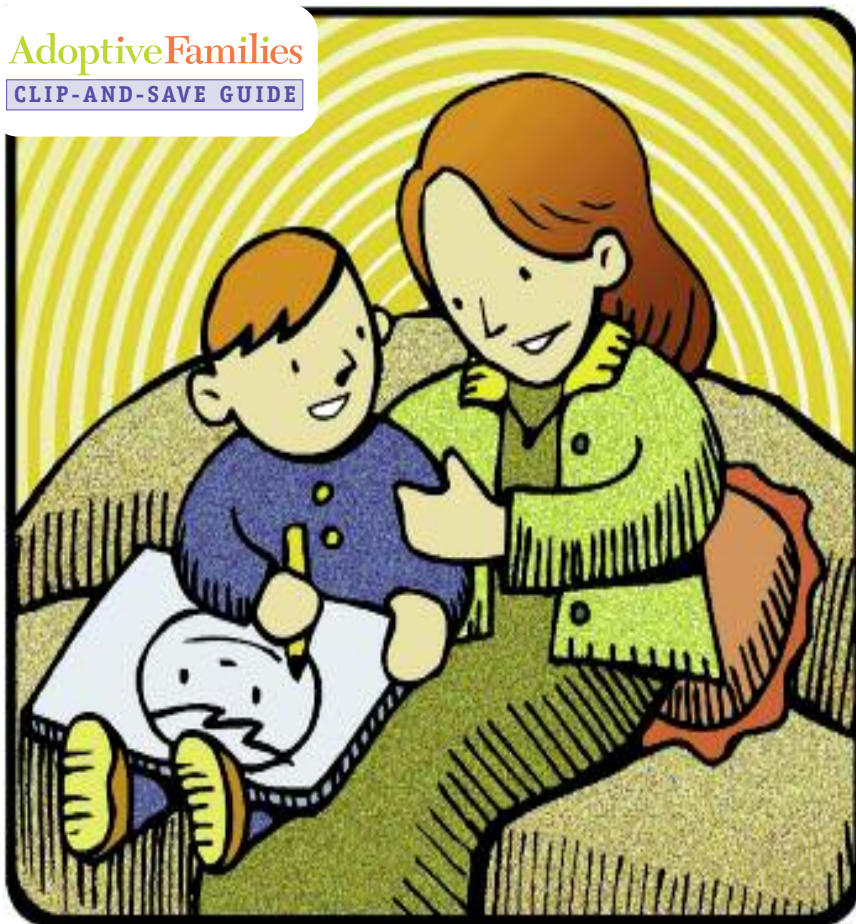
**Don't directly contradict your child's fantasy.**

- It is playing an important role in her development.
- Say: "It's OK to pretend. I can see why you'd want to make the story happier."

**Reassure your child that no one can take him away.**

- Show him his adoption certificate.
- Describe concretely why he was placed for adoption.
- Share a birthmother's letter describing why she was not able to raise a child.





# SMILE BE GENTLE AND HUMOROUS

As they mature, our children will note how we react to comments from strangers and acquaintances about adoption. Developing polite and playful ways of fielding ridiculous comments is a powerful tool to use to manage our own feelings and to teach our children.

## Becoming a School Advocate

Difficult questions will come up in the classroom, when we're not around to help our children formulate a response. **You can support them and help create a positive environment at school by:**

- ◆ **volunteering** to visit your child's classroom. Use the time to give an adoption presentation or to simply read an adoption storybook aloud.
- ◆ **preparing a program** for teachers or inviting a local agency that has a post-adoption program to come in and talk with teachers about how to expand and modify assignments that might be difficult for adoptive families.
- ◆ **suggesting alternatives** to the family tree, biographical timelines, and other tricky projects. Find creative solutions at [adoptivefamilies.com/school](http://adoptivefamilies.com/school).

## What if my child says...?

**"I must have been a bad baby for my mom to give me away."** Resist arguing with a comment such as "No, you were a wonderful baby." But correct misperceptions: "It's nothing you did that made your birthmother plan adoption. All babies are good, but they need to be taken care of." (This is a good time to make examples of the babies you know in the neighborhood.) "Your birthmother wasn't able to take care of you."

## ◆◆◆ Affirming Activities for Parents and Children

As kids become aware of how many different sorts of families there are, it's important to emphasize that adoption is a great way to make a family, that their birthparents are good and loving people, and that they can feel proud of themselves. You can do this by:

- ◆ reading books or renting videos with adoption themes, such as *Anne of Green Gables*, *Superman*, and *Free Willy*.
- ◆ making cards for birthparents on

Mother's Day and Father's Day.

- ◆ collecting pictures of themselves they want their birthparents to see.
- ◆ talking about birthparents, their country/culture/race/background.
- ◆ imagining birthparents, if you don't know them. What must they look like? Which interests might they share with your child? Invite children to draw a picture of what they might look like.
- ◆ showing compassion and acceptance

of difficult circumstances that led birthparents to place their child for adoption.

- ◆ making connections with role models who share your child's racial or ethnic background, famous and not.
- ◆ reminding children about how much deceased people in your family loved them or would have loved them. These loving figures become inner resources.
- ◆ putting a map on the wall showing all the places your family comes from.





# Talking to Your Nine- to Twelve-year-old About Adoption

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

**A**re you ready for the middle years? As any parent of a nine- to 12-year-old will tell you, glimpses of teen moodiness can appear at this stage, especially in girls, who mature more quickly than boys. But for the most part, preteens are open to talking and have the intellectual sophistication for satisfying conversations.

This is the time to establish your role as advocate and coach in preparation for the challenges that are soon to come—while you are still able to teach, guide, and set limits.

Don't attribute all problems to adoption. Research shows that most adopted kids do just as well as their peers who were not adopted.

We need to ask more questions at this stage. Children may keep more to themselves as their own questions become more complex. Ask open-ended (not yes or no) questions. Reinforce the lines of communication that will be crucial in guiding your child into adulthood.

### Reassure Them!

**At this age children are coping with the demands of schoolwork and peers, teachers and counselors, coaches and teammates (and parents!). They want to know:**

- ◆ Am I loved?
- ◆ Am I attractive?
- ◆ Am I smart and capable?
- ◆ Can I make and keep friends?
- ◆ Am I like my peers and my family?
- ◆ Was I adopted because my birthparents didn't love me? Is there something wrong with me?

*Susan Saidman is a mother by adoption to Sasha. She directs a domestic adoption program for Adoptions Together in Silver Spring, Maryland.*



ILLUSTRATION BY WOOK JIN JUNG

## Talking Strategies

- ◆ **REAFFIRM SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCES:** "Yes, we are both good at fixing things. You must get your talent for writing from your birthparents."
- ◆ **ACCEPT YOUR CHILD'S ANGER,** an easier emotion to express than sadness or hurt, especially at this age: "You're angry at your birthmother for taking drugs. That might be why you have some learning challenges. I can see why you might feel upset." Or "I wonder what her life was like?"
- ◆ **BE PHYSICALLY AFFECTIONATE.** Now is the time to cuddle; teenagers are often less open to physical affection. Hugs connect us when words fail, strengthen our bond, and inoculate us against future friction.
- ◆ **USE POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE.** Your attitude and words are the best models for your child. Talk about adoption with pride, and your child will know what to say when you're not around to come to his rescue.

CONCEPT/TASK	CONVERSATION/ACTIVITY
<b>LOTS OF PEOPLE WERE ADOPTED.</b>	Tell the adoption stories of children and adults you know. Check out an adoption-related movie or book together. (See list below.)
<b>THIS IS MY FAMILY.</b>	Ask your child to draw a picture of her family. Talk about what, whom, and how she chooses to draw.
<b>PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND ADOPTION.</b>	Ask your child how others react to learning he was adopted. Let him know it is his choice to tell, ignore, or keep adoption information private.
<b>EVERYONE HAS FEELINGS.</b>	Ask your child how it feels to think about her adoption story—and how it feels to talk about it with others. Help her prepare answers in advance as a way of managing emotions.
<b>I WAS ADOPTED.</b>	Talk with your child about what that means to him. Look through his lifebook or your family's adoption scrapbook together.
<b>WHO AM I?</b>	Ask your child to draw a picture of herself. Use it to talk about what she sees as her strengths and weaknesses, which aspects she shares with you, and which she might share with her birth family.
<b>BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM.</b>	Plan outings with other adoptive families and with children your child feels comfortable around.

## When to Seek Therapy

Some children cope with their growing awareness by becoming angry or depressed, or by acting out. These behaviors or feelings may not be related to adoption; however, whatever is happening in your child's life, adoption comes along for the ride. Think about seeking help if your child:

- ◆ threatens to leave home
- ◆ has difficulty managing anger
- ◆ behaves in a way that is a dramatic departure from his usual personality and temperament
- ◆ suddenly shuns social activities, although she is typically outgoing
- ◆ suddenly challenges authority in school (Challenging parental authority is normal for American children. "You are not the boss of me" is their mantra!)

This is a stage when children may be more open to talking with a family therapist than they will be later. And many experts recommend this as the time to convey difficult or troubling aspects of a child's adoption story. A therapist can prepare parents for challenging conversations, and help give a child sensitive information, with the parent on hand for support and discussion.

## When Your Child Says Nothing at All

If your child doesn't bring up adoption, it doesn't mean that he doesn't want to talk about it. Let him know you're open to talking by saying:

- ◆ "Do you ever think about meeting your birthparents?"
- ◆ "Do you know if [your friend] knows her birthparents?"
- ◆ "It's been a while since we have talked to your birthmother."
- ◆ "I noticed that you turned away when I brought up visiting your birthmother. What were you feeling?"

## Losses Children This Age Are Coming to Terms With

- ◆ Loss of the biological family: "Why couldn't they raise me?"
- ◆ Loss of being a "normal" family: "I wish we could just be like other families."
- ◆ Loss of innocence about adoption: "Now I get it: Special means different."
- ◆ Loss of status (real or imagined): "Will kids tease me about being adopted?"
- ◆ Loss of a wholly positive view of adoption: "That story about that birthmother on the news was scary."

*In recognizing these losses, grieving them, and coping with them, children build inner resources and vital life skills.*

## Conversation Starters

Movies and books are an excellent way to normalize adoption. Authors have written about adoption throughout history, and many other stories have made their way on to the silver screen.

***Anne of Green Gables***, by Lucy Maud Montgomery (Sterling)

***The Great Gilly Hopkins***, by Katherine Paterson (HarperCollins)

***Heidi***, by Johanna Spyri (Sterling)

***Pollyanna***, by Eleanor H. Porter (Dover)

***Superman*** (Warner Home Video)

***Welcome Home, Roxy Carmichael*** (Paramount)

***Hotel for Dogs*** (Paramount)

# The Evolving Conversation

Should parents initiate talk about adoption or wait for their child's questions? Sometimes you lead, and sometimes you follow.

BY GAIL STEINBERG AND BETH HALL



**H**ow will I talk to my child about adoption?" This is a question every parent asks himself or herself. Even as your new baby takes her first steps, you

wonder if you'll be ready when the questions start to come. Soon you realize that your child is simply your child, not your "adopted" child, and it becomes difficult even to imagine an adoption talk. But

you'll have this conversation, not just once, but over time, offering more information as your child matures. Sometimes its coming will take you by surprise, launched by the query of a curious child.



Sometimes you'll see an opening and take it, offering the chance to talk if the feelings fit. The key here is comfort, to create an atmosphere of openness and warmth in which both parent and child feel free to approach a hard topic.

What if you miss an opportunity? What if a question is asked and you deflect a thought? Relax. You have a whole childhood in which to talk. Some time between ball games and play dates, math tests, and family reunions, you'll have your conversations. In a way, talking about adoption is like dancing with your child. Sometimes he leads and you follow. Sometimes it's the reverse. And with each conversation, successfully joined, the dance will become more graceful. So go ahead, take that first step.

### **DIRECTED PLAY: Following a child's lead**

The goal with even the youngest child is to create a healthy intimacy. A preschooler feels like the star of his own adoption story when it is presented as something that makes his parents happy. And don't be fooled by their using the right words. Three- to five-year-olds often use words without having a clear idea of what they mean. Research makes it clear they are sometimes mimicking more than understanding.

Four-year-old Haley was all seriousness and concentration as she cooked our breakfast at her toy stove in the backyard—sand oatmeal, pebble popovers, squashed raspberries, pretend vanilla ice cream. Pouring cold-water tea from a red flowered pot into thimble-size cups, she served up her feast as grandly as a queen. I took imaginary sips from my little cup. It was a summer day, the sun was shining, and we had the time to do anything we chose. I was filled with every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous inch of my preschool daughter. It was hard to keep from scooping her up and holding her close.

Haley was the one who broke the silence, by asking gravely, "Do you

remember when I came out of Daddy's tummy?"

Curiously, I was not panic-stricken. *What do I say? How do I say it?* I thought. I breathed. I paid attention. I told myself, "This is not the only chance I will have to talk about adoption."

"Haley, you didn't come out of Daddy's tummy. Only mommies can grow babies inside of their bodies, not

daddies. I've been your mommy since you were born, but you were not in my body either. Daddy and I adopted you. Your birthmommy, Ellie, carried you in her body, and when you were ready to be born, you came out of her."

"Nope, your body," Haley insisted. "If I wasn't in Daddy, I was in you."

"I can see how you might have thought that," I said. "Actually, Daddy and I came to get you at the hospital as soon as Ellie gave birth to you. You grew inside your birthmommy, just like all babies do. And when it was time for you to be born, you came out of your birthmommy, just like all babies do. But Ellie didn't think she could take care of you and give you all the things she knew all babies need. She was sad that she couldn't take you home with her and care for you, but she picked us to be your other real mommy and daddy forever. We're so happy she did."

"What did you say when you first saw me?"

"We said, 'How amazing! How wonderful! You are our most important dream come true! We are so happy!' And we wrapped you in your yellow blankie and drove home very, very carefully, right to the place where you were going to be forever. With us, your very real parents!"

"Oh," she said, relaxing against me. "Would you care for some more tea now?"

The best way to read children's feelings about adoption is by their actions rather than their words. To know what your child is thinking, play with her. Use dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, scarves, trucks—whatever toys she enjoys making up stories with. Let her be the boss and tell you what your character in the story is supposed to do. For example, if she asks you to be a lost puppy, while she is the mother dog, ask her how to do it. Rather than initiating the pretend plot, ask your child if the puppy is scared, or worried, or hungry. Your child will probably be delighted to

## **LET YOUR CHILD LEAD THE CONVERSATION...**

- [] Whenever** kids ask direct questions or make statements about adoption
- [] Whenever** outsiders ask questions about your family in front of your kids
- [] When** adoption comes up as a school issue or in sensitive school assignments
- [] When** hurtful incidents occur.

## **FOLLOW HIS LEAD BY ASKING...**

- [] What** happened
- [] How** it made her feel
- [] When** it happened
- [] If** he's happy with what he said or did
- [] If** there is anything you can do (or could have done) to help.

## **INITIATE CONVERSATION...**

- [] When** your intuition tells you to
- [] When** your child appears sad or contemplative
- [] When** your child experiences loss
- [] On** your child's birthdays
- [] On** Mother's Day and Father's Day
- [] Whenever** the subject of birthparents comes up in books, films, or casual conversation
- [] Whenever** there is an opportunity.



be in charge and direct your actions.

Follow your child's lead and don't push to give the story a happy ending. You want to learn how she interprets the situation. You may be surprised, but try not to seem distressed. Remember, this is a window into your child's thinking at this one moment.

If the story is unhappy or anxiety-provoking, come back to it later. Over time you will have opportunities to clarify and expand understanding.

## SHARE YOUR FEELINGS:

### Leading by example

One way to take the lead in discussing adoption is to offer your own experiences of being an adoptive parent, both the happy and the sad. Disclosing difficulties often has more impact than sharing only joyous feelings. Kids know it's not easy to talk about the hard stuff, and they feel honored to receive "privileged information."

When I picked Jordan up from school that day, I hoped he couldn't see how crummy I felt. During a visit that morning, my aunt had implied that I could never love Jordan as much as I would a child who was born into our family. She talked about blood being thicker than water. I felt hurt and angry. I was doing my best to hide it—afraid my little boy would pick up on it.

"What's wrong, Mom?" he asked as soon as he got into the car.

"Nothing, Honey," I replied. "Don't worry about it."

We drove in silence for a while, me not trusting myself to say more, Jordan seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. During our long drive home, I had a lot on my mind, and I could tell Jordan was concerned by my silence. I wondered whether I should share the conversation and my feelings about it with him. Wasn't it up to me to protect him from the hurtful views some people have of adoption and not to burden him with adult concerns? On the other hand, we

always asked Jordan to share his feelings.

"Are you OK, Mom?" he asked again as we came to a standstill in traffic.

"Sometimes it's hard to talk about things, Honey, so thank you for asking. Something upsetting happened to me today. I'll try my best to tell you about it, but I'm embarrassed, hurt, angry, and sad all at once. It doesn't have anything to do with you. Someone I thought was close to me said some stupid things about my not being a real mother, and it really hurt my feelings. Some people just don't understand that you are my real son, I guess."

"Oh," he said. A few minutes later he added, "I wonder if it's like how I feel when kids ask me why my real mom didn't want me." I was astonished.

"Maybe."

"Why didn't my birthmom want me, Mom? Do you think maybe I cried too much?"

Wow, I thought. Jordan had never mentioned this before. With a sigh, I reached over to rub his back.

"Babies are supposed to cry," I said. "Crying is how babies tell us they need something before they can talk. Sometimes when a baby is born, his parents have problems that keep them from being able to take care of *any* baby. It's not ever the child's fault."

Jordan and I were quiet the rest of the way home. We held hands across the seat, and we both had a feeling that something important had happened. When we got home, as we were getting out of the car, Jordan said, "I'm glad you told me, Mom. I like it when you tell me how you feel, even if you feel sad."

"Me, too," I said.

It's important, too, to give your children permission to express their concerns about birthparents without denying their feelings or trying to fix things. Parents can show that they accept their children's feelings with an empathetic sigh or hug, a soft exclamation, or just by saying "What a

way to feel." When parents share painful, as well as joyous, experiences, children feel free to follow.


## THE CASUAL COMMENT: Leading by opening topics you think matter

Another way to lead is by making casual comments and letting them resonate. Your child may not respond to these at all. Nonetheless, by putting them out there, you are saying you are ready to discuss these issues when they are. Do this often, simply by thinking out loud about things you've read or seen on TV, the genetic traits your child inherited, or feelings. Here are some examples:

"You're such a talented pianist, and now you're even composing your own songs. I wonder if someone in your birth family was a musician."

"I always think about your birthmother when it's time for your birthday. I wonder if you think about her, too."

"I read that lots of adopted kids think it's their fault they got placed for adoption."

Adoption is but one aspect of your family's life. Remember, the goal is to create a reasonable balance between talking about adoption and just living daily life. Ask yourself, when was the last time adoption came up? If you can't remember, it's probably time to raise the subject. But none of us is defined by a single feature of our lives. We are parents first, not adoptive parents. Never forget your most important job—creating the close family you dreamed of when you began the journey toward adoption. Life is a gift. Our children are treasures. Cherish them above all. 

GAIL STEINBERG and BETH HALL are the co-founders of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, and coauthors of *Inside Transracial Adoption*.

# Why Didn't They Keep Me?

How to answer children's questions about their birthparents.

BY CARRIE KRUEGER

**S**ix-year-old Michael wants to call his birthfather in Texas and ask why he didn't keep him. Eight-year-old Rachel asks her mother, "Did I look funny when I was born? There must have been something wrong with me." Nine-year-old Suzanne wants to know whether her birthmother has freckles like she does.

## Why Now?

All three of these school-age kids are thinking about their birthparents. Their questions and behavior are typical of this age but often surprise adoptive parents. Even when the joyous adoption story has been comfortably and frequently discussed during the preschool years, the reality of the poignant (and pointed) questions of seven- or eight-year-olds can be painful for parents to hear.

It makes sense that children this age would try to understand what it means to have been placed for adoption and why it happened to them. Lois Melina, author of *Raising Adopted Children* and *Making Sense of Adoption* (both Harper Paperbacks), points out that this is the age when children consider life and death, when school exposes them to all kinds of families and they become acutely aware of their own. So, although adoption may seem less important than activities such as soccer or scouts, a lot of thinking about it is usually going on under the surface.

"Just a couple weeks ago, my daughter said she wanted to know what her birthmother looked like," says Charise, the mother of an eight-year-old. Elementary school children typically want to know who their birth families are, what they look like, where they live, and so on.

Even children who never talk about



adoption are probably wondering about their birthparents. Ronny Diamond has run group sessions for adopted kids ages seven to 13 for Spence-Chapin's Post-Adoption Resource Center in New York City. She tells of one session in which "a significant number of parents thought their children didn't think much about

their birthparents." Having just been with their kids, Diamond reported to the parents that *all* the children wondered about their birthparents and wished they knew more about them.

## Set the Stage

As it turns out, Diamond says, "although

preschoolers may know their adoption stories and tell them with pride, verbatim, they don't truly understand them." Nonetheless, early discussions lay the groundwork for questions that will emerge in the school years.

Some parents are very comfortable talking about the joy and beauty of adoption but shy away from mentioning birthparents. If you are comfortable, talk about your child's birthparents in a natural and casual way from the earliest age. For example, toddlers love to admire themselves in the mirror. It would be natural to say, "You have such pretty eyes. I wonder if your birthmother has eyes like that?"

A four-year-old's "mommy" games will often lead her to ask, "Did I grow inside your tummy, Mommy?" This is the opportunity for parents to tell their child that she grew inside her birthmother, just as all children grow inside a woman, and that she was born, just like other children. This is also the time to set the stage for adoption talk by distinguishing between giving birth to a baby and being able to care for one. Parents can explain to the child that, after she was born, her birthmother could not raise her, so she made a plan for her adoption.

What's important to underscore is that it was the birthparents' situation, not anything the child did, that led to his adoption. Be direct in telling your child that his birthparents would not have been able to care for *any* baby.

## What Are You Really Asking?

Despite lots of early talk, most adoptive parents are caught off-guard by the tough questions of their seven- or eight-year-old. During that stage, my own daughter asked repeatedly, "Why, Mommy, why?"

Before you answer specific questions, try to find out what your child is thinking. In the case of a nine-year-old who asks to see her birthmother, Melina asks, "Is she

asking, 'Do I look like my birthmother?' Is she saying she has something she needs to know or wishes she could tell her?" Resist a quick answer that ends the dialogue. Instead, use the opening as an opportunity to learn what your child is thinking and worrying about.

Diamond adds, "When a child asks, 'Can I call my birthmother?' that's usually

not a literal request. She may mean 'I want to know more about this person.' That's an opening. Ask, 'What do you think she'd be like? What would you say to her? What do you think she might say to you?' There are many places you can go with a question like that."

Most children have questions about why their birthparents decided on adoption. It's important that your child feel free to talk about these questions. Suggest that she write a letter to her birthmother asking the questions on her mind. If you are in a semi-open or open adoption, providing answers to these

questions is often all that's necessary to satisfy a child's curiosity. For those children for whom there are no answers, sending a letter to the adoption agency or orphanage may help. (For examples of letters to birthmothers written by children, see "Letters from Wondering Hearts," left.)

Despite parents' assurances to the contrary, children this age are self-centered and may decide that they were placed for adoption because of something they did. It's usually not enough to assure them that this isn't the case. Parents should share as many facts as possible to help children come to more reasonable conclusions on their own. (See "Make The Story Concrete," following page.)

If you have no information about your child's birth family, don't assume there isn't much to talk about. Adopted children with no information have as much curiosity as those in open or semi-open adoptions. And they need just as much support in thinking it through and asking the all-important question, "Why?" If you can't provide the specific facts, conjecture together.

"Adoptive parents often feel concerned that they have little or no information," says Ellen Singer, of the Center for Adoption Support and Education in Silver Spring, Maryland. "But you can help a child understand the circumstances or governmental policies that might have led a birthparent to make an adoption plan.

## LETTERS FROM WONDERING HEARTS

### FROM MYUNG HEE TO HER UNKNOWN BIRTHMOTHER IN KOREA

Dear Mom,  
Do you remember me? I'm Myung Hee. My American name is Melanie. Are you still in Seoul? America is good. But I wish I could see what Korea is like. I always wonder about Korea. Why did you send me away? Didn't you love me? Well, even though I don't really know you, I love you. What happened to Daddy? How old are you? Do I have siblings? I love you! I miss you. Please contact me.  
Love always,  
Myung Hee

### FROM ADAM, AGE 9, TO HIS BIRTHMOTHER, SHERRY

Dear Sherry,  
Do you have any pets? We have five dogs and three cats. I like to play sports and I take karate. I've got a joke for you:  
It's snowing. You go in a house. There's a lamp, a stove, and a fireplace. You have one match left. Which one should you light first?  
(Answer on back.)  
Here are some things I'd like to know:  
How tall are you? How old are you? What are your hobbies? Are your neighbors nice? Do you play sports? Do you sew?  
Love,  
Adam  
(answer to joke: the match)



It is important to acknowledge that it may feel unfair.”

Don't forget that your job is to provide your child with as much information as you can and then let her come to her own conclusions. Says Diamond, “Parents are not supposed to make it neat and tidy. Children have to keep figuring it out and revisiting it.”

## Fantasies and Sadness


Patricia Martinez Dorner, an adoption professional in Texas and author of *How to Open an Adoption* (R-Squared Press), notes that kids often wonder what their lives would have been like had they not been adopted. Dorner says, “Some children imagine that life would have been perfect if only they lived with their perfect birthparents.”

These feelings are normal and may emerge as sadness or anger over adoption, notes Dorner. Parents should remind themselves that these feelings have nothing to do with a child's love for her adoptive parents. If anything, school-age children need more reminders than ever that adoption is forever. Internationally adopted children may

benefit from a homeland trip as a way to cope with fantasies about life in another family.

Mostly, parents need to let children know that it's OK to feel sad (or angry or worried)—a difficult task for any parent, and even more so for those of us for whom adoption has brought such joy.

## Don't Give Up

Often opportunities to talk with your child crop up unexpectedly. “It's usually when you're not even discussing adoption,” says Melissa, mother of a nine-year-old in a semi-open adoption. “It's something they have been chewing on.” Adds Diamond, “If you miss an opportunity, bring it up at another time. If you blow it, go back and try again later.” This can be difficult and emotional. No parent handles every query perfectly and seizes every opportunity. But a commitment to listen and to support your child will go a long way in helping her deal with one of the most complex issues she will ever confront. 

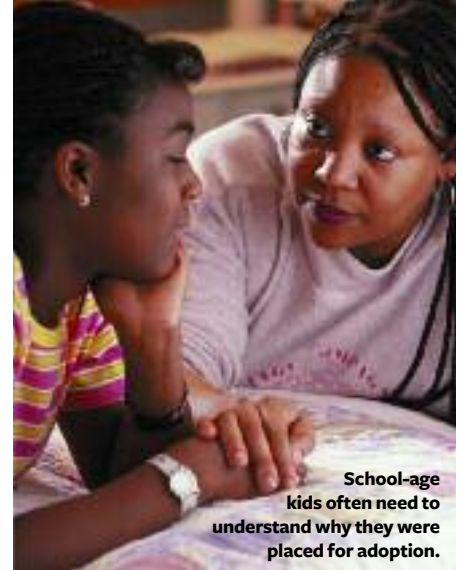
CARRIE KRUEGER is a single mom of three in Washington. She spends a lot of time talking about birthparents!

## MAKE THE STORY CONCRETE: ADVICE FROM LOIS MELINA

Answer questions honestly using concrete images and as many details as possible, says the author of *Making Sense of Adoption* and, with Sharon Kaplan Roszia, *The Open Adoption Experience*. “A child needs to understand that his birthparents are real people, not fantasy figures. If you have a picture, show it to him, and put it in context. Say something like, ‘Here you are with Susan on the day you were born.’ Telling your child who attended his birth, what people said, and what he looked like can go a long way in helping him understand that his birth was normal and had nothing to do with his adoption. If you don't have any infor-

mation about your child's birth, you can explain what conditions were probably like where he was born.

Instead of, “Your birthmother was too poor to keep you,” you could say, “Your birthmother already had two children to take care of. She could barely find enough money to buy them food and pay for heat. She was afraid that she wouldn't be able to feed all of you.” Sharing a birthmother's letter describing rundown housing, the meals she could barely afford, and the difficulty of getting to the grocery store without a car will help a child understand concretely why she was placed for adoption.



**School-age kids often need to understand why they were placed for adoption.**

## TAKE ACTION!

Things you can do with your child as she explores adoption issues.

### Draw your heart out.

Art is great therapy. Suggest that your child draw pictures of what he is thinking or how he feels.

### Get it on paper.

Let your child write or dictate letters to his birthmother. If these can't be delivered at the time, they can be kept on file at your adoption agency or stored at home in a special box.

### Play detective.

Is it possible that there is some information out there about your child's birthmom that you aren't aware of? Even the smallest tidbits of information have significance.

### Role-play.

Allow your child to fantasize that his birthmom is there in the room. What would he like to tell her? Grab a couple dolls and let him act out a reunion.

### Make a birthmom box.

This can be a place for your child to store documents, letters, and artwork. The box gives a child something tangible to revisit from time to time.

### Create rituals.

Light a candle to honor birthparents. Pray for them if your beliefs include praying for others. Create a tradition of throwing a stone in the lake each time you walk by to say thank you to birthparents. Simple rituals can help kids more than you think.



# 6 QUESTIONS EVERY ADOPTED TEEN WANTS ANSWERED



As children reach the teen years, the simple adoption stories of their early years no longer suffice. In this excerpt from *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, we take a look at what goes on in the minds of teens, and offer advice for talking with them.

By Debbie Riley, M.S., with John Meeks, M.D.  
Excerpted with permission.

**P**rior to adolescence, children are extremely curious about their adoption stories. Although they question the circumstances that led to their adoption, most of them seem to accept the answers calmly. But adolescents often demand fuller and more factual answers. They understand that most mothers love, nurture, protect, and keep their babies. Why not in their case? Was there something terribly wrong or unlovable about them?

Now that they are more sophisticated critical thinkers, adolescents revisit their earlier vague questions and refine them into a very personal (and some-

times painful) exploration of the question, “Why did my birthmother and birthfather leave me?” This process begins early in adolescence, a period of heightened upheaval and confusion for most youngsters. The

## Fantasies about birthparents may be more damaging than the truth. In almost all cases, the truth is freeing.

already-stressed adolescent reconnects with the powerful awareness that, to have been adopted, someone had to give him away.

Here are six common adoption-related questions teens have, and ways you can help:

**1 Why was I adopted?** The minds of adopted teens are filled with questions like, “Why was I given away? Was there something wrong with me? Did they give me away because they did drugs or abused me? What does this mean about me? Why couldn’t they have worked things out and taken care of me?”

One of the hardest challenges for adoptive parents is to explain their child’s adoption story. While parents begin with the best intentions in mind, they often stray off course just at the point when the information might reveal aspects of the story that may be difficult for their child to hear. Sam’s mother said, “I am leery about telling Sam the whole story. I do not want to upset him.” It is an understandable dilemma. By adolescence, however, it is no longer adequate to recapitulate the simplified adoption story that was given when the child was

## Adolescents seek the facts—the detailed facts. They want definite information about why and how they came to be relinquished.

younger: “Your birthmom could not take care of you, and Daddy and I wanted so much to be parents, and we adopted you.”

In this developmental period, almost all children seek to expand their understanding of their own story, especially when it comes to knowing the reason why they were relinquished. Unfortunately, this is often the very piece of the story that most parents find most difficult to share or explain. In fact, parents often do not know the true reason that led the birthparents to relinquish. In such a situation, it is better to acknowledge to

your teen that, in fact, you don’t know. Then you can discuss and speculate on the reasons together.

**A parent might say:** “I can imagine how frustrating it is not to have your questions answered. I wish I had more that I could tell you. However, from the little we do know, what do you think things were like for your birthparents at that time?”

**2 What’s the truth about my birthparents?** Younger children are comfortable living with broad, general ideas of their birthparents. Adolescents seek the facts—the detailed facts. They want definite information about why and how they came to be relinquished. They may ask questions like, “Why was I abandoned? Do I have any brothers or sisters? Did my birthfather care about my birthmother, or was it a one-night stand?”

Parents may be hesitant to share information that they regard as potentially upsetting or damaging. But when there is a void, teens will often begin to fantasize about their birthparents and, quite often, the fantasies may be more damaging to a teen’s identity formation than any fact—including difficult facts. In almost all cases, the truth is freeing for adolescents.

Barbara knew that her son Jason’s birthfather had a dependency on alcohol and had been physically abusive to his birthmother before he abandoned her and Jason. Barbara had told her son that she did not know anything about his birthfather. “I worried that he would somehow think he could grow up to be like him.” When Jason was 17, he began pushing for more information, and Barbara told him the truth. Jason was relieved that he finally had some knowledge about his birthfather, even though he felt sad to hear about his poor choices. Jason had secretly believed that his birthfather was dead, since no one spoke of him. The new information opened the possibility that maybe one day he could meet his birthfather.

Therapists are often asked for advice on the correct timing for sharing difficult information with children. There is no cookbook answer. Each child’s temperament and emotional and intellectual maturity will determine his readiness for processing distressing information. Certainly by adolescence, parents should reveal all the details they know about the adoption story. Adolescents have a new cognitive capacity to process information and to consider facts and feelings.

**A parent might say:** “I think it is time to tell you some more information about your adoption story. You may be mad that I have waited to share this, but it was important to me not to overwhelm you with information you might not be ready for.”

**3 Why do I feel different from everyone else?** Feeling different from peers is the worst curse of adolescence. Nowhere else

along the developmental stages of life do people so desperately want to fit in, to be a part of the group, as they do in adolescence.

Being adopted creates a sense of being different in many ways. Adoptees may be of a different race or cultural background than their family, and may feel different from peers who are being raised in biologically related families. For transracially adopted teens, this sense of belonging and loyalty may be hard to achieve.

Katherine, 14, wanted very much to connect with her cultural origins. She sat at the cafeteria table where the Korean girls would congregate. She was flatly rejected as soon as they realized she “wasn’t really Korean,” meaning that she couldn’t speak the language. “I knew very little about their culture—the only thing we had in common was that I looked like them.” Katherine went to the Korean food market with her mom and learned how to make some Korean dishes. “I shared the food I made, and they began to talk to me! Of course the adoption question came up, but I was prepared.” Katherine was slowly accepted into the group. Eventually, the girls invited her into their homes and taught her more about her birth culture, customs, and language. Katherine’s sense of self-worth soared.

Adoptive parents are often surprised to learn from their transracially adopted teen that the world is not the wonderful, embracing place they believed it to be. Pedro was adopted at 18 months from Guatemala, and grew up in a fairly diverse neighborhood. Even so, he was uncomfortable being in a transracial family. “The fact that my skin color is different from my family’s draws attention no matter where we are,” said Pedro. “It used to be OK, but now that I am older, it seems more complicated. Sometimes, to avoid questions from people at school, I say that the woman who came to pick me up is our neighbor, not my mother.”

What was missing for Pedro was a repertoire of survival skills necessary to combat discrimination. Long before adolescence, parents should begin preparing their child to cope with racism. The Center for Adoption Support and Education’s WISE Up! tool teaches children that they have the power to respond to unwanted questions through the four WISE choices: **W**alk away; **S**ay, “It’s private”; **S**hare something about the adoption story; or **E**ducate with general information about adoption. (Go to [adoptionsupport.org](http://adoptionsupport.org) to learn more.) Parents will probably need to bring up the subject, because teenagers will usually talk about racism only if they are directly asked.

**A parent might say:** “Are classmates saying anything unkind to you, especially about being Hispanic? Do you notice anything about how you are treated by anyone at school because you are not white? I really want you to tell me, because I don’t want you to go through this alone.”

## WORDS YOU CAN USE

Here are some typical teen comments, sample language you can adapt for your response, and messages you want to send during the exchange.

**COMMENT:** “I wonder if my birthfather cared about my birth-mother. What was their relationship like?”

**ANSWER:** “I know they were not together a long time. I imagine that he did care about her at some point in time. I know from what she told us that they dated for a while but chose not to stay together.”

**OBJECTIVE:** Validate your teen’s questions, answer with whatever information you have, and keep the dialogue going. Your teen’s questions likely connect to her thoughts about dating and her own relationships.

**COMMENT:** “You don’t know anything about what it’s like to be Asian. The white boys at my school don’t want to date me. I don’t fit in anywhere.”

**ANSWER:** “No, I guess I don’t really know how it feels. I feel sad that the color of your skin is keeping you from being able to date boys you like. What can I do that might help you?”

**OBJECTIVE:** Acknowledge that you do not share the same experience, but that you can and will help her with this problem. Work together on finding a solution—teens want to collaborate, not be directed. Talk about why race is becoming more of an issue for her now that she is dating, and about racial diversity in relationships.

**COMMENT:** “I’m tired of not knowing anything about my adoption. I want to find my birth family and get answers. I am old enough!”

**ANSWER:** “Can you tell me why this is important to you at this time? What are you hoping for? What information do you want that we don’t have?”

**OBJECTIVE:** Use this discussion to determine what your teen is really looking for. Ask him to describe what questions he would pose if he were to meet his birthparents. Explore what it might feel like to meet them. What role would your teen want you to play? (This question may have come sooner than you expected it to, but try to stay calm and open.)

## 4 What will happen when I leave home?

Often in late adolescence, as many teens prepare to leave home for college, work, or other opportunities, they begin to ponder the longevity of the parent-child relationship. They may think that, since the adults have almost completed the job of raising them to young adulthood, the relationship will soon come to an end.

Adopted teens may be especially vulnerable to separations of any kind. They may think, “If my birthparents gave me away, it could happen again.” Or “When I go to college, will my parents be there for me?”

Lynn’s parents were talking about how much fun it would be to have a little cabin in the mountains. Lynn, age 15, had been silently listening to the conversation. She had tears streaming down her face as she finally said,

## A teen may think, “I have so many questions about my birthparents, but if I ask my parents, will they get upset?”

“I knew you could leave me one day.” Lynn’s mother was incredulous. “We were just daydreaming about our retirement home! Where in the world would you come up with the idea that we would leave you?” she reassured her daughter.

Like all children, adopted children need to know that they are loved and that the love is forever. However, adoptive parents may need to reinforce the issue of permanency more often. Whenever a conversation about college or leaving home comes up, assure your child that you will always be his parents—no matter what.

**A parent might say:** “I may not be ‘in charge’ of you anymore, but I hope that I will always be your best consultant. No matter where your life takes you after high school, I’ll only ever be a phone call or e-mail away.”

**5 Who am I?** Two questions pose particular challenges for adopted children: Who am I and where did I come from? Not only must adopted adolescents think about how they are similar to and different from their adoptive parents, they must also think about how they are similar to and different from their birthparents.

Many adopted adolescents ask themselves: “Am I like my adoptive parents or my birthparents or both? I know little about my birthparents, so how can I possibly figure out who I am? What does it mean that I am Hispanic/Korean/African-American? Who would I have been if I had stayed with my birth family?”

Our identity is molded from our values, beliefs, capabilities, talents, intellectual capabilities, sexual self-image, racial and ethnic heritage, personal goals and expectations, and, of course, our physical characteristics. All teens develop an awareness of these elements of self by determining how they are similar to their families and how they are different from them.



**Teens Speak Out** Read essays by teen and young adult adoptees about forging a strong identity at [adoptivefamilies.com/teens](http://adoptivefamilies.com/teens).

In biological families, similarities and differences are typically discussed more readily. Tell your teen what similarities you see between yourself and him. Teens are often amazed by parents’ perceptions, and hearing about these perceived similarities helps them feel a stronger bond.

**A parent might say:** “We are so alike—we are very perceptive (or messy, laugh at the same jokes, love shopping).” And don’t forget to celebrate the differences, too: “I wish I could be more like you, you are so much calmer (or musically gifted, outgoing).”

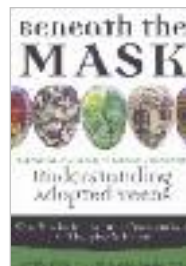
**6 Is it OK if I think about my birthparents?** Many teens experience guilt related to their frequent and intense thoughts and feelings about their birthparents. A teen may think, “I have so many questions about my birthparents, but if I ask my parents, will they get upset?” Fearing the disapproval or disappointment of their parents, teenagers may hide their feelings and struggle alone with their emotional connection to their birthparents and the questions they have about them.

The frequency and intensity of these thoughts may vary, depending on the adolescent’s personal adoption story, but all adopted children ponder the existence and character of their birthparents at some point in their lives.

Parents need to understand the depth of these thoughts, the emotional significance of these thoughts, and the difficulty that teens may have in sharing them. Thinking about birthparents does not mean adolescents love their parents any less. “I am so afraid to tell my mom that I think about my birthmom,” said Amy, 16. “I love her and don’t want to hurt her.”

A child’s need to consider the significance of the other set of parents is by no means a reflection of diminishing feelings for her adoptive parents. Parents need to present clear messages to their teen, supporting the quest for information. Initiate conversations about the birthparents, and affirm their importance. By demonstrating to your teen that you are not afraid to talk about her birthparents, you can help diminish her feelings of conflicted loyalty.

**A parent might say:** “I always think about your birthmother on this day (Mother’s Day, child’s birthday), and say a special prayer for her, to thank her with all my heart.” Or, if there is contact: “I am so glad that Amanda (birthmom) is part of our lives.”



DEBBIE RILEY, M.S., is the executive director of the Center for Adoption Support and Education, in Burtonsville, Maryland. Learn more at [adoptionsupport.org](http://adoptionsupport.org). Excerpted with permission from *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, by Debbie Riley, M.S., with John Meeks, M.D. This article may not be reproduced.



# ADOPTION WORKSHOPS

**The right environment will encourage your child to open up and start talking about adoption.**

BY JULIE MICHAELS

**T**he children filed into the waiting room at Spence-Chapin Adoption Agency in New York City like kids being dragged to the dentist. Their parents had signed them up for a 90-minute “Kids’ Workshop on Adoption,” one of many post-adoption services the agency offers. Nervous and unsure what would be asked of them, the children clung to their parents like barnacles to a ship.

“Children are rarely eager to attend these sessions,” says Ronny Diamond, a social worker with Spence-Chapin. “They’re anxious; they think they’re going to be put on the spot. But once engaged, the experience can be transforming.”

All adopted children have questions. They may harbor thoughts about birthparents that they hesitate to share. They may struggle with how to speak to peers about being adopted. Even a well-adjusted child may at times feel isolated and confused.

## Lesson I: Starting Young

Diamond explained to parents that working with children who were as young as seven and eight was new for Spence-Chapin. Ordinarily, children start addressing adoption issues when their thinking becomes more complex. But, she said, parents had been eager for workshops that focused on younger children. “This is a generation of parents that doesn’t want to push adoption issues under the rug,” said Diamond. “They’re eager to get their kids talking.” Once children understand that it’s all right to bring up difficult questions—and that there are other adoptees who feel what they feel—they’re less likely to close down around the subject.

## Lesson II: A Safe Place to Say Scary Things

Social worker Peter Maramaldi explained to his young charges that whatever information they shared in the sessions was private. He would talk to parents about the session in general terms, but he would not share the children’s individual comments.

“This gives the kids permission to say things they might not say otherwise,” explains Maramaldi. “Most children this age have thoughts about their birthmother—‘what was she like, did she love me?’—but they may be reluctant to share these thoughts for fear of upsetting their adoptive parents.

“What we provide here is a social learning model—the children learn from each other. They sit in a group and hear another child utter their own most secret feelings. Other adoptees will bring issues out into the open that the child thought were his problems alone. And there’s no disapproval. The child realizes, ‘Hey, I can say these things and the world won’t explode.’”

## Lesson III: Establishing the Group

Maramaldi later explained to parents that he started his sessions by establishing trust within the group. The children had to go

around the room, make eye contact with the person next to them and state their name. They had to hold hands and squeeze the hand of the person next to them.

Next he established what they all had in common. “How many children here are seven, how many are eight?” Hands would shoot up. “How many children are in first grade?” “How many children here like ice cream?” Hands up. “How many children here were adopted?” Hands went up all around the room.

## Lesson IV: The Mean Meter

Maramaldi asked them to talk about their experiences around adoption. Had anyone ever said anything about their being adopted that hurt their feelings? Had children in school teased them?

As the stories came out, Maramaldi suggested they rate the stories on a “Mean Meter.” How mean is it? A little mean, moderately mean, REALLY mean? Suddenly, children were eager to share hurts that just an hour before they wouldn’t have dreamed of acknowledging. Again, hearing another child speak of similar experiences made being adopted not so unusual after all.

## Lesson V: Thinking About the Birthmother

When Maramaldi asked the kids if they ever thought about their birthmothers, they all raised their hands. Although, as promised, he didn’t give children’s names, he did tell parents what he heard:

- ▶ “I think of her as my imaginary friend, next to me all the time.”
- ▶ “I’d like to travel back to when I was a baby and talk to her.”
- ▶ “I wonder what she looks like.”

Because this was a group that included both domestic and internationally adopted children, there was much discussion of unmarried mothers too young to care for their children. Whether or not this was true for each child, it helped them think more about their own biological mothers and talk about their feelings.

## Lesson VI: Instant Friendships

At the end of the workshop, parents returned to a group of children who, 90 minutes before, had been complete strangers. Now they were friends. There was a feeling of relief in the room—not only had they come through an experience they had been anxious about, there was also the relief of discovering they were not alone. Dark secrets had been shared and turned out to be not so very dark after all.

The children returned for a second session with the same group the following week. Their assignment had been to bring some item with them that related to being adopted. Some children brought a photo album, others brought clothing. One little girl chose to bring a tiny tiger slipper that she had worn in China.

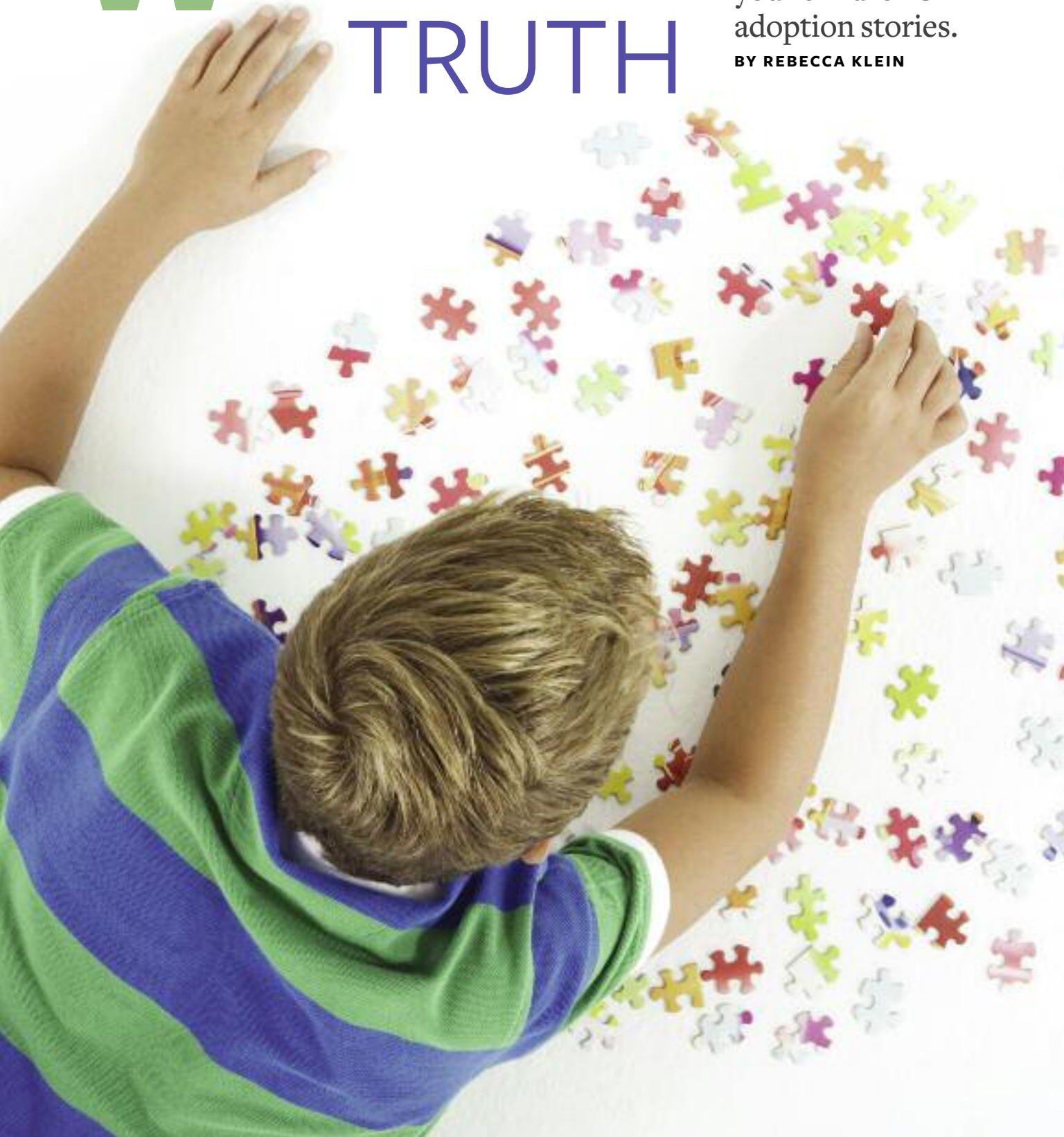
The second session turned out to be less revealing than the first. “They just wanted to play,” said Maramaldi. “They weren’t ready to take things any farther.” This may be the downside of working with younger children. If they’re not ready to talk, they won’t. Even so, the experience was remarkably positive for all of the families. “It freed my daughter to talk more, to feel what she felt without guilt,” said one mother. “It opened up her world.”


JULIE MICHAELS lives with her family in Massachusetts.

# The WHOLE TRUTH

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

BY REBECCA KLEIN





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 *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.”

*“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*

## 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

*“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*

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

*“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*

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 children 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 kids accept the information. And

later on, they will probably be more at ease connecting with biological siblings than with birthparents.

When you tell your preschooler his

adoption story, mention that there are other children. He won’t be able to 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

*“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*

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. 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

*"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 needs grown-ups to take care of them." —Mary*

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.

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

## 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.

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 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 [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."

**[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 a former associate editor of *Adoptive Families*. She lives with her family in New Jersey.

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 talking about rape until the child is in his late teens—not because preteens aren't mature

*"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 birthmommy 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*

# Questions About Birth Siblings

Don't be surprised if your child wants to know about his biological brothers and sisters. Such questions are healthy—and normal.

BY JOEY NESLER

**D**id my birthmommy have other babies? Were they adopted, too? Why didn't she keep me?" These are tough, but valid, questions typical of an early grade-school child.

Between the ages of six and eight, children begin to apply rules and logic to everything, including family relationships. And as your child enters this phase, he may ask questions about his birth family—and his birth siblings in particular.

## Tell What You Know


Some parents are caught off-guard by such questions and don't know how to respond. It's helpful to remember, though, that an adopted child's interest in birth siblings is healthy, normal, and age-appropriate. If your child brings up the topic, physically get down on his level, so you can make eye contact, and give him your full attention. Say, "What a good question! I can understand why you would wonder about that."

Then tell your child what you know, in language he can understand. For instance, say, "The adoption agency mentioned that you were your birthmom's second baby boy. I wish I knew more that I could tell you." Or "Birthmothers make adoption plans for their babies for different reasons. Your birthmother made a plan for you because she wanted you to have a life she couldn't give you. It takes the biggest kind of love to make a hard choice like that. She was able to parent your baby brother, though, because things were different." Then explain in simple terms how that was a different circumstance.

Parents may be concerned that this type of dialogue is hurtful. But it is profoundly healing for a child to know his life story. Children also benefit because such talk only enriches their trust in you and affirms that you will not withhold information.

Thoughts about birth families cross

every adopted child's mind. If a child has voiced one question, you can bet he's contemplating others. The first question tests the waters; your reaction will determine whether he feels safe enough to broach others.

When responding to your child, use nonreactive, honest, age-appropriate language. What you say is important, but how you say it is crucial. A hushed tone conveys secrecy or shame, while an elevated tone can suggest anxiety. It may help to get comfortable with the information by talking about it with your spouse or a trusted friend beforehand. However you deal with this issue, remember that you're laying the foundation for a lifetime of important questions and honest answers. 

JOEY NESLER is a clinically trained adoption psychotherapist in Orange County, California. She is an adoptee who has been reunited with her birth siblings.



## INCLUDING SIBLINGS

Whether or not you know your child's birth siblings, you can acknowledge them in some way. Here are a few suggestions.

- 1** Include a page about your child's siblings in her lifebook. Paste in their pictures, make a birth family tree, or, if you do not know the siblings, have your child write or draw something about them on a page.
- 2** Make holiday mementos, such as Christmas ornaments or Hanukkah decorations, and inscribe them with birth siblings' names. You can also create a quilt with a patch for every known family member.
- 3** If possible, facilitate visits or long-distance communication with birth siblings (even if it's just birthday or holiday cards).
- 4** If you're unable to establish this connection, or if you don't know whether birth siblings exist, plan a ceremony to help your child deal with her curiosity or sense of loss. Plant a rosebush for each imagined birth sibling. Or have your child write the sibling a letter that you will burn outside and create a story about how the ashes float in the wind, bringing the imagined sibling a message in his dreams.





# Birds, Bees, and Adoption

Talking with your children about reproduction is a vital part of the adoption discussion. Here's a guide to help you build on the dialogue as your child grows. By Marybeth Lambe, M.D.

**W**hen our daughter was six years old, she asked me, “Where do I come from?” “Georgia,” I replied. “You were born in Atlanta.” “No,” she was louder now. “Where do I come from?”

You are probably quicker than I in realizing that my daughter was not asking for a geography lesson; rather, she wanted to understand her origin. Her next question cleared away any possible confusion: “Was I made from sex?”

Even though I had covered this territory with her older siblings, I'm embarrassed to admit that I remain squeamish about such discussions. Many of you may feel the same. It is hard to know exactly what to say and how to say it. Nevertheless, straightforward talk about sex is critical for our children. As parents, we want to be sure they feel at ease in coming to us for honest responses. As they grow, we want them to be able to turn to us, without shame or awkwardness, for help in understanding their bodies and their sexuality. Most important, if we do not talk to our kids about sex, someone else will.

With children who were adopted, honesty is particularly important. Our

children did not come from an adoption agency. They need to know they were conceived and born like every other child and then adopted into their forever family. Sometimes their story of origin is painful or uncertain, but it must be conveyed—in an age-appropriate fashion—if we are to have credibility as they grow.

When your child is old enough to ask questions, she is old enough for honest answers. Although the way your child asks sex-related questions may make you grin, you'll want to avoid laughing at all costs—or your child may feel embarrassed and avoid further discussions.

If your child reaches age seven and has not asked questions or seems uninterested in talking about sex, you may need to initiate the discussion. Try to find apt moments—perhaps a television show will provide an opening, or a song on the radio. Adopted kids may have questions but be hesitant to reveal them. Some worry about sounding unappreciative if they ask about their birthparents. Some sense their parents' anxiety about such topics or assume that, if they are supposed to know, we will tell them. Again, look for opportunities to open the conversation.

## An Ongoing Dialogue

Teaching about reproduction doesn't happen in one “big talk,” but in a series of discussions throughout children's lives. Some questions need a two-minute chat, while other topics, particularly as children grow up, require a longer give-and-take. While kids don't need drawn-out discourses about every detail, they do need to hear about basic values and have their questions answered again and again as they grow.

Our goal is to give our children the tools to avoid mediocre relationships, one-night stands, and casual sex—to protect them from sexual and emotional abuse for which ignorance leaves them vulnerable. We want them to develop healthy, loving relationships and to understand that their body is sacred and to be cared for. This isn't achieved in one talk, but through years of open, honest discussions.

## What to Talk About, Age by Age: Ages Three to Six

*How are babies made? Where did I come from? Was I in your tummy?*

When a young child asks a question, it's a good idea to find out why. “For

example, if a child asks, “What do mommies and daddies do to make a baby?” a parent could ask, “What made you bring that up?” or “Well, what do you think happens?” suggests Doug Goldsmith, Ph.D., executive director of the Children’s Center in Salt Lake City. “This helps parents explore what is going on in the mind of the child.” They can then give more focused answers.

Simple, brief answers are best: “Babies grow inside their mommy’s tummy until they are ready to be born. They grow in a special place called a uterus.” Don’t use cute or made-up terms. Now is the time for your child to learn the correct anatomic language: penis, vagina, breasts, nipples.

A child at this age may not retain or even fully understand the information you offer. He may ask the same questions repeatedly. Just as preschoolers do not fully grasp the concept of adoption and their own adoption story, so do they have trouble understanding sex. This makes it even more imperative to keep explanations simple and concise.

If a child wants to know more, he’ll ask. If a question seems too mature or asks for details you feel are not yet suitable, it is all right to reply: “That’s a very good question, and we plan to talk to you about it when you are a little older, so we know you will understand.”

Your preschooler may ask, “Did I grow in your uterus?” It is important to be clear that he was created by a birthmother and birthfather and carried in his birthmother’s uterus. Many young children express sadness because they

lacked this ultimate closeness with you. You’ll want to empathize, saying, “I wish you’d been in my tummy too,” or “You were born in my heart.”

Children this age are often more concerned with birth than conception, so you might discuss, briefly, what giving birth is like. Because adopted children sometimes feel they were born “unnaturally,” it’s critical they know that they entered the world the same as all babies. Speaking about your child’s birth sets the stage for discussion about why he was placed for adoption and helps him understand he has a history that includes his birthparents. Repeated over the years, this helps him to believe it is acceptable and good to talk about this history.

## Ages Seven to 12

*What does it mean to have sex? Do you have to be married to have a baby?*

During this stage, kids become curious about the mechanics of sex. Your explanation might be: “A man and a woman lie close together and feel loving toward each other. The man’s penis fits inside the woman’s vagina. That’s called sexual intercourse.” Discussions with children in this age range should also touch on sexuality in general—which includes understanding relationships and gender orientation, as well as sexual intercourse.

Be prepared for a reaction of disgust or embarrassment. Let your child know this is natural and common and that she will feel differently as she grows older. School-age children need time to digest information and to ask further questions.

## IF YOUR CHILD WAS OLDER...

There’s a chance that a child joining a family at an older age has witnessed or even experienced sexual abuse. This may not come out for a few years, until a child feels safe enough to discuss it. If this is your child’s history, your job is to help her see the difference between sexual mistreatment of a child and apt expression of sexual feelings between two adults.

Be careful to avoid rancorous characterizations of her birthparents, who may have allowed abuse to happen. This will create conflict for your child, who certainly retains some loyalty to her birth family; resenting your criticism, she may refuse to reveal any further details. A more effective approach: awareness of her birthparents as victims themselves, and empathy with your child’s difficult history—and constant and generous expression of love and support.

## TALKING TITLES

These excellent books can help you talk about sex with your child:

### FOR AGES 5 TO 8:

- *It’s Not the Stork! A Book About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families, and Friends*, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick Press)
- *It’s So Amazing! A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families*, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick Press)
- *What’s the Big Secret? Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys*, by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown (Little, Brown & Co.)

### FOR AGES 9 TO 12:

- *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick Press)
- *The Period Book*, by Karen Gravelle, et al (Walker)
- *What’s Going on Down There*, by Karen Gravelle, et al (Walker)

This is also the time to begin imparting your own family values, such as abstinence. In addition, you can reinforce the idea that sex is a positive and wonderful experience and making love is a profound bond between two people.

School-age children who were adopted frequently mention that they feel like they were hatched or born in a non-natural way. This is particularly true if their life stories have been told beginning with the first meeting or “gotcha day” rather than with conception and birth. So, as with younger children, your grade-schooler needs to be reminded and reassured that she was born just as any other child is born—that her birth was normal and was not the reason she was placed for adoption. If available, the specific facts around your child’s birth should be shared with her. If this history is unknown, the likely

circumstances can be told: “You were probably born in a hospital....”

Such discussions can lead to the important topic of why your child was placed for adoption. Helping her to understand that her birthparents could not take care of any baby is critical. In this way you help dispel any perception that it was some negative characteristic of hers that caused her to be placed for adoption.

At this age your child will likely be interested in the idea of relationships—and may want to know if her birthparents were married. A child born out of wedlock may want to know if this makes her different from or inferior to her friends. If you avoid the tough questions or act hesitant, you communicate that her queries are painful and uncomfortable. Soon the questions stop coming, and a child is left feeling that discussions of sex or adoptive history are taboo. It is important to be honest.

## Ages 13 and up

You and your child have probably been engaging in discussions about sex since early childhood. Even if you haven’t, it’s




**It’s important for your child to know that, like all babies, she grew inside her birthmother’s body.**

not too late to start. Teenagers, however, almost never initiate these conversations, so it’s up to you. Now is the time for

give-and-take dialogue about contraception, abstinence, date rape, and other important subjects.

Remember that sexual behavior is not an inherited trait. You have had years to instill your family’s values. Because her birthmother got pregnant does not mean that your child will. If you have such fears, examine them honestly and avoid communicating them to your child. Otherwise, you may create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which your teenager resents your judgments about her birthparents and rebels by acting out sexually.

When our children ask tough questions, we must remember that they can often handle the answers better than we do! Sexual education is really about helping our children learn how to build relationships and experience intimacy. It is about protecting them from unwanted sexual attention or abuse. As adoptive parents, we are also teaching them that their birth is about more than a simple sex act; that they have a valid and treasured history before joining our family. 

MARYBETH LAMBE, M.D., is a family physician and writer who lives with her family on a sheep farm in Washington.

## HOW TO SAY IT

For most children, the facts of life and the facts of adoption are inextricable. Yet very few adoption books address reproduction. These two books offer words for parents:



In ***Lucy’s Feet***, by Stephanie Stein (Perspectives Press), Lucy is sad that she didn’t grow inside her mother the way her brother did:

“I don’t want to be adopted! It’s not fair. Elliott has your feet because he grew inside there,” said Lucy, pointing to her mother’s stomach. “How come I was adopted and he wasn’t? I want to come from in there, too!”

“You know, Lucy, in a way you did grow in here,” said Lucy’s mom. “Elliott grew inside my body, but my love for you, my wanting you, grew in here.” Lucy’s mom pointed to her heart.

“But you couldn’t feel me in there, the way you could when Elliott kicked before he was born.”

“Oh yes, I could!” said Lucy’s mom. “I carried you around in my heart for a very long time. And while I waited, I thought about the little baby that would be mine someday. I thought about what you would look like. I thought about how it would feel when I held you

close. I thought about the songs we would sing and the places we would go. Then my heart would start beating very fast, and I would think, ‘Now that’s my baby kicking, only she’s not kicking at my stomach, she’s kicking away at my heart.’”



In ***How I Was Adopted***, by Joanna Cole (Harper), the narrator says:

“Before I was adopted, I was born. Daddy and Mommy told me how babies are born. They said that every baby grows in a special place inside a woman’s body. That place is called her uterus. When a baby is ready to be born, the woman’s uterus

squeezes and squeezes, and the baby comes out into the world!

“Many children stay with the woman who gave birth to them. Some children do not. Some children need to be adopted, the way Mommy and Daddy adopted me. I did not grow inside Mommy’s uterus. I grew in another woman’s uterus.”

# Dear Teacher

Even a teacher sensitive to adoption may benefit from having words to say. Here's a sample letter to help you compose your own.

BY KATHY URBINA AND DEB LUPPINO

**Dear Mrs. Jones,**

Our daughter, Emily, will be in your class this year. We wanted to make certain you know that our family was formed through adoption, since it may come up in discussion in the classroom at some point. Throughout the year, we would like to share some terrific educational resources about adoption, family trees, positive adoption language, and more. In the meantime, we are sending you information and sample dialogue that we hope may help you if other students in the class ask questions about adoption—whether addressed to you directly, or that you overhear Emily being asked.

## Background on Adoption from China:

Adoption of children from China by American families began in 1992, when a law authorizing international adoption was passed by the Chinese government. Most of the children available for adoption from China are girls. To control its serious population problem, China actively discourages most families from having more than one child. Because it is traditional for a male child to support his parents in old age, the one-child policy creates a dilemma for parents to whom girls are born. As a result, some Chinese families make the decision to place girls for adoption. In China, adoption takes place anonymously, so we do not have any information about our daughter's birth family.

**[EDITOR'S NOTE:** Readers will want to adapt this paragraph to their child's situation. For background information about why children are placed for adoption in the U.S., Eastern Europe, Guatemala, Korea, and China, see:

[www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=467](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=467)]

**Here are some questions you may hear in the classroom, with appropriate answers suggested.**

**Q:** Where are Emily's real parents?

**A:** Emily's real parents are the parents who are raising her, John and Kathy. She also has birthparents in China who gave birth to her.

**Q:** Where's Emily from?

**A:** She's from Connecticut, just like you and I are. She was born in China, but she is now a U.S. citizen.

**Q:** Why doesn't Emily look like her parents?

**A:** She was born in China and her parents adopted her when

she was a baby. Her parents are European American; she is Chinese American.

**Q:** Does Emily speak Chinese?

**A:** No. Emily came to the U.S. when she was several months old. She was not speaking any language at the time! Children speak the language of the country they are raised in. That's why you speak English, too, and not the language your grandparents spoke before they immigrated to the U.S.

**Q:** Does Emily eat with chopsticks?

**A:** In the same way that American kids learn to use forks, spoons, and knives, Chinese kids learn to use chopsticks. They are not born knowing how to do this. Emily was raised in America, and she learned to eat with a fork, spoon, and knife, just like you did. She may also know how to eat with chopsticks, though. Do you?

**Q:** Will Emily be a Communist? Buddhist?

**A:** No. Belief systems are learned (whether by choice or not). We are not born with them.

**Q:** Did it cost a lot to adopt her?

**A:** This is like asking how much your parents paid for the doctor and hospital when you were born. In adoption, there are other costs involved, like fees to the adoption agencies, professionals, and lawyers to cover the legal and social work involved in the process.

**Q:** Why didn't Emily's real family want her? Didn't they love her?

**A:** I think you're asking about Emily's birthparents. They probably loved her very much, but knew that they couldn't take care of any new baby at that time. They wanted Emily to be raised by a family that would love her and could take care of her forever. Adoptions always happen for grown-up reasons, and are never the result of anything a child does.

We want you, our child's teacher, to know that we believe that families are created through love, respect, and caring and not solely through genetic connections. Thank you for helping us communicate this to Emily's classmates.

Best,  
Emily's Mom and Dad

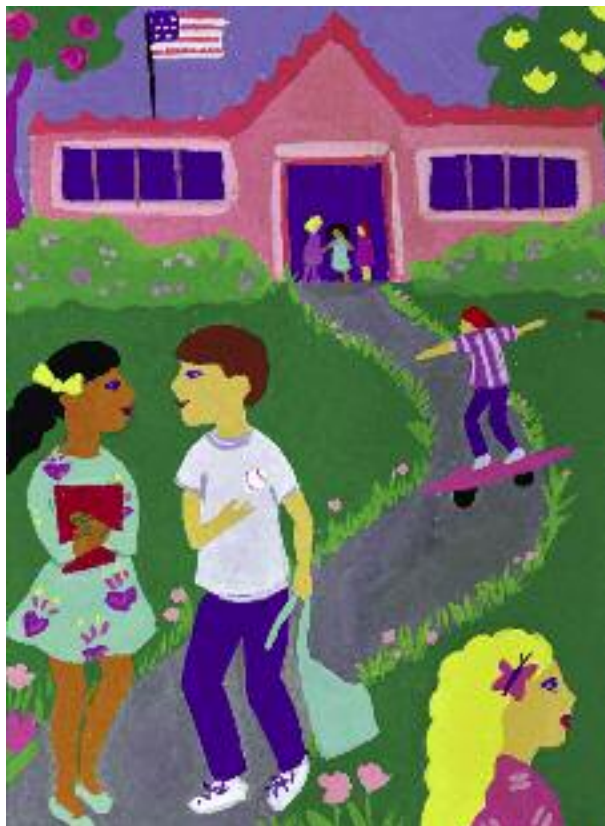




## AN ADOPTION & SCHOOL HANDOUT

# Helping Classmates Understand Adoption

**NOTE TO ADOPTIVE PARENTS:** Distribute this handout to other parents at your child's school, or send it home with his classmates after an adoption presentation.



### “Where’s Billy’s Real Mom?”

Children are naturally curious. Until now, your child probably assumed that being born into a family is the only way families are formed. If she learns that a friend or classmate was adopted, she’ll have lots of questions. She’ll want to know what adoption means and how it comes about. She might even feel anxious about the permanence of her own family.

If you’re unsure of how or where to begin the discussion, start with this handout. We’ve compiled two pages of adoption facts, sample Q & As, and talking guidelines. Adoption is not shameful, nor is it secret. Adoptive families talk openly about adoption from the time their children are very young. Take the lead by making it clear that adoption is a wonderful and normal way to build a family, and your children will follow your cues.

## Adoption Q & A

### CHILD-TO-PARENT

When your child learns that a friend or classmate was adopted, he’ll have questions. Here are responses to the most common questions kids ask about adoption.

**Q:** Why doesn’t Billy look like his mom?

**A:** Billy’s family is an adoptive family. He was born in Guatemala to a family who looks like him, but who couldn’t take care of a baby when he was born.

**Q:** What happened to Billy’s real mother?

**A:** Do you mean the woman who gave birth to him? She is his birthmother. Sometimes a woman has a baby but isn’t ready or able to be a parent.

**Q:** Why isn’t he with her?

**A:** She may have been too young to raise a child, or needed to work and didn’t have anyone to take care of him. So she found a family who wanted a baby. Billy’s mommy and daddy will be his parents forever.

**Q:** Do you think Billy’s real mother misses him?

**A:** I think his birthmother probably does.

**Q:** Is Sara Billy’s real sister?

**A:** Yes, they are brother and sister because they are part of the same family.

**Q:** Emily told me she was adopted. What is adoption?

**A:** Adoption is when a family that isn’t able to take care of a child finds a family who will take care of her forever and ever. Emily’s parents love her as much as we love you.

**Q:** Am I going to be adopted?

**A:** No, because I (or Daddy and I) was ready to be a parent when I had you. I will be your mother forever.

**Q:** Will Emily ever meet her real mother?

**A:** Do you mean her birthmother? That’s a hard question to answer because I don’t know. Sometimes adopted children meet their birthparents and sometimes they don’t.

**Q:** Why did Emily’s parents adopt her?

**A:** Because they wanted to have a family, and adopting a child is one way to do it.

**Q:** What did Emily do that was so bad that her real parent(s) didn’t keep her?

**A:** I think you are talking about Emily’s birthparent(s). Adoption is no one’s fault. It is a decision made by grown-ups when they don’t feel able or ready to be parents.



## Explaining Adoption to Young Children

Tell your child that families can be formed in many different ways. Children can live with the family they were born into, like your family, or with a family that adopts them, like her friend's family.

Let your child know that, sometimes, a parent who gives birth isn't able to raise the child. She looks for another family to take care of him. That family adopts the child and becomes his family forever. Reassure your child she will be part of your family forever.

Even if you know the specific circumstances of the friend your child is asking about, steer the conversation to a more general discussion of adoption. While adoption isn't a secret, each child's story is personal and is his to share. Some children are comfortable talking to friends and classmates about their adoption. Others prefer not to discuss it outside of their own family.

It's important not to cast adopted children as "special" or "different." Adoption is simply one of many ways to become a family.

## Adoption Q & A CHILD-TO-CHILD

Even after you talk to your child about adoption, don't be surprised when he asks his friend questions that you may fear are rude. Don't worry—adopted children are used to being asked questions by other children. Here are some of the responses your child may hear.

- YOUR CHILD:** Is that your real mom (or dad)?  
**PEER:** "Why are you asking?"  
 "Would I call her Mom if she wasn't?"  
 "Yes, a real mom is the person who takes care of you."
- YOUR CHILD:** Why didn't your real mom keep you?  
**PEER:** "My birthmom couldn't take care of me, but my mom will always take care of me."  
 "This is stuff we talk about at home."  
 "I don't feel like answering that question."
- YOUR CHILD:** What are you?  
**PEER:** "What do you mean? Do you want to know my ethnicity or where I was born?"  
 "I'm American, like you."  
 "I'm from outer space."

## 5 Myths & Realities About Adoption

- 1 MYTH:** Birthparents can show up at any time to "reclaim" their child.  
**REALITY:** Once an adoption is finalized, it is permanent, and the adoptive parents are legally recognized as the child's parents.
- 2 MYTH:** Birthparents are irresponsible and don't care about their children.  
**REALITY:** Birthparents want the best for their children. They make adoption plans because they know they aren't able to take care of a child.
- 3 MYTH:** It costs a lot to get a child.  
**REALITY:** While most adoptions involve fees, the fees are for services rendered. They are never in payment for a child.
- 4 MYTH:** Adoptive parents don't love their children as much as parents in families formed through biology.  
**REALITY:** The love is the same, regardless of how a family is formed.
- 5 MYTH:** Adoption is second-best.  
**REALITY:** Adoption may sometimes be a second choice, but it is never second-best.

## Recommended Reading

Read these books about adoption, alternative families, and diversity with your child.

**AGES 2 TO 6:** *We're Different, We're the Same*, by Bobbi Jane Kates; *The Family Book*, by Todd Parr

**AGES 3 TO 8:** *The Colors of Us*, by Karen Katz; *A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza

**AGES 4 TO 8:** *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis; *Families Are Different*, by Nina Pellegrini

**AGES 8 TO 11:** *Lucy's Family Tree*, by Karen Halvorsen Schreck; *If the World Were a Village*, by David J. Smith

All of these titles are available for purchase from [www.adoptivefamilies.com/books](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/books).

## POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE

Words not only convey facts, they can unintentionally express negative feelings. Here are some positive terms to use when discussing adoption:

- >> **Birthparent or biological parent**—rather than "real parent"
- >> **Parent**—rather than "adoptive parent"
- >> **International or intercountry adoption**—rather than "foreign adoption"
- >> **Make an adoption plan**—rather than "give up a child" or "put up for adoption"
- >> **Was adopted**—rather than "is adopted"

Compiled by MARGARET MINTZ, an adoptive mother, and RONNY DIAMOND, the director of Spence-Chapin's Adoption Resource Center in New York City.

Visit [www.adoptivefamilies.com/clip.php](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/clip.php) to download this and other adoption handouts as printer-friendly PDFs.

# How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade

One mother shares how she enlightened her daughter's curious classmates, using a favorite doll and a logic young children can follow. **BY AMY KLATZKIN**



**E**arly in first grade at my daughter's school, each child is given a special day when she gets to help the teacher in prominent ways and make important choices (like who gets to stand first in line). Classmates interview the child of the day, and the teacher records the answers on a big poster. My daughter was the first of two adopted children in her class to have a special day, and inevitably questions about adoption came up—although, the teacher reported, they were afterthoughts. The class had just finished interviewing my daughter, and the teacher was about to move on, when a classmate asked, “Weren’t you adopted?”

I got a message from the teacher that afternoon saying that adoption had come up and that my daughter had handled the situation with confidence and pride. The teacher then read to the class a book called *Families Are Different*, by Nina Pellegrini. In it a girl adopted transracially from Korea talks about her white parents, her Korean sister, and the occasional discomfort of being different from other families. But she looks around the neighborhood and notices that while in some families everyone looks alike (even the dog), in others there are many differences. All families, she concludes, are held together “by a special kind of glue called love.”

I was glad the teacher had the book on hand and decided to read it, and I was gratified to hear that my daughter had enjoyed her special day. So I was surprised, when I picked up my daughter that afternoon, to see her looking sad. It turns out that the interview was fine. She had enjoyed talking about herself and didn’t mind the questions about adoption. She loved the book and was pleased that her teacher had read it aloud. But there was still a problem.

One child had asked if the two adopted girls in *Families Are Different* were real sisters. And the teacher had answered, “They’re kind of sisters.” It’s possible that no one except my daughter picked up on the subtext. But some kids catch all

the nuances when grown-ups talk about adoption. Mine has her radar fine-tuned. She heard that the teacher wasn’t sure just how “real” those sisters were. My daughter doesn’t have a sibling, but she has adopted friends who do. Aren’t Betty and Zoe real sisters, she asked?

I explained that sometimes grown-ups not in adoptive families aren’t always good at answering questions about adoption. What’s confusing, I explained, is that before Zoe was adopted, she and Betty weren’t sisters, but that from the moment of adoption on, they were sisters forever. And by the way, would she like me to come talk to the class about adoption next week?



## Adopting Emma

At the beginning of the school year, I'd given my daughter's teacher a packet of materials on adoption and school issues. The teacher had invited me to give a talk on adoption, but I hadn't scheduled it yet. I wished I'd done it before my daughter's special day, but after would have to do.

I was nervous about talking to the class, so I asked several parents who'd done it before for some suggestions. Then I talked with my daughter. She had a terrific idea. She has a doll named Emma who was made to look like her when she was one year old. "Let's dress Emma in my orphanage clothes," she said, "and we can talk about Emma's adoption."

And that's what we did. The class loved it, and everyone wanted to hold the "baby." My daughter was a participant in the discussion rather than the subject of it, which really pleased her. We talked first about different types of families, how some look alike and some don't. In my daughter's

**I don't know if it was the doll or the lists, but for most of the kids, something clicked. They were excited to understand something concrete about adoption.**

school a third of the children are biracial so it's not just transracial adoptees who look different from one or both parents. We used this realization as a springboard to discussing adoption.

Together we made two lists on the black board. On one side the children named things that babies need: diapers, bottles, food, clothes, hugs, love, and so on. On the other side they listed what parents do: feed, clothe, and hold babies, change diapers, give medicine. None of the first-graders said anything about being born. At the top of the parents' list I added a crucial part of every child's story: Babies need parents to bring them into the world.

You have to be careful how you talk about birth with first-graders. At this age there's a wide range of knowledge about procreation. Some six-year-olds can give accurate anatomical names to all the relevant body parts, while others know only that a baby grows in a mother's tummy. One boy in the class insisted that babies come from the earth. While some of his classmates shouted corrections, I redirected the discussion. I wasn't there to teach the birds and the bees.

## A Job for Emma's Forever Parents

Once we had our lists of what babies need and what parents do, I moved on to adoption. I told them to remember that adoption happens for grown-up reasons and that the need for adoption is never, ever a child's fault. Birthparents sometimes have big problems (like being too young to be parents or, in some parts of the world, being afraid to break rules about how many children they can have). Because of a big grown-up problem, some birthparents decide that they can't be "forever parents" to their child. I put a circle around "bring babies into the world." I picked up Emma, the doll, and said, "Emma's birthparents could bring her into the world, but they didn't think they could do all these other things," and I pointed to the long lists of things babies need and parents do.

"Emma's forever parents," I explained, "adopted her because they wanted to do all those other things for her. But they didn't do the first thing: they didn't bring her into the world. So Emma has two sets of real parents: her birthparents, who are certainly real even if we don't know who they are, and her forever parents, who are also real and who are part of her real forever family."


I don't know if it was the doll or the lists, but for most of the children, something clicked. They were excited to understand something concrete about adoption, and my daughter was proud of the whole presentation—especially the interest everyone took in Emma's clothes. "Those were really my clothes," she confided to the class, to general acclaim. When the other adopted child in the class had her special day, no one asked about adoption. They knew enough for now.

What worked for us may not work for your child. It may not even work for my

## TIPS FOR TALKING

1. **Don't wait too long.** Children in kindergarten and first grade (ages five to seven) don't mind their mothers being in the classroom, and may even be excited to share the outlines of their adoption stories. By second grade, children are more self-conscious about differences and less willing to be the center of attention.
2. **Don't make your child's adoption story the subject of the talk.** Talk with your child about what he feels comfortable sharing. He may wish to give some basic details in the presentation, or he may wish to keep his story entirely private. A good way to keep the discussion general is to read an adoption storybook.
3. **Be aware that many children this age have never heard of adoption.** As one child said to her mother after her turn as "Star of the Week," "Mom, when I said I 'was adopted,' some kids thought I said I 'was a doctor'!" Cover the basics so that your child doesn't have to.
4. **Tailor your talk for a young audience.** Five- to seven-year-olds aren't sophisticated. Using props—like dolls—is a good idea.
5. **Talk to teachers beforehand** to get a sense of the class dynamics.
6. **Finish with food.** Hungry children love a treat, whether it is a dish from your child's country of origin or homemade cookies.

—JULIE MICHAELS

daughter next year, in second grade, when more complex questions and concerns may arise. We can't deal with the issue once and consider it done, because understanding adoption is a lifelong process. We need to keep communication open with our children so we know (or can make educated guesses about) what issues are coming up in school and can help them, their friends, and their teachers develop greater awareness and understanding of adoption. 

AMY KLATZKIN is the editor of *A Passage to the Heart: Writings from Families with Children from China*. She lives with her husband and daughter in San Francisco.



# How to Explain Adoption to Family and Friends

Family members, friends, and other parents can use our adoption experiences to broaden their children's sphere of understanding.

BY LOIS MELINA



**W**hen I was growing up, one of my playmates was a girl who lived alone with her mother. Single parent families were not common then—at least not in our subdivision—but I was given an explanation for their situation even before I formed the question. “Julie was adopted,” my mother told me. The statement may have been whispered; I don’t recall. And I wonder if I would have been told at all (or if my mother would even have known) if my friend had had two parents.

Apparently I thought that no further explanation of the adoption process was necessary, and I don’t believe I ever talked to Julie or her mother about it. What I was really interested in were Julie’s apricot-colored toy poodle and white bedroom set with a canopied bed. If I ever connected these luxuries with the idea prevalent at the time that single, adopted children often were spoiled, I don’t recall.

Consider what my mother’s statement about a friend’s adoption might have brought to mind. Was adoption something secret? Or was it something to be desired (because it comes with a poodle)?

Was a barrier thrown up by the comments, as there might be if someone tells a child that her playmate is of a different faith?

What information, if any, was conveyed about the reasons people adopt and how children become available for adoption? If I had asked why Julie didn’t have a father, would my mother have known what the policies were toward single-parent adoption in the 1960s?

Most important, if Julie's mother had known I would be told about Julie's adoption, how would she have wanted that information conveyed?

As parents, we want to teach our children about the world. Often, we start with the center of our world—our own family—and move outward. As our children encounter new people and situations in the world around us, we help them make sense of the unfamiliar. We hope to create understanding, empathy, and a wider sphere of comfort.

We explain why chemotherapy caused Aunt Rachel's hair to fall out; why a neighbor

their kids by helping them understand the subject better themselves. Because they will rely on accumulated information for those discussions, whatever we can do to make sure the information is accurate will help.

That means that, from the start, we correct any misinformation they may have—without being so defensive or sensitive that we become bores on the subject. We might be tempted to ignore a statement like, "I just don't understand how anyone could give away a beautiful baby like that." However, if we give the speaker a brief but empathetic picture of birthmothers and relinquishment, we may ensure that a few years later this


nine. Until then they will not expect family members to be racially alike or otherwise resemble each other.

■ When children are old enough to understand adoption, they may wonder if they were also adopted, even if they don't ask the question. Parents may want to include in their discussion of another child's adoption the facts about how their own child joined their family.

■ Children will find it difficult to understand why birthparents relinquish children for adoption because they don't have the life experience to understand the social and economic factors that contribute to such decisions. It is sufficient for parents to explain that, for whatever reason, the birthparents were unable to care for any child at that time. It was not a problem with the child that necessitated the adoption.

■ Parents who have neither relinquished a child for adoption, been adopted, nor experienced infertility or adoption may look at our decision to adopt and think, "If that were me, I would not have the [biologic] children I have. How sad. How could I live without my children—how could any other child be acceptable to me?" They may inadvertently convey this attitude, or they may overcompensate, making adoption sound perfect because the child has been "chosen" or because the birthparents had the "perfect love" necessary to make such a sacrifice. Tell them that it is not only all right, it is desirable to talk about adoption as an experience of both joy and sorrow.

■ Parents should not forget to mention that children who were adopted not only have a birthmother, but also a birthfather. Otherwise, classmates may conclude that the child's adoptive father is his biological father. Parents also should know that birthparents can be active participants in an adopted child's life.

There are many myths about adoption and much misinformation about its practices and the members of our community. Let your family and friends know that they do not have to be experts on the subject when talking to their children—and that you stand ready to be a resource to them. 

## It is sufficient for parents to explain that, for whatever reason, the birthparents were unable to care for any child born to them at that time.

who fought in the Gulf War is too sick to work; why the woman in the grocery store covers her face with a veil. In most cases, we draw on our own experiences and general knowledge for these explanations. We don't do a search of medical journals before explaining chemotherapy. We rely on what we have retained from explanations we've heard, news accounts and memoirs we've read, specials we've watched on the Discovery channel.

Because those sources have satisfied us, we believe they will be adequate for our children. And, in most cases, they will be. The broad picture is understood. It is only the fine points that may not be understood as precisely as they should be.

Family members, friends, and the parents of our children's classmates will use our adoptive family experiences and stories to broaden their children's sphere of understanding. Adoption can say a lot about how the world works in ways other than we think or expect. Birth control can fail. People of different races can be sisters. Two men can be fathers to the same child. Collectively, our adoptive families are a rich source of social, economic, racial, and ethical commentary.

However, individually we tend to have more immediate and mundane concerns: Is my own family accurately described? Is my own family better understood?

We can help others explain adoption to

parent won't pass on that shallow judgment when talking to his child about our son or daughter.

At the same time, we want to protect our child's privacy. It is her story, after all. She has the right to decide who knows the details of her life, including the circumstances of her birthparents, how she became available for adoption, and her own physical, mental, and social condition at that time. If the ethical reasons to maintain a child's privacy were not compelling enough, there are practical considerations as well. We do not want our child's friends and classmates to know her story before she learns it from us herself.

Some parents take a formal approach, writing a letter to friends and family members outlining preferred adoption terminology, information about the adoption process, and insight into any cultural issues that might be relevant, such as how independent adoption works in the U.S. or the "one-child" policy of China.

Whether parents convey information in this way or more casually, they will want to communicate the following ideas to parents of nonadopted children:

■ Children can't understand adoption until they are old enough to understand reproduction—usually around the age of five or six. Preschool children probably will not think adoption requires explanation. Children don't understand genetics until about age

LOIS MELINA is the author of several highly regarded books, including *Raising Adopted Children* and *Making Sense of Adoption*.



# Relatives Say the Strangest Things

When bringing your family into the adoption conversation, educate them with compassion but hold your ground.

BY LEONARD FELDER, PH.D.

**W**hatever you do, don't adopt," insists my pushy uncle Bruce at a family holiday gathering. "Why not?" I ask. "Well, I heard somewhere that all adopted kids have problems," he announces in a booming voice.

My wife and I look at each other in disbelief. This is not the first time Bruce

has said something insensitive. Yet for Linda and me, his comments and the ensuing family debate about "Do adopted kids really have more problems" are especially painful. We had gone through six years of trying to start a family and several more years of infertility procedures. Now that we had finally made up our minds to adopt, here's Uncle

Bruce and his "I heard somewhere."

In a perfect world, our immediate and extended families would be educated, sensitive, and supportive about our journeys in the world of adoption. Yet as an adoptive parent and a psychotherapist who has counseled many families about adoption issues, I am constantly amazed at the clumsy,



invasive, and hurtful things that certain relatives have to say.

## For example, have you ever:

**...been treated as a second-class member of your family because you were childless, or because your children were adopted?**

**...had to listen to one of your relatives spout nonsense, rumors, or generalizations about “all adopted children”?**

**...gotten tired of hearing, “Oh, but she looks exactly like you!” (As if it mattered.)**

**...been asked, “Don’t you wish you could have a real child?” or “How could you be so stupid as to stay in touch with that irresponsible birthmother?”**

**...been aghast when one or more of your relatives made insensitive or stereotypical remarks about your child’s racial features or special need?**

**...felt slighted by a grandparent who gives a little less love, money, gifts, or attention to your child who was adopted?**

How does a parent or child respond to family members who say and do strange things because of misinformation or discomfort about adoption? Here are the four rules that have worked for my counseling clients and in my own family encounters:

## Appoint yourself ambassador of adoption.

Rather than feeling shocked or belittled each time something bizarre comes out of a relative’s mouth, see him or her as an innocent soul who lacks in basic knowledge about adoption. Your task is to teach this person what he or she needs to know in order to stop hurting or insulting you and your child.

In order to be a knowledgeable ambassador, educate yourself and your children about the positive aspects of adoption and what to say to the nonsense certain people utter. That could mean two hours a month attending a support group of adoptive parents or taking a class on post-adoption issues at a local agency. Or it could mean reading magazine articles or books on situations you and your family are encountering or will be facing in the future.

One of my counseling clients told me recently, “I often get useful information from my catch-up phone calls with other adoptive parents. Just a half hour every couple of weeks talking with those who have kids a bit older than mine gives me a great preview of what I’ll be facing.”

## Increase your comfort level with adoption.

How do you protect yourself and your child from certain members of your family who just don’t get it?

First, before any family gathering, put a plan in place that will help you stay calm and positive. A few days or several

numerous times to their infants and toddlers, “Hey, do you know what adoption is? Adoption is how we became a family, and we’re so glad that we’re all together as a loving family.” One of my counseling clients, a mother of two children, told me, “My kids and I are so comfortable with adoption because from the time they were old enough to talk, we would play this game of asking ‘Hey, do you know what adoption is...?’ Now at ages five and 11, whenever they hear negative comments, they wonder, ‘What is wrong with this person? Doesn’t he know that adoption is a great thing? He is so out of it.’”

## Prepare yourself for some insensitive remarks.

Another way to deal with the odd remarks of an opinionated relative is to uncover the hidden insecurities that underlie the strange comments. If you ask a few of your family members why a relative tends to say hurtful things, you will probably discover something very interesting.

Quite often, the most invasive or chronically advice-giving relatives are that way not because you need advice, but

## To be a knowledgeable ambassador, educate yourself and your children about the positive aspects of adoption and what to say to the nonsense that people may utter.

hours before the event, ask a supportive person who will be at the event with you—a longtime friend, a sibling or cousin, or some other informed relative—to be your “booster shot” if anyone says something unpleasant. Tell this person, “If anyone says or does something ridiculous, I’m going to look at you, and we’re going to make eye contact to remind each other that I’m a good parent and I’ve got an amazing kid.” Knowing ahead of time that someone understands and is rooting for you will immunize you against whatever toxic comments come your way.

At the Vista Del Mar Adoption Support Groups in West Los Angeles, adoptive parents are taught to say

because they were raised by an invasive or chronically advice-giving mother or father. Or you’ll find this person to be judgmental with his or her own spouse and kids—it’s not just your kid who gets picked on. Or maybe you’ll come to understand that the relative who cannot get comfortable with your child’s racial or ethnic features is uncomfortable with her own appearance or social status.

For example, Jenny, 44, is the Caucasian parent of 12-year-old Alicia, whose Latin-American features are part of her beauty. Yet Jenny’s mother, Bernice, 64, can’t stop making negative comments about Alicia’s skin, eye, and hair color, or her ethnic pride as a Latina.

According to Jenny, “For years my

mother has urged me to make Alicia look, sound, or act more ‘classy.’ What she really means is that she wants Alicia to be more ‘white.’ I want my daughter to feel connected to her extended family, yet I often feel like screaming at my mother and forbidding her to see Alicia.”

I asked Jenny to find out why her mother is so obsessed about status, race, looks, and fitting in. A few weeks later, she told me, “I spoke to my mom’s younger sister and found out something I’ve never known before. When my mother was in high school, she was in love with a Cuban immigrant whom her parents refused to let her marry.”

Jenny continued, “You would think my mother would have learned from that painful episode, but it’s just the opposite: My mom was rejected by the status-oriented cliques at her high school, and she’s always tried to make up for that painful experience by doing everything she could to look affluent, act sophisticated, and fit in socially. She probably thinks she’s trying to help by being so concerned about Alicia’s looks and whether she, too, will fit in.”

Even if your relatives are carrying hidden pain or shame, that doesn’t make their prejudices excusable. It simply allows you to think about their problems rather than feeling insecure about your own life.

## Hold your ground firmly, but with compassion.


Even though you might feel like lashing out at relatives who say or do hurtful things, you will be far more effective if you respond in a more sensible way. The next time Jenny heard Bernice say, “Why don’t you put some blonde highlights in Alicia’s hair?” her first impulse was to snap at her mom. But instead, she took a deep breath and tried out a communication technique we had practiced in a counseling session. It utilizes both firmness and compassion to let the family member know you care about him or her but you will not put up with hurtful comments about your child.

The technique consists of two reassuring statements surrounding an assertive middle one. In a calm and sincere tone, Jenny said, “Mom, I know

you care about Alicia and that you want the best for her.” (This was the reassuring top layer.) “But your comments about hair and skin color are dangerous to her self-esteem. They make it sound as though she needs to pretend to be white in order to be OK. I love you, Mom, and I want Alicia to have a good relationship with you. But if you make one more remark about her looks or racial features, I won’t be able to let her be around that kind of harmful talk.” (That was the assertive middle part of the sandwich.) Jenny then concluded, “I know you can do it, Mom. You are an intelligent, considerate person and you can appreciate that my daughter, your granddaughter, is a beautiful Latina who is going to do quite well in this world.” (That was the reassuring bottom layer.)

Jenny could tell during the next few months that it wasn’t easy for her mother to get beyond her own insecurities. Bernice still gave holiday and birthday gifts of clothes and accessories that were “preppy” and not quite what Alicia or her friends like to wear. Yet Bernice did stop making hurtful comments to Alicia and Jenny. Over time and with several one-on-one conversations, Jenny was able to teach her mother that, to some extent, times had changed.

As Jenny told me during her final session, “I don’t know if I’ve completely changed my mother from being an insecure or prejudiced person. But I’ve helped to change her comments and her behavior. And for now, that’s enough. She is supportive and positive with Alicia most of the time.”

As with many of our relatives, the expectation in Jenny’s case was not perfection or 100-percent compliance. A few of our relatives will still sometimes say and do things that make our hair stand on end. But if you become more adept at responding with a mixture of compassion and firmness, you and your children will survive any clumsy family moments. Without being shocked or crushed at occasional misinformed remarks, you can smile and say to yourself, “It’s all relatives.” 

LEONARD FELDER, PH.D., is an adoptive father and psychologist in West Los Angeles. He is the author of *When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People* (Rodale Press).

## “I CAN’T BELIEVE HE SAID THAT!”

**Comments you may hear—and how to respond.**

**Your Relative:** Her birthmother was a teenager, right?

**You:** We’re keeping information about Janie’s birth family private right now.

**Your Relative:** How could anyone give up such a beautiful child?

**You:** Her birthmother decided that she couldn’t raise any child right now.

**Your Relative:** It’s too bad you couldn’t have a child of your own.

**You:** Janie is our own.

**Your Relative:** Aren’t you worried his birthparents will come and take him back?

**You:** No. We’re Michael’s family by law.

**Your Relative:** I hear adoption is outrageously expensive. How much did you have to pay for a newborn?

**You:** After tax credits and employee benefits, adoption was no more expensive than giving birth. And you don’t buy a baby—the legal and social work fees are all approved by the courts.

**Your Relative:** Aren’t most adoptees really troubled?

**You:** Studies show that adoptees are as well-adjusted as their non-adopted peers.

**KEEP IN MIND:** The most important thing is to reinforce your child’s sense of belonging in your family; you never need to “explain” your family or your child to anyone. You may choose to educate relatives at a time when your child is not around.



## Be an Adoption Ambassador

After becoming a parent, you'll also take on the role of adoption spokesperson, fielding questions from curious strangers and encouraging would-be adopters. In this excerpt from *You Can Adopt*, we offer sample responses and back-up-data you can draw on.

**N**ow that you're home with your child, and wrapped up in the day-to-day joy of parenting, you probably find it hard to believe that you were ever skeptical or fearful of adoption. But cast your mind back and try to recapture all the emotions you felt when you first considered this route to parenthood. You may have felt vulnerable after struggling through years of infertility, and so used to bad news that you doubted an adoption would happen. You probably wondered about the timeline—because you were *so ready* to be a mom—and worried about the cost. Perhaps you began your research online and felt overwhelmed by all the options—how could you be sure you were choosing a stable adop-

tion program and a trustworthy agency or attorney?

For many of us, getting the chance to ask all of those nagging questions was the key that helped us take that next step. If you haven't yet been approached by a neighbor, a colleague, or a friend of a friend, get ready. Before that first conversation, it's wise to prepare yourself with answers about adoption in general. This way, you can avoid giving away personal information that your child might some day prefer to keep private. (Many readers admit they shared too much when their children were little.)

Once we get the hang of this new role, most of us relish these opportunities to be adoption educators and advocates—and never



get tired of attesting to the sweet light at the end of the tunnel.

## THEIR QUESTIONS, OUR ANSWERS

Here, we offer tried-and-tested short answers to the most common questions, plus statistics and background information, if you want to go further.

**Q:** Was adoption terribly expensive? How did you afford it?

**A:** The average cost of an adoption last year was \$27,000. Grants and reimbursements can reduce the expense.

Each year, *Adoptive Families* conducts a survey of adoption costs and timelines; according to our data, the average cost of adoption roughly equals the cost of a midsize car. The adoption tax credit (up to \$12,150 for adoptions completed in 2009) and employee benefits can reduce out-of-pocket cost significantly, bringing adoption well within the reach of most Americans.

Although every adoption has unique factors that affect cost, as a general rule, adopting from foster care is the least expensive route. In the 2007-2008 *AF* survey, 85 percent of foster adopters reported total costs of \$5,000 or less. International adoptions are more expensive, but generally predictable, once you've chosen the country of origin. Private, infant adoption costs range widely, depending on your state's laws and the birthmother's situation.

**Q:** How long does it take? Didn't you wait forever?

**A:** The average wait to adopt is about two years.

According to *AF*'s surveys, most adoptive parents bring their children home within two years of submitting their paperwork. The numbers are always in flux; in recent years, several sending countries have slowed their process. Meanwhile, domestic adoption has sped up. In our most recent poll, more than half (55 percent) of the respondents report being matched with a birthmother in less than six months; for one-third of the families, the baby was born less than one month after the match.

**Q:** Is it really possible to adopt an American child? Even a newborn?

**A:** The vast majority of adoptees are U.S.-born. International adoptees just tend to be more visible.

In any given year in the U.S., about 100,000 children join their families through adoption (not counting adoptions by stepparents). About one-quarter are placed at birth by their mothers. About half are adopted from U.S. foster care, often by their foster parents. These children range in age from infants through teenagers. About one-quarter are adopted from other countries. Media attention tends to focus on international adoption, but for the past 30 years, more than three-quarters of adoptions are of U.S.-born children.

**Q:** Doesn't open adoption confuse your child?

**A:** Research on kids in open adoption shows that there's no such effect.

The Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) studied several hundred families in open adoptions. The children (who were between 12 and 20 years old for the last wave of questions) did just fine on tests of self-esteem and social adjustment. It's hardly surprising: Only 58 percent of all children under 18 in the U.S. live in a "traditional household" with two parents. Children who've been exposed to blended, single-parent, extended, and gay families in their own lives, and in the media, can easily grasp the idea of having birth relatives.

**Q:** Aren't you afraid the birthparents will come and take him back?

**A:** Ever since the adoption was finalized in court, he's as much ours as if we'd given birth.

In private, infant adoptions, about one-third of expectant mothers change their plans between matching and placement. A smaller—but still significant—number change

their minds between placement and the termination of their rights. Finalized adoptions are very rarely contested: Fewer than 0.1 percent end up in court. In adoption from foster care, and in international adoptions, birthparents' rights are terminated before the adoption proceedings can begin.

**Q:** I bet her birthmother was a teenager, right?

**A:** We're keeping information about our child's birthmother private, but most birthmothers are in their twenties.

The majority of birthmothers relinquishing children are older than 18 (one study puts the average age at 24). Most are single (though about five percent of babies are relinquished by married couples). About a quarter have children already. Interestingly, women who place their children for adoption are more likely to have intact families, higher incomes, and higher educational levels than mothers who choose to parent their babies. The average age of relinquishing birthfathers is 27; about one-quarter of them take an active role in the adoption plans.

**Q:** Are you going to tell him that he was adopted?

**A:** Yes, it's something we already talk about.

Fifty years ago, adoptive parents often pretended that their children had been born to them. (Some adoptive mothers even wore padded maternity clothes for months before the baby came.) Nowadays, the growth in open adoption and transracial adoption (let's face it, it's hard to pretend that two Caucasian parents gave birth to a Chinese baby) means that it's almost impossible to keep an adoption secret. Our families talk openly about adoption with their children

## WHAT ABOUT ANGELINA?

Many adoptive parents are asked to comment on celebrity adoptions. Even if you can't explain Madonna, you can at least dispel tabloid myths about celebrities "shopping for children," bending rules, or "kidnapping" children who are "not really orphans." The truth is always more prosaic; adoption, like childbirth, is a great leveler. Every American citizen—yes, even Angelina—has to go through the same homestudy process that you endured. And while news stories often make it appear that celebrity parents swoop in and pick up a child, they wait just as long as everyone else; it only looks "instant" because public figures are cautioned to keep their plans private until the adoption can be completed. (One celebrity mom recently told *Adoptive Families* that she's pretty sure her adoption took longer than average, because her agency wanted to find a child whose birth family could withstand press scrutiny.)

from the very beginning. For their part, few adoptees can remember having been told they were adopted—it's just something they grew up knowing.

**Q:** Aren't most adoptees troubled?

**A:** A research study that's been going on for a decade shows that adopted children do just as well as kids raised in their biological families.

The Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS), conducted at the University of Minnesota, which has followed children in 600 families since 1999, concludes that, by mid-adolescence, adoptees are no more likely than their peers to engage in delinquency, substance abuse, or aggression. Their relationships with their brothers and sisters (whether adopted or the biological children of the adoptive parents) were as close and loving as those between bio-siblings, and adoptees reported feeling as attached to their parents as did biological children.

However, the SIBS also finds that adoptees are “moderately” more likely than their nonadopted peers to display emotional or behavioral problems, like anxiety, depression, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children adopted domestically are at slightly higher risk than those adopted internationally; researchers do not know why.

Although the risk of adoptees having a disorder is only slightly elevated, the SIBS has found that they are more than twice as likely as non-adoptees to be referred to a mental-health professional. The researchers theorize that adoptive parents are better educated, or have greater economic resources, than non-adoptive parents, are more comfortable with social services because they've had previous interactions, or “may have a lower threshold than the parent of a non-adopted child for reporting behavior as problematic.” As a result, their children may be over-diagnosed. Overall, however, the SIBS researchers emphasize that “most adopted adolescents are psychologically healthy.”

**Q:** How do you know that your adoption was legal? Weren't you afraid of being scammed?


**A:** The best way to avoid problems is to work with a large, nonprofit agency or

with an attorney who specializes in adoption, and to do plenty of research before you sign up.

No one compiles reliable statistics on adoption scams, but our experience at *Adoptive Families* is that the greatest risk factor is attempting to go it alone. Adoption is a process that will transform at least two lives; it likely involves laws in more than one state, and maybe more than one country. There is no guarantee against problems, but risks can be reduced by working with an agency or attorney with a long history of doing adoptions, and by checking references thoroughly.

**Q:** I'd love to adopt—how do you get started?

**A:** What kind of child do you think will fit best in your family?

Adoptive parents who have had a positive experience will naturally think to recommend their own attorney or agency; however, this may not be the best choice for your questioner. Agencies and attorneys specialize in different kinds of adoption. Prospective adoptive parents should focus first on the child and the kind of adoption they want to pursue before picking their adoption professional. 

Adapted from *You Can Adopt: An Adoptive Families Guide* (Ballantine), by SUSAN CAUGHMAN and ISOLDE MOTLEY. The book is available at [adoptivefamilies.com/youcanadopt](http://adoptivefamilies.com/youcanadopt).



## You Can Adopt: An Adoptive Families Guide What You'll Find Inside

### Thinking about adopting?

- Making the decision to adopt
- Choices in adoption: domestic and international
- How to think about race, age, and gender

### Working on an adoption

- Choosing your adoption team
- Real expenses and real solutions
- Understanding the medical issues
- Preparing your homestudy and dossier
- Preparing for your new child
- Choosing to accept a referral or birthmother match
- How to make sure your adoption succeeds

### Parenting your child

- Bonding and attachment
- Your child's birthmother and other new relatives
- Telling the adoption story
- Talking to teachers, doctors—and strangers
- Speech delays, learning disabilities, and other complications
- Adoptees on adoption

Plus, checklists to get you through the process, tips from parents and adoption experts, personal essays, reader-submitted photos, and more.

**You Can Adopt: An Adoptive Families Guide** is available at major bookstores everywhere and online at [adoptivefamilies.com/youcanadopt](http://adoptivefamilies.com/youcanadopt).

## PRIVACY VS. SECRECY

As you educate friends and acquaintances who may be interested in adopting, answer their questions in a general way. Speaking openly and enthusiastically about adoption normalizes it, and makes it clear to our children that there's nothing secret or shameful about our families. But you must remember that your child's story is his to tell. Many of our families say they regret sharing so much when their children were little. As a rule of thumb, keep any details about your child's birth family and their reasons for making an adoption plan to yourself. And make it clear to your child that he doesn't have to answer anybody's questions. A polite “I don't care to discuss that” or “that's private” is fine.

# Budding Curiosity

Between the ages of three and five, children love hearing the story of how you became a family, and begin to ask simple questions about adoption. *AF* takes you inside the mind of your preschooler, and offers talking tips. **By Joni S. Mantell, LCSW**





**Y**ou've probably been telling your child her adoption story from the first day she came home. In the early years, adoption talks are generally one-sided. By the time she's three, a child may be able to adorably recite the entire tale, or joyfully chime in at her favorite parts. But the conversation is about to get much more interactive.

Three- to five-year-olds are famous for asking questions about just about *everything*, so you can expect that some of your child's questions will touch on adoption. Keep in mind that preschoolers are literal thinkers and cannot understand abstract concepts. For example, when Tess, a four-year-old from New York City, heard that a boy was "put up for adoption," she thought that he had been put up on a shelf. Until a child understands something about birth and reproduction, he cannot truly differentiate birth and adoption as ways of forming a family. All children at this stage are egocentric, so if he gives it any thought, an adopted child will probably assume that all children join their families by adoption.

Although preschoolers understand very little about what being adopted really means, they can become familiar with some of the language and grasp the emotional message that adoption means they are loved. As you talk with your preschooler, think about it as laying a foundation for later conversations. Here are five developmental tasks your three- to five-year-old is ready to work through, and how you can encourage exploration.

### Learn some adoption language

When children are very young, your tone and your comfort with the topic are as important as the facts you relate, so you can stick to a simple version of your child's story. Think of it as a sketch that you'll fill in with more details as she grows. The only caveat is to be honest and avoid saying anything you'll have to contradict later.

You may want to start by sharing the excitement you felt when you received the telephone call about her, the frantic trip to meet her, and how thrilled everyone in the family was to welcome her home. The birthparents should be included in these early

conversations, but a brief mention should suffice. In her book, *Over the Moon*, Karen Katz beautifully states: "You grew like a flower in another lady's tummy until you were born. But the lady wasn't able to take care of you, so Mommy and Daddy came to adopt you and bring you home."

If you start talking early, adoption becomes a natural topic for your child and you. Follow your child's lead in giving more information. Curious as he may be, your child's questions will probably be simpler than you expect.

### Find out whose tummy they grew in

Around age four, a child will see a pregnant woman and ask her mom, "Did I grow in your tummy?" While this may startle you, it

## AGES 0-2:

### The Earliest Conversations

Many parents report getting teary the first few times they told their child his adoption story. Perhaps this conversation stirs up unresolved feelings about infertility, or it's so emotionally profound to finally be telling your own child how you became a family. Use these early "conversations" with your infant to increase your ease with the topic. Children pick up on tone of voice long before they can understand the words you're using, so strive for an upbeat tone that reflects the joy you feel about being your child's parent. Practice what you want to say, so that the story flows naturally by the time your toddler understands the words.

is important to keep in mind that, to your child, this is not an adoption issue. This is a magical regressive wish that *all* children this age have, whether they were born to or adopted by their parents.

Sometimes, out of their own anxiety, parents explain more than their child is ask-

ing. Keep your responses simple and honest. When children first learn of the existence of their birthmother, they may think of her as an intruder and wish they had grown inside you, the mother they know and love. Five-year-old Chris seemed sad when his mom told him about his birthmother. He said, "I don't want her in my story." If your child reacts this way, reassure him about your relationship and acknowledge that he's expressing a wish to be close to you: "I know you feel sad. I feel sad, too, but I feel as close to you as if you grew in my tummy. I love you." [See "Words You Can Use," opposite page, for more sample dialogue.]

### Understand that they were born, like other children

Adoptive parents sometimes skip the birth step when telling their young child his story. They may say, "Mommy and Daddy couldn't make a baby, so we called an adoption agency. They found a baby for us, and that was you." Other parents start talking about adoption by focusing on the child's birth country. Lily, age five, from Lawrenceville, New Jersey, thought she was born "from China." Keep in mind that preschoolers are literal thinkers. It is not unusual for a child this age to conclude that "adoption" means being hatched, delivered by plane, or some other non-natural process. Include your child's birth in her story even if you know little about it; your child needs to know that she was born normally, like any other child.

Between the ages of four and six, children begin to ask where babies come from. Although parents are probably nervous about explaining the birds and the bees, children are usually unabashed and eager for information. Let your child know that it takes a man and a woman to create a baby, and that, following a period of gestation, the baby is born.

This is a good time to mention the birthfather, if you haven't already. If birthfathers aren't mentioned, it's not uncommon for children to believe that their adoptive dad is their birthfather.

This very basic information about reproduction and birth will be valuable in helping your child understand the concept of adoption. Your talk may also awaken painful memories about your infertility, if that was the reason you chose adoption. Discussing birth and the creation of families

with your child can be an enriching—and freeing—experience for the whole family.

## Realize that he has birthparents

Preschoolers begin to differentiate between birth and adoption as different ways of entering a family, and to realize that they have two sets of parents. They'll start asking questions that they'll pose many times over, in different forms, in the years to come.

*Why did they place me? Did they give me up because something is wrong with me?* Children tend to feel responsible for whatever happens to them, and may worry, Maybe I cried too much, didn't eat enough, and so on. Reassure your child that nothing he did or didn't do led to his being placed for adoption, and that his birthparents could



not take care of *any* baby because of their own situation. On the other hand, don't give the impression that something is wrong with his birthparents. Even if you have troubling information about the birthparents, try to send the message that they did their best, given their circumstances. At this age, your child needs to feel that he was born to good people.

Don't tell a preschooler, "She placed you because she loved you." This may only lead your child to worry that you, her loving parent, could place her again.

*Are my birthparents OK? Are they worried about me?* Knowing that their birthparents are real people whom they don't know can trigger some complex feelings. Greg, a five-year-old, became hysterical at bedtime and said he wanted to go home to Russia. His mom took this as a personal rejection. When she got up the courage to ask him why, Greg

said, "I want to tell my birthmother I am happy and not to worry about me."

Preschoolers benefit from expressing their feelings in concrete ways. Have your child draw a picture or dictate a letter to keep in a special place (or to send, if that is an option). Or use dolls or stuffed animals to act out your child's adoption story.

## Notice differences in physical appearance

If your child is of a different race, or has clearly different physical features, from your family, she'll become aware of this around age four. She may notice it herself, or overhear someone commenting on her appearance. Explain that the birth process is the same for everyone, but that people from different cultures have distinguishing physical features and their own rich heritage.

Although it is tempting to smooth over your differences, you should acknowledge them and help your child take pride in his cultural and racial heritage. When five-year-old Ella asked her dad why her skin was darker than his, he replied, "It's not. I tan in the summer, and we look alike." When she asked her mom the same question, she was told, "You have dark skin because you inherited your birthfather's Mediterranean complexion." Ella responded, "You'd better write Daddy an e-mail!"

It's common for children this age to think, "Mommy's color is the most beautiful." If your child says she wishes she were "\_\_\_\_, like you," acknowledge the difference and tell her how beautiful you think she is.

The most important goal at this stage is to create an open, empathic family atmosphere in which adoption is freely discussed and all questions are welcome. Laying this foundation will serve you and your child well in years to come, as her feelings about adoption become more complex, or if you have negative information to share.

Children who learn at an early age that it's alright to be curious usually carry this idea over to school and other venues for learning. In this way, your early talks about adoption will help build a strong self-confidence that will carry your little one through childhood and beyond. **11**

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## TALKING TIPS

1. **Start slowly.** You'll share more details as your child develops.
2. **Clarify what your child's asking.** His questions may be simpler than you think.
3. **Validate your child's emotions.** At this age, this is more important than his having all the facts.
4. **Process your own feelings about adoption.** Even if you use the "right words," your child will pick up on a negative tone of voice.
5. **Create a safe environment for talking about adoption.** Initiate the discussion yourself if your child rarely raises the topic.

## WORDS YOU CAN USE

**Here are some questions kids ask during the preschool years, language you can adapt when responding, and the messages you want to send.**

**QUESTION:** "Why wasn't I born in your tummy?"

**RESPONSE:** "Daddy and I couldn't make a baby, but we wanted a baby to love very much. You were born from your birthmother's tummy, and then we adopted you."

**OBJECTIVE:** Give a simple explanation that confirms that your child was born, like other children.

**QUESTION:** "Why didn't my birthparents keep me?"

**RESPONSE:** "Sometimes when a man and a woman have a baby, they cannot take care of any child at that time. It's never because of anything about the child. It's for grown-up reasons."

**OBJECTIVE:** Clarify that the placement was for grown-up reasons and was not because of any fault of the child.

**QUESTION:** "How come my skin is brown and yours is pink?"

**RESPONSE:** "Your birthparents had brown skin, so that is something you inherited from them. Most people from Guatemala have brown skin."

**OBJECTIVE:** Associate a genetic trait and identify the heritage, when possible.

**QUESTION:** "What does my birthmother look like?"

**RESPONSE:** If you know, describe her. If you don't know, say, "She probably looks a lot like you, so she must be very beautiful."

**OBJECTIVE:** Respect your child's need to know about her birthmother, and use this as an opportunity to support self-esteem.

# Big Tummmies, Big Questions

Don't let your preschooler catch you off-guard! Be prepared to talk about the birds, the bees, and adoption. **BY JOANNE SOLCHANY, PH.D.**



**P**reschoolers ask a world of questions—so when they see a pregnant woman at day care or the grocery store, their curiosity may be piqued. Here are a few common questions a preschooler may ask, and how to handle them.

## Oh, Baby!

*“Mommy, why is that lady so fat?”*

When a child asks about a lady’s “big tummy,” it opens the door for you to talk about conception and childbirth. Depending on your values and opinions (how much can your preschooler process, and what does she really need to know?), your discussion can go in one of several directions.

Some parents decide these issues are best explained to kids this age by the “magic of life” idea—babies come from God, the stork brings them, and so on. Others believe that preschoolers aren’t too young to know the basics of reproduction, described in age-appropriate terms, such as “When a mommy and daddy love each other very much, they

get very close together, and their love makes a baby.”

## The Other Mommy


*“Did I get made in your tummy?”*

An adopted child will eventually ask this question, and when she does, you’ll have to decide how to answer it. If your child is involved in an open adoption, she has likely heard about her birthmother from the start. This makes it easier to talk about whose tummy she grew in. For a child who does not know his birthmother, you may need to explain this concept for the first time.

## Why We Adopted

*“How come I didn’t grow inside you?”*






This question presents an opportunity to discuss why you chose to adopt. Some parents are open, sharing their reasons quite frankly. Others may still be struggling with the pain of infertility or something else that makes it hard to give a brief and thoughtful response. In either case, preparation is key. Discuss

with your partner, or with a friend, how you want to present information to your child. (There are no hard and fast rules—simply follow your heart.) Whatever you decide, use basic language, tailoring your response to your own situation. For example, you might say, “You grew in your birthmommy’s tummy because mommy and daddy couldn’t make a baby.” Remember to keep your explanation simple, concise, and clear. 

JOANNE SOLCHANY, PH.D., is an infant and child therapist and nurse practitioner in the Seattle area, and the adoptive mother of two.

## TALKING TO PRESCHOOLERS

Preschoolers are curious about why things happen as they do. To talk to your child about babies, reproduction, and adoption:

-  **Follow his lead.** Your preschooler will let you know what, and how much, he wants to know by the questions he asks.
-  **Be brief.** Your response should involve no more than five to 10 words (or one concept) at a time.
-  **Give him time.** Sometimes it takes a preschooler several days, or longer, to process new information. Because of this, more questions may pop up at any time.
-  **Get active.** Tell your story through an activity. Draw a picture of a baby in a birthmother’s tummy, “construct” the airplane you took to pick up your child, and so forth.
-  **Share a book.** There are many preschool titles on the subject. Try *Our Teacher’s Having a Baby*, by Eve Bunting (Clarion); *Waiting for Baby*, by Harriet Ziefert (Henry Holt); *How I Was Adopted*, by Joanna Cole (HarperTrophy); and *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperTrophy), among others.



# When Children Notice Race

Kids start to become aware of racial differences during the preschool years. Here's how to talk about it. **BY MARYBETH LAMBE, M.D.**

**P**reschoolers are passionate observers, engrossed in noticing how they're like other people, how they're different, and how their families are unique. And while our kids are busy comparing themselves and their families to others, they're also beginning to recognize distinctions in race, gender, and ethnicity.

A preschooler may ask why a freckled child has "spots" on her cheeks, why a dark-skinned child looks "dirty," or why the food at an Indian friend's house is "so weird." If she was adopted, she may ask why her eyes are different from yours or why her skin is a different color.

## Talking About Diversity

As adoptive parents, it's important to help our kids learn about diversity. We can begin by teaching them the proper words with which to express themselves (a child's eyes are "almond-shaped," not "slanty"), and by being open to questions and observations.

Parents who are approachable and

honest about racial differences send an important message: that racial issues are not unmentionable.

Second, we must be careful not to pass on any hidden or dimly recognized prejudices of our own. Children pick up not only on what we say but the way we say it, as well as our actions and attitudes toward others.

It's most important to find ways to support your preschooler's racial identity, especially if it is different from your own. For instance, you could enroll your child in a preschool or day care facility with children and caregivers of varying ethnicities. If you're planning to move, consider relocating to a diverse, multiethnic community. Or, at the very least, try to associate with or make friends with people of different backgrounds, including some who share your child's racial identity.

Research has shown that preschoolers raised in homogenous communities link levels of trust, comfort, and responsiveness with only one skin color. Such limited

associations can be a source of later prejudice. For a child who has been adopted interracially, a subconscious bias toward her own race can be destructive. **18**

MARYBETH LAMBE, M.D., lives with her large, multiethnic family on an organic dairy farm in Washington.

## HOW TO START A CONVERSATION

Talking to your child about racial and ethnic differences will not—as some parents fear—make her more self-conscious. Here's how to begin a dialogue with your preschooler.

**1** If you and your child are of different races or ethnicities, use claiming statements to help her see how you are similar: "Wow, you are a good artist, just like Daddy." On the other hand, let her know that differences are OK, too: "Yes, your skin is a beautiful shade of brown. But Mommy has freckles, and Daddy turns bright pink in the sun!"

**2** Teach your child what to say if a playmate asks about differences (why her hair is so much blonder than her brother's, and so on). Hearing comments about how "weird" or "different" she is can tear at a child's sense of identity and self-esteem unless you've role-played such scenarios many times.

**3** When your preschooler poses questions, find out what she really wants to know. If she asks, "Why do my eyes look so much rounder than yours?" she may be wondering about her birth family, asking whether she fits in with yours, or simply seeking a practical answer ("Every person's eyes are a unique shape and color").

**4** If your preschooler tells you about cruel or insensitive racial or ethnic comments directed at her, take time to gather your thoughts before replying. Don't let your own emotions get in the way of giving her a calm, informed response.



# The BIG Questions

Between the ages of six and eight, children begin to understand adoption in a more sophisticated way—and will pose some questions you may have a hard time answering. *AF* takes a look at what's going on in the school-age child's mind, and offers advice for talking.

**BY JOANNE SOLCHANY, PH.D., ARNP**



**Y**ou've probably told your child his story from a very young age. As a toddler, he picked up on your cheerful tone when you talked about adoption. In early childhood, children generally accept adoption as a happy, positive family narrative. By the preschool years, your child may have learned his story verbatim, and loved to chime in when you recited the tale. Even so, he probably understood few of the words or concepts being used.

Between the ages of six and eight, children make substantial cognitive gains. This is the age when children begin to understand the difference between reality and fantasy, gain a greater capacity for logical thought, and start to see things from others' perspectives. These developmental advances allow children to understand adoption in a new way. What does this lead to? For many of our kids, lots of questions. Other children may never voice the questions, but tantrums, testing of our limits, periods of regression, or other behaviors indicate that they're mulling something big beneath the surface.

As parents, we may be overwhelmed by this new round of questions and surprising behaviors. Some will seem to indicate that our child is sad or grieving. We worry about saying the wrong thing or giving him information that will cause him to worry. Often, we're at a loss because we simply don't know the answers.

Here are four developmental tasks—and the resulting questions and behaviors—that are typical of this age.

## Recognizing the “other” family

During the preschool years, children tend to think of family as the people who live together in a house. But they soon begin to understand the concept of cousins, grandmothers, and extended family. When they start school, and their world broadens further, they realize that families are formed in different ways, and that most children live with their birth families. This awareness leads to a more profound understanding of adoption.

Six- to eight-year-olds realize that, in order to have joined their present families, they lost their first families. And that their birth families are living somewhere else in the country or the world. Children may ask a lot of questions as they seek to solidify this fact. Tracy Wachtman, of Defiance, Ohio, reports that her daughter “has started to process the fact that she has birth siblings in Belarus. She asks a lot of ‘what are they doing right now?’ questions.”

The understanding that they have separate adoptive and birthparents often leads children to “compare” the two—even if they never knew their birthparents. Cindy, of Madison, Wisconsin, is very familiar with the kind of comments that result from what she calls the “Disneyland birthmom phase”: “My birthmother would let me stay up later” or “My birthmother would let me have whatever I wanted.” She's learned to “ride them out” and to bring up adoption when her daughter isn't upset.

## Needing to know “why”

At a younger age, children can't conceive of others' points of view. During the school years, this “egocentrism” begins to fade and children move beyond their immediate thoughts and impressions. At the same time, they're able to connect actions with thoughts and feelings in their minds. Thus, they begin to consider not just the process of

adoption, but why their birthparents did what they did, what they were thinking, and how they might have felt.

“My daughter, adopted at 16 months, didn't talk about adoption until age six, but it was clear that she'd been processing it,” says Jenna Rugile, of East Northport, New York. “All of a sudden, she began asking questions like, ‘Why did my mommy give me up? Was I bad?’ She also began throwing tantrums and testing our limits.”

Rugile's experience is hardly unusual; wanting to know “why” a birthparent made an adoption plan is the biggest question for many children during this stage. Rugile and her husband eventually decided to seek help from an adoption therapist. She describes a recent “breakthrough” moment: “After a tantrum, and many tears and sobs, my daughter said, ‘Maybe I get so angry because I have a boo-boo inside from when I was left.’ I responded, ‘Yes, I think that's true,’ and reassured her that we are here for her and can talk about anything whenever she needs to talk.”

School-age children are capable of logical thought, and want to “problem-solve” and come up with answers. If you explain poverty, youth, or other circumstances that can lead to adoption plans, your child may ask, “Why couldn't someone give her some money, so she could take care of me?” or “Why couldn't someone teach her how to be a better mommy?” Encourage your child's thoughts, while explaining that you don't know all of the circumstances surrounding her birthparents' adoption plan: “That's a good suggestion, but we didn't know your birthmother. We do know that she made this decision because she felt it would give you a better life.”

## Separating fantasy from reality

Until the years of middle childhood, fantasy plays a huge role in a

## Talking Tips

There is no “best way” to deal with your child's desire for information. However, it's helpful to keep these guidelines in mind.

**Follow your child's lead.** Take it one question at a time and allow your discussions to unfold naturally.

**Wonder with her.** Ask what she imagines her birthmother is like.

**If you don't know an answer, admit it.** If you're giving your child your best guess, make this clear by saying, “Probably” or “I think.” Then, ask your child what he thinks.

**Support your child's emotions**—she may be mad, sad, or indifferent. All of which are normal and OK.

**Take advantage of “parallel conversation” situations,** like riding in the car, walking the dog, or cuddling on the couch—any time when direct eye contact can be avoided and discussion can flow.

**Encourage your child to put his feelings about his birthmother to paper.** Give him a journal in which to record his thoughts, or suggest that he write a hypothetical letter. Offer to hold the letter in a special place for now. For many children, simply putting the words to paper is therapeutic.



# “Why” a birthparent made an adoption plan is probably the biggest question at this age.

child's life. Fantasy is gradually replaced by rules and routines. This change can be seen in a child's play, as pretend-play gives way to games with rules and structure.

And because six- to eight-year-olds can now tell fantasy from reality, they have a strong desire to know “what is real.” When it comes to adoption, they want more information on how they came to be, what happened to their birthparents, and, especially, why their birthparents could not take care of them.

The adoption story you've told so far is probably a simple framework. Now's the time to add in all the details you know. “When our son was about six, he asked a lot of questions about his first mom. What was her name? Did he have brothers or sisters? What are their names? Why didn't he live with her? What was his name before he was adopted?” says Michelle Oxman, of Evanston, Illinois. “We were still in touch with his birthmom at the time, and I think that helped. I'd talk with him about the letters we sent her. Once she sent a picture of herself, and he hugged it to his heart.”


As Oxman found, children this age respond to concrete information. Share any photos or letters that you have, or pull out the passport your child used when you traveled home to the U.S., or the decree that made his adoption final in your state's court.

Parents may worry if they lack specific information, but you can explain what probably happened: “We don't know why your birthmother couldn't raise you, but babies need lots of things to grow up to be strong and healthy. She may have realized that she couldn't provide everything you needed, and decided to find a family who could.”

## Exploring fears about permanence

Children in this age group are moving on to bigger classrooms, to real academic work, and to more complex peer interaction on the playground. And they must function independently for longer periods on school days.

These transitions can cause anxiety that surfaces in questions such as, “If my birthmom gave me away, will you give me away, too?” or “What happened to my birthparents?” Children may relate such fears to circumstances within your family: “If Daddy loses his job, will you give me away?” “If I am bad, will you have to send me back?”

It's important to explain to your child that adoption is always an adult decision, and it never has anything to do with the child or her behavior. Stress that her birthparents could not care for any baby at the time. End every discussion by reassuring your child that adoption is forever—and that you're open to talking about the subject any time she wants to. Just as these weren't the first adoption conversations you had with your child, they'll be far from the last. 

JOANNE SOLCHANY, PH.D., ARNP, is the mother of two adopted children. She practices in the greater Seattle area.

## Words You Can Use

Kids ask tough questions at this age. Here are some typical queries, sample language you can adapt, and messages you want to send during the exchange.

### Q: Why didn't my mother want me?

**A:** Your birthmother wanted you to have the best home and family. She knew she would not be able to give that to you, so we adopted you!

**OBJECTIVE:** Reinforce the desire to give your child a good life.

### Q: How come they didn't like me?

**A:** I believe your birthparents loved you very much, which is why they wanted you to be adopted. They were not ready to be a mom or dad yet, and they wanted the best family for you!

**OBJECTIVE:** Explain how hard decisions can be made out of love.

### Q: What's my birthmother's name? What does she look like?

**A:** Her name is \_\_\_\_\_. I have a photo of her. Would you like to see it?

**OBJECTIVE:** Parents who adopt domestically often have a letter, a photo, or met the birthmother at the time of the adoption, but may wait for—and worry about—the “right time” to share. Often, knowing what a birthparent looks like is enough to satisfy a curious seven-year-old. If your child asks, and you are comfortable, share some of this concrete information.

### Q: If you were my birthmother, would you have kept me?

**A:** Wow, that is a big question.... Your birthmom had to make a very difficult decision that I will never have to make. You are my son and we are a family, and nothing will ever change that.

**OBJECTIVE:** Although you probably feel the urge to “support” the birthmom, what's most important at this age is to cement the current relationship as lasting “forever.”

### Q: Did I have a father, too?

**A:** Yes, you do have a birthfather. Have you been thinking about him?

**OBJECTIVE:** Even if you included the birthfather in your earlier adoption talks (and you should have!), children may not think or ask about him until this stage. Open up the discussion.

### Q: Why couldn't she go to school to learn to be a mommy?

**A:** Some women are not ready to be mommies, and they want their child to be with another mommy who is ready. Your birthmommy was wise enough to know that she was not ready to be a mom, so she made the decision to have someone else raise you.

**OBJECTIVE:** Encourage thinking and processing. “What ifs” are a good way to help your child explore his thoughts.

### Q: Is my birthmother dead?

**A:** What makes you think that?

**OBJECTIVE:** It is OK to say you don't know, but it is more important to explore your child's feelings and the fantasies. These are normal issues that need to be addressed.

# Birthparent Fantasies

Your child's birthmother looms large in her imagination now. What's your grade-schooler really thinking?


BY FRAN EISENMAN

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

## Demystifying Mom

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

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

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

FRAN EISENMAN is a New England-based social worker and family counselor specializing in adoption.



## SPEAKING OF BIRTHPARENTS

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

- 1** Casually mention your child's birthparents from time to time early in her life, preferably soon after she joins your family, regardless of her age. Smile. Your child will catch your emotional tone even if she doesn't understand all the words.
- 2** Let your child know that you will not be upset by birthparent talk. (Your child's interest in her birthparents is not a threat to you.) Keep your tone neutral and your facial expression calm and welcoming. Practice your reaction in a mirror if you have initial discomfort.
- 3** Encourage your child to keep talking whenever he brings up the topic: “What do you think?” “How does that make you feel?” “You sound sad (or angry).”
- 4** Accept your child's feelings as valid. Don't try to talk her out of feeling sad or hurt. This will shut down the conversation and force your child to deal with her feelings alone. Accept the fact that there are some things parents can't fix—just be there.

# A Growing Awareness

Between the ages of nine and 12, children register the meaning of adoption—and this can bring harder questions and more complex emotions. *AF* takes a look at what's going on in the minds of preteens, and offers advice for talking with them.

**BY JONI S. MANTELL, LCSW**



**B**y the time your child reaches his preteen years, you will probably have laid the foundation to create a safe environment for talking about adoption. When your child was very young, he likely enjoyed hearing his story and happily parroted it to anyone who would listen—even before he understood it all. Around age six, children begin to differentiate fantasy and reality, and to realize that adoption means they have two sets of parents.

And sometime between ages nine and 12, you notice that your tween rolls her eyes when adoption is mentioned, refuses to engage in discussion, stops coming to you with questions, and expresses feelings that surprise you. Children who once accepted the facts of their adoption may exhibit sad or ambivalent feelings. They may withdraw from adoption-related

events, or clam up when the talk turns to adoption.

Kids at this stage are developing coping skills and are learning to rely on themselves more. This is the beginning of their independence, and they use this opportunity to experiment with problem-solving, test the limits of their independence, and take responsibility for their feelings.

Communicating with your growing child becomes more complicated. You know that feelings about adoption are beneath the surface, but how do you keep the conversation going, or at least send the signal that you're open to talking? Be understanding, approach conversation with a caring attitude, and recognize that, while you know this is a passing phase, it is a here-and-now reality for your child. Here are the four developmental tasks for this stage, and ways to help your tween:



## Exploring feelings about birthparents

Cognitive development at the tween stage is uneven, because tweens still see situations as either all good or all bad. A tween will imagine that something was either wrong with him or with his birthmother that led to placement. Tweens wonder, “Why didn’t my birthparents keep me?” even if they seemed to understand your earlier explanations. James R., 10, from Yardley, Pennsylvania, was told he was placed because his birthmother could not raise him as a single parent. When he began to notice that many single parents keep their babies, new questions arose.

On her tenth birthday, Madison\*, from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, shared her profound awareness that “I could have had a whole different life.” Madison realized that adoption meant that she might have been raised by different parents, and she became more curious than ever before. She tried to imagine what her life would have been like if she had been raised by her birthparents. Although it was an open adoption, Madison had not seen her birthmother in four years. The family arranged a visit, and Madison developed a more concrete picture of her birthmother’s life. Afterward, Madison and her mother discussed her new awareness of the difficulties her birth family had faced.

Parents can help their child temper his black-and-white thinking with a more empathic view of both themselves and their birthparents. Let your child lead the conversation. Keep your responses honest and nonjudgmental, because your child will identify with his birthparents at some point. This is a good time to explain that there is usually more than one reason for a person to make a decision. James’s parents explained that his birthmother was unable to parent him because she was single, without family support, and in need of skills to get a job.

Given their new awareness about feelings, tweens may be concerned that talking about adoption is disloyal and will hurt their parents’ feelings. Let your child know you are open to talking and are interested in what he is feeling. He will be relieved when you open the door. Look for ways to bring up birthparents in conversation. You might say, “You are such an amazing singer. I wonder if you inherited that talent from one of your birthparents?” Books, articles, movies, or TV shows that deal with adoption might spark conversation.

## Questioning permanence

As children connect emotionally with the reality that their birthparents placed them, some experience separation anxiety. Although the politically correct term is “placed for adoption,” many children hear “given up.” The underlying fear is, “If my birthparents could give me away, would my adoptive parents ever do the same?”

Children may exhibit this anxiety by testing their parents’ attachment. Alexis, 11, from Arlington, Virginia, would test her parents by saying, “My real parents would let me stay up until midnight.” Children need to know that you can tolerate their anger, and want to see how much you believe in the stability of the family.

Watch for behaviors that are not compatible with the fam-

ily rules and norms. Tweens who imagine their birthparents were “bad” may try to test whether they are also bad—and, if so, are they still lovable? Discuss your tween’s perceptions about her birthparents, as she begins to sort out “what is really me, and what did I inherit?”

The opposite side of the insecurity coin is extreme compliance. Some adoptees are so fearful of rejection that they are afraid to be themselves. Isabelle, 11, from Pennsylvania, found every opportunity to be good, in the hope that she could guarantee love and security. She offered to help her friend’s mother carry groceries rather than join the other kids on the playground. Parents with compulsively compliant kids can reassure them directly: “I will love you, even if you go play!”

This is a good time to talk about love and commitment, and how forever relationships work. Counter tweens’ black-and-white thinking with examples of how you accept both the good and the bad in people you love.

## Coping with emotions of adoption

Tweens have quick access to their emotions, and some may grieve as they come to understand fully that their birthparents are real people who made the decision to place them. Even those adopted as babies may feel sad about their first families.

Allie\*, 11, from Brooklyn, New York, says, “Adoption is bittersweet—sometimes I’m happy because I get to have a better

Sometime between the ages of nine and 12, your child may begin to roll her eyes whenever adoption is mentioned...

life, and sometimes I’m sad because it is hard to leave my mom. I miss her.” Although Allie was adopted as a newborn, her parents validate her feelings, “even when it is hurtful to us or when we are tempted to minimize or deny her feelings,” says her mother. “We don’t tell her that she can’t possibly miss her birthmother, because she only saw her for one day, and we don’t say she shouldn’t miss her because she has us. We want her to feel free to talk to us, without worrying about our feelings.” This lets Allie know that her parents understand how she feels.

Not all children are as direct as Allie. Some show their emotions by exhibiting intense grief at other kinds of losses, exclusions, and rejections, or by withdrawing from social activities. Birthdays or Mother’s Day may be difficult.

These emotions are perfectly normal for some children in processing what it means to have been adopted. Children report that being able to share these feelings with their parents makes a world of difference to them. They appreciate knowing that their parents do not take their feelings as personal rejection. Parents can help a lot just by naming the feeling—labeling

the adoption-related sadness for your child—and letting her know that she is having normal feelings.

## Coming to terms with differences

Tweens want to fit in with their peers, so they may not want to tell them that they were adopted or acknowledge their heritage. Stephanie, of Ohio, says, “Our 10-year-old would rather people not know she was adopted. This can be hard, as she is multiracial, and her father and I are not. We have a very open adoption, but she has become reluctant to see her birthparents. I have tried to reassure her that it is OK to have these feelings, and I let her decide whether to include her birth family in events.”

Tweens look beyond their parents for role models, frequently to peers or to movie or TV characters. You can support and guide them by introducing good role models, such as teens or adults who were adopted or those who share their race or heritage. If your child withdraws from people of her own culture or race, try to find out why. She may have heard a negative stereotype, and, if so, you will want to find ways to negate it.


Adoption peer groups are popular among kids this age. Peer groups offer an outside-the-family chance to discuss adoption, race, birthparents, and adoptive parents, and to learn how to handle the questions and comments they get from their non-adopted peers. Sarah, age 11, who was adopted from Nepal, shared her feelings with her group. “I hate it when people ask me if I am Hawaiian or if I speak Spanish,” she said. It helped to

hear a validating response from Jackie, age 11: “I know. People always ask me if I speak Chinese.”

While some tweens start paying attention to their physical appearance in a positive way, others become insecure. Read magazines together to open a dialogue about appearance, and learn why your child is feeling insecure. She may be wondering what she will look like as an adult, or she may be disconcerted by not knowing anyone who looks like her. Spending time with adult or teen role models, or peers of the same race—shopping together or simply hanging out—can make your tween more comfortable with her appearance.

Communicating with tweens is not easy. You have to shift from being the problem-solver to being a supportive guide for your child, as he experiences and processes deeper feelings. And you will be letting your child take the lead more often.

As Heidi Wheeler, a mom of six, in Asheboro, North Carolina, says, “I believe, once children start to process adoption, it’s better to leave the ball in their court and let them talk about it when they need to. It’s something they have to process for the rest of their life. It is their personal journey, and we love and support them.”

This difficult phase can bring your family closer together, and it gives your child a chance to grow by leaps and bounds. 

JONI S. MANTELL, LCSW, is director of the Infertility and Adoption Counseling Center, in New Jersey and New York.

*\*Names have been changed to preserve privacy.*

## Words You Can Use

Here are some typical tween comments, sample language you can adapt for your response, and messages you want to send during the exchange.

**Comment:** “I hate it when people stare at us in restaurants.”

**Answer:** “Sometimes people stare at us because they are not used to seeing a mixed-race family, and they are curious.”

**Objective:** When you say, “They are staring because you are so beautiful,” children think you are uncomfortable discussing adoption and how your family is different. It shuts off discussion. They would rather have their differences acknowledged—see this as an opening.

**Comment:** “I wish I could see my birthmother.”

**Answer:** “Why do you want to see her?”

**Objective:** Learn whether your tween really wants to see her, wants to know more about her, or wants to express his feelings about not knowing her. If he wants to see her, ask what he hopes to gain from it.

**Comment:** “My real parents would let me stay up till midnight.”

**Answer:** “If you want to talk about your birthparents another time, we can do that. Right now we are discussing your bedtime.”

**Objective:** Remain centered when a child is testing you. This shows your child that you believe in the strength of your bond, and that you can tolerate his feelings and questions because you love him.

**Comment:** “None of my friends go to Chinese class. I’d rather play soccer.”

**Answer:** “That is really a personal decision. Are you sure that you do not want to keep going?”

**Objective:** While you will ultimately let your child make this decision, give her a chance to think about what is right for her. She may opt to stop attending, to minimize her difference, or she may choose to continue if she really enjoys the class.

**Comment:** You overhear your child talking to a classmate and denying the fact that she was adopted.

**Answer:** “I overheard you talking to your friend. It’s OK that you did not want to say that you were adopted. I want you to know that I am open to talking with you about this anytime.”

**Objective:** Respect your child’s need for privacy, but let her know you are comfortable talking about any feelings she has about adoption.

**Comment:** Your child stops asking questions about adoption altogether, and is dismissive when you bring up the subject.

**Answer:** Take your child’s lead. Not all kids need to talk about adoption. Listen for openings, and try bringing it up once in a while, perhaps in reference to a news story or movie.

**Objective:** Unless you think there is a problem (your child starts hanging out with troublesome peers, or shunning those who share her race), you don’t need to press the topic right now. When your child is ready, she will bring it up again. Just listen and wait.

# When Your Kid Clams Up

If your preteen is suddenly silent about adoption, look for “reachable” moments. **BY JAYNE SCHOOLER**

Once upon a time, Josh was quick to respond when his mom brought up adoption or asked about his feelings about his birthmother. Around his eleventh birthday, all that changed. If Carol mentioned the word “adoption,” Josh would sullenly reply, “I’m fine and I don’t want to talk about it.” Carol didn’t know what to do.

## What’s Going On Here?

As children enter their preteen years, their ability to think in abstract terms increases dramatically. They’re able to comprehend the meaning behind the words of their adoption story. At the same time, they’re striving to be successful and industrious in school, in sports, and with same-sex peers. They want to be

capable and to be similar to their friends. If adoption makes them feel different, they may try to avoid the subject.

In addition, preteens are concerned about fairness. Attention to the rules in game-playing with friends reveals this mindset. They also worry about the fairness of adoption—that they are not being “fair” to their parents if they have feelings or questions about their birth family, particularly if they sense discomfort in their parents. This is why Josh became reluctant to discuss his adoption and birthparents.

## 3 Things You Can Do

When children aren’t talking about adoption, don’t assume they aren’t thinking about it. Instead:

**1** Look for “reachable/teachable” moments. It’s generally healthy to keep the dialogue going. While your child should not be forced to discuss adoption-related issues, keep letting her know that you’re open and comfortable with the subject when she is ready. You might occasionally remark about your child’s skills, looks, or interests, indicating that some of these attributes probably came from her birth family: “You play the piano so well. I wonder if your birthmother or someone else in your birth family has musical talent. Do you ever wonder about that?”

**2** Be alert for “anniversary reactions.” A child may be especially somber around his birthday or adoption day, or holidays like Mother’s Day. Instead of allowing him to suffer in silence, anticipate sadness, and help him express it: “I



always think about your birthmother around your birthday. Do you think about her, too? Do you have any questions about her that I could answer?”

**3** Let children know they can love two sets of parents. Preteens may feel disloyal to their parents if they have questions, or even emotions, about their birth family. Assure your child that you expect her to love both you and her birthparents. Explain that parents do not stop loving a child who is already there in order to start loving a child who has just arrived. In the same way, children can love more than one set of parents. **4**

JAYNE SCHOOLER is coauthor of several books, including *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child* (Bergin & Garvey).

## STILL NOT TALKING?

If your preteen remains silent on adoption after you’ve tried to reach her, look for other ways to engage her:

- 1** Suggest an “orphan-lit” book, such as *Dave at Night*, by Gail Carson Levine (Harper Trophy).
- 2** Talk to her about attending a peer-group adoption workshop, suggesting she might like to hang out with other adoptees her age.
- 3** Get together with another adoptive family who has a child close to your child’s age.
- 4** Consider a counselor for her to talk to in private.
- 5** And keep in mind that she may not be talking because she’s at a comfortable place and it’s not a need.



# The Other Birthparent

Your teen will want to know more about his birthfather—and his birthparents' relationship. **BY DEBBIE B. RILEY, M.S.**



**I**t's important to include your child's birthfather in his story from the beginning—even if you have little information or if your child doesn't seem to be curious. Before the teen years, however, few children will ask questions about him. Parents, too, tend to focus on the birthmother. This may be because they actually met her at the time of placement, or they may just be following their child's lead.

In adolescence, however, as teens strive for a deeper understanding of their adoption story, they're likely to have lots of new questions about their birthfather—and about their birthparents' relationship.


## Sharing what you know

These new questions can pose challenges to parents. You may have been told that there was no information about the birthfather, and didn't push to learn more. Perhaps you have information, but worry that it will trouble your child. The conversation may be difficult, but now is the time to share whatever you know. [See "Honest Answers" for sug-

gested language to use in specific situation.] Teens can understand emotionally complex topics, and they deserve your candor. Withholding information will set you up for conflict in the future, after your teen discovers that you've been keeping a secret.

As you share what you know, watch your child's reaction carefully. New information may lead your teen to see both her birthparents in a negative light. *Was my birthmother promiscuous? Did she lack morals? How could my birthfather leave her to deal with this alone? Did he ever care about her?* Because self-esteem can be fragile during the teen years, being "of people" who are viewed with such negativity can be damaging. We cannot change hard facts or avoid talking about them, but we can help our teens see their birthparents as real people, with real strengths, real vulnerabilities, and real-life, challenging circumstances. Maybe the birthmother who had many partners suffered from low self-esteem. Maybe the birthfather who was physically abusive was abused himself as a child. Perhaps the

birthfather was never told that he had fathered a child.

Such explorations are not meant to excuse behavior that's undesirable, or even horrific, but they can help a teen develop empathy and come to peace with his story. He needs to see that his own circumstances allow him to reach different conclusions about relationships and his identity. Don't let anything that is known (or unknown) about either birthparent or the relationship become a "stuck spot" for your teen—taking up emotional energy that is better used toward growth and maturity. 

DEBBIE B. RILEY, M.S., is the CEO of the Center for Adoption Support and Education ([adoption.support.org](http://adoption.support.org)).

## HONEST ANSWERS

Here are sample questions and language you can adapt when talking about birthfathers.

**"Why don't you ever talk about my birthdad? I know I have one."**

"You're right, you do, but we know very little about him. We can call the agency to see if they've learned anything new."

**"Did my birthparents love each other?"**

"From what I understand, your birthparents were young and just beginning to explore relationships with the opposite sex. Sometimes young people become physically intimate when they're really seeking emotional closeness. I don't think they were involved long enough to develop that kind of closeness."

**"Why couldn't they stay together?"**

"Your birthfather was married to someone else, and they had children. Your birthmother was afraid to raise you by herself, and she felt that making an adoption plan was the right decision."

# “Is That Your Family?”

By now, you and your teen have established a firm family bond. But outsiders may not see it that way. **BY DEBBIE B. RILEY, M.S.**

**C**hildren who were adopted, and who don't resemble their parents, often have to cope with the negative reactions of strangers. While younger kids may be oblivious to people staring at them at the grocery store or in a restaurant, most teenagers are not. In fact, they are acutely aware of their surroundings and sensitive to the responses of others. What's more, most teens just want to fit in—and don't want to call attention to themselves or feel different from peers in any way.

## The Impact on Teens

Adoptive teens and their families will experience a range of reactions from strangers. Carly, 13, was often mistaken for the daughter of family friends, whom she resembled. Confusion arose when the two families were out together, and introduced to new people. At first, everyone thought this was funny. But, as Carly says, “It got really old. The more it came up, the more I became aware of our differences.”

Mia, now 32, was adopted from Korea by a Caucasian family. As a teen, she was embarrassed and angry whenever she and her father were out together and would receive disapproving stares. “People would look at my father as though he were dating an Asian girl young enough to be his daughter,” Mia says.

When teenagers feel their family is being shown disrespect by outsiders, it can affect their self-image and emerging identity. To help your teen handle such feelings:

■ **Talk to her about what she notices when your family is out in public.** Also, mention what you observe, how it makes you feel, and the impact it has on your family.

■ **Do some prep work.** If your family has been subjected to stares or rude remarks, role-play what you might do the next time this happens. Don't be afraid to use humor—it can be a powerful coping tool.



For example, Mia's father used to joke, “When people stare at us, you can just say, ‘I prefer the short, overweight, balding type.’”

■ **Talk about racist comments soon after they occur.** Did strangers make insensitive remarks, accidentally or on purpose? Explain to your teen that some people were brought up to be prejudiced. Demonstrate ways to respond to this behavior.

■ **Get your child involved in activities with teens of diverse backgrounds.** Such

experiences broaden your teen's world, and make her less vulnerable to the biases of others.

■ **Focus on similarities between you and your teen.** Say things like, “We all have the same sense of humor,” to help build family identity. **11**

DEBBIE B. RILEY, M.S., is CEO of the Center for Adoption Support and Education, and author of *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens* (C.A.S.E.).

## BUDDY UP!

If your teen has ever felt the “odd man out” in your family, he may find it helpful—and empowering—to share his experience with others. Talking to other adoptive teens can normalize your child's experience, and show him how peers have handled similar situations. To find support, look for an adoptive teen group in your community, or seek informal ways to connect with other adoptive families.

# A Piece at a Time

by Stacy Clark

One evening, I was puttering around in the kitchen when my five-year-old daughter, Hanna, came to me with a drawing in her hands.

“Mommy, will you drive me to China?” she asked. I dropped the sponge and squatted down to look into her eyes. This was one of *those* questions.

“Why do you want to go to China?” I asked.

“So I can give my mommy this picture.”

Her drawing showed a woman with straight, black hair and a triangle-shaped dress. She had a green heart and a dark-haired baby in her tummy. Hanna had scrawled across the top: I LOVE YOU, MOMMY.

A pang shot through me. *Who am I? Have all my years of mothering not been enough?* Quickly, I brought myself back to the conversation. *No, this is good.*

Hanna has heard the story of her birth and adoption since she came home, nearly five years ago. She and I have read picture books about birthmothers. But this was the first sign of her longing for a connection.

Though I had not expected this question, I knew that Hanna would ask more about her origin. When she was younger, her questions were simple, couched in fantasy. She would ask, “Mommy, how come you took so long to come to China to get me?”

“Hanna Banana,” I’d answer, “I came as fast as I could.”

“Did you run?” she wanted to know, and I don’t think she was kidding. China, to her, was about as far away as her preschool down the street.

At age three, Hanna began to notice differences in our family. Once, when we were coloring, she looked up and said, “Mommy, I have yummy chocolate eyes. You have blue-sky eyes.” She looked thoughtful for a moment and returned to coloring. She never asked why.

I read once that a child may know the facts of her adoption and seem fine with them, but that, as she develops, she will understand those facts differently. This stuck in my mind. Over the years, I have watched my daughter carefully, waiting for her to grasp the meaning of what she knows.



At age four, Hanna saw a mother nursing a baby. She wanted to know if she drank milk from my “boobies,” as her sister did. When I said no, she put her hands on her hips and asked, “Did Kathryn drink it all up?”

And now, Hanna has drawn herself inside another mother, one who looks like her.

I could see more questions coming. But that evening, all Hanna asked was that I drive her to China. To her, it was a simple question that needed a

simple answer.


“China is a long drive,” I said. “You have to cross an ocean. We would need to take a plane.” Hanna frowned, wanting more. “I do not know if we can find your mommy,” I continued. “But when you are ready, I’ll take you to China.” At this, she smiled and walked away.

Hanna’s story is not one I can give her. It is one she must take, a piece at a time, when she is ready.

Later that evening, Hanna and I lay side by side on my bed with a snow globe between us. Silently, we watched the flakes sparkle inside the glass dome. In the quiet, she asked if it was her birthmother who left her beside the red wall. I told her a bit more of what I know.

In the weeks afterward, Hanna would say gleefully that she was “made in China,” like her toy guitar. She asked if we could hear her crying when we came to “buy her.” One night, she sighed and wished aloud that she had been made in my tummy.

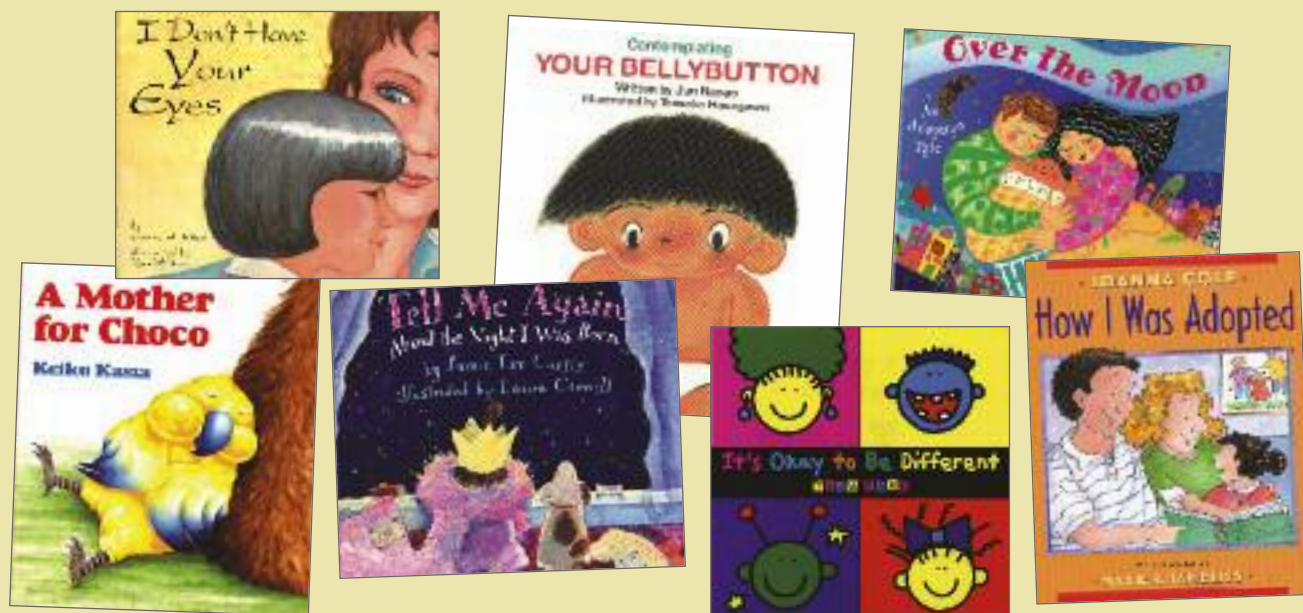
She has big questions and wishes for a child who stands belly-button-high, whose tiny hand barely fills my palm. I have learned to listen, when to give her answers, and when to just hug her, so she feels safe. Sometimes I have to stifle my own fears about not having the right answers or not being sufficient as her mother, while knowing that deeper questions and desires are still to come.

For now, I hold her hand in mine and take her questions to heart, trusting that love is the answer she needs. 

STACY CLARK is a mother by birth and adoption. She writes about raising a blended family at [thissideoftheskies.blogspot.com](http://thissideoftheskies.blogspot.com).



# CONVERSATION STARTERS



**A** good storybook can be a great way to start an adoption discussion with a young child. We asked our Reader Panel members to tell us about their favorite books that encourage talking and to share some conversations.

>> In *A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza (Putnam Juvenile), a little bird searches for his mother, and eventually finds a family that is not what the reader might expect! Preschoolers can understand it, but kids will still love it in elementary school. The book has sparked wonderful discussions about what it means to be a family in our household. We own three copies—one for each child. —BARB

>> My daughter's favorite book about adoption right now is Todd Parr's *It's Okay to Be Different* (Little, Brown). She asks to read it daily. The book is great because it addresses lots of "differences" through

bright, colorful illustrations. We've given it to many of the other adoptive families we know as a gift. —ROBYN

>> *Over the Moon*, by Karen Katz (Henry Holt), is about a couple that is adopting from Guatemala. The author does a beautiful job of explaining why the birthmother could not raise the baby, and how the child came to be in her forever family. My three-year-old daughter immediately connected to this story—she actually thinks it is *her* story! The pictures are very colorful and lively. —TERRILL

>> I love reading *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*,

by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperTrophy), to my son. I explain that the story is exactly what happened on the night he was born, only there was no airport for us. When I say that, we both laugh, and it breaks the ice to start talking about adoption. He even took this book into school, for the teacher to read to the class. —NANCY

>> Joanna Cole's *How I Was Adopted* (HarperTrophy) has recently become one of my daughter's favorites, since it covers being born as well as adoption. For kids expecting a new sibling, Cole's *I'm a Big Sister/Brother Now* books (HarperCollins) are great, regardless of whether the baby is joining the family through adoption or birth. —VAISHALI

>> The book that gets my three-year-old son talking

about adoption isn't even an adoption book. It's *Contemplating Your Bellybutton*, by Jun Nanao (Kane/Miller Book Publishers). It helped him understand the difference between, as he says, a "body mother, birthmother, belly button mother" and an "everyday mommy that you live with forever." —MARTHA

>> Our favorite adoption book is *I Don't Have Your Eyes*, by Carrie Kitze (EMK Press). I adopted my three kids from foster care, and this book represents them all. It doesn't talk about birthparents or country of origin or age or how you got to your forever family, but it speaks to the heart of all families—that we're created through love. —VICKIE

Find links to purchase these books and other adoption classics for children and adults at [adoptivefamilies.com/books](http://adoptivefamilies.com/books).

# 8 Myths and Realities About Adoption

## FACTS:

- ▶ As of the 2000 Census, there were 1.5 million children under age 18 in America who joined their families through adoption. This figure represents 2% of all children in the U.S.
- ▶ In the U.S., there are 5 million people today who were adopted. More than 100,000 children are adopted each year.
- ▶ 65% of all Americans have a personal connection to adoption and view it favorably.

**MYTH** There are very few babies being placed for adoption.

**REALITY** About 25,000 U.S.-born infants are placed for adoption each year—many more than the annual total of international adoptions.

**MYTH** Adoption is outrageously expensive, out of reach for most families.

**REALITY** Adoption is often no more expensive than giving birth. Costs to adopt domestically average \$25,000, before the roughly \$13,000 Adoption Tax Credit and benefits that many employers offer.

**MYTH** It takes years to complete an adoption.

**REALITY** The average time span of adoption is one to two years. The majority of domestic and international

adopters who respond to *Adoptive Families'* annual Cost & Timing of Adoption Surveys complete their adoptions in less than two years.

**MYTH** Birthparents can show up at any time to reclaim their child.

**REALITY** Once an adoption is finalized, the adoptive family is recognized as the child's family by law. Despite the publicity surrounding a few high-profile cases, post-adoption revocations are extremely rare.

**MYTH** Birthparents are all troubled teens.

**REALITY** Most birthparents today are older than 18, but lack the resources to provide and care for a child. It is generally with courage and love for their child that they

terminate their parental rights.

**MYTH** Adopted children are more likely to be troubled than birth children.

**REALITY** Research shows that adoptees are as well-adjusted as their non-adopted peers. There is virtually no difference in psychological functioning between them.

**MYTH** Open adoption causes problems for children.

**REALITY** Adoptees are not confused by contact with their birthparents. They benefit from the increased understanding that their birthparents gave them life but their forever families take care of and nurture them.

**MYTH** Parents can't love an adopted child as much as they would a biological child.

**REALITY** Love and attachment are not the result of nor guaranteed by biology. The intensity of bonding and depth of emotion are the same, regardless of how the child joined the family.

## Read more about adoption conversations and other topics at [adoptivefamilies.com](http://adoptivefamilies.com)

- AF's online guide to talking about adoption: [adoptivefamilies.com/talking](http://adoptivefamilies.com/talking)
- Talking with teachers, adapting assignments, and more about adoption at school: [adoptivefamilies.com/school](http://adoptivefamilies.com/school)
- Bonding with your baby after adoption: [adoptivefamilies.com/bonding](http://adoptivefamilies.com/bonding)
- Information and advice from adoption medicine experts: [adoptivefamilies.com/medical](http://adoptivefamilies.com/medical)
- Connect with a community of fellow waiting and adoptive parents: [adoptivefamiliescircle.com](http://adoptivefamiliescircle.com)



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