



School Experiences: Interview Techniques and Ongoing Experiences

By Kathy Ann Brodsky, LCSW, Director, Ametz Adoption Program

As many of our children begin the school year, we can anticipate adoption questions coming up. Whether it is a casual comment about the similarity or difference in our physical appearances, a “family tree” assignment, a discussion about family formation or cultural difference, adoption issues often lie just below the surface.

Each year, I wonder if the new teachers will understand the issues involved. Several years ago I was very lucky. Both of my kids’ teachers were very aware of adoption--one as an adoptive mother and the other as an astute human being. Both asked questions of me when appropriate and I always felt I could bring up the subject, along with many others, without fear. Another year, one teacher was better at understanding than the other, but both were open to listening. There was no need to discuss adoption with them until one of my daughters spoke to friends about it and her teacher became aware of it. I confirmed the adoption, let the teacher know my daughter was to take the lead in sharing information and asked her to let me know what she heard in the classroom.

Unfortunately, not all of my past experiences have been so happy. On one occasion, a teacher introduced my daughter to another adopted child (at no one’s request). A different teacher revealed to me that another student was adopted (again, no one asked). Issues of confidentiality like these are upsetting to anyone. Did I storm the classroom? No. But I did mention to the teachers that it is always a good idea to get the permission of those involved (children and adults) prior to disclosing this information. Both teachers felt they were doing a nice thing by letting all of us know we were not the only adoptive families in the class. The result, however, was just anxiety on my part about whether to tell the other family that I “knew.” My kids, though, seemed unaffected.

When and how should you bring up adoption with adults who interact with your child in a learning environment? It is a very personal decision and there is no right or wrong way to proceed. Whether your child is obviously adopted or not, it is important to know if an environment is adoption-friendly. You can get this information, without disclosing the adoption, by noting the reaction of school personnel to a variety of questions. Ask about the overall curriculum’s inclusion of such issues as family formation (single, step, two-parent and adoptive families), openness in dealing with children’s individual issues (medical, mainstreaming), or the school’s philosophy of informing parents about occurrences involving other school personnel (psychologists, counselors) in classroom issues. You can also ask if the school has any parent groups (families of color, divorce, and adoption). Their responses may indicate a clue about things to come.



For outside activities this is not as urgent, especially if you accompany your child. But, again, others may ask about the adoption, naively, casually or just not as subtly as you would like. Decide what you want to share with others based on the type of relationship you have with them. If you remain uncomfortable, talk to the leader of the group and seek support or diversion from the subject until you decide to return to it.

You may find yourself the educator of others in what adoption is and what it isn't. You are the lead player in how your family's adoption is to be incorporated into classroom interactions and school curricula. This includes your continuing your efforts to help your child field questions and dealing with those naïve and uninformed individuals with whom you and your child interact daily.

Don't despair. With practice you will get better; your child will see your strength and ability, and those around you will learn. Eventually, it is your child who will take the lead and let you know what to say or how to respond. In the meantime, talk to other parents, commiserate, complain, gain insight, learn what others have done and what works and mostly gather strength from one another.

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