

How to Talk to Your Adopted Child

Talking with adopted children about sensitive adoption topics may feel like a sunny Sunday stroll through a minefield. Parents may not see the explosion coming, but they sure feel its effects—and most parents scramble to do triage! But trying to pick up the pieces of an unsettling conversation is not nearly as productive as going into a discussion fully prepared with a course of action.

Understanding ‘what’ adopted children need from their parents (and why) is key to actively encouraging conversation about the type of topics that tend to make children unhappy and parents uncomfortable. Adoption, abandonment, birthparents, loss, grief and fear are themes that can produce anxiety, outbursts or dead silence—not the kind of conversation starters that families like to bring up at the dinner table. However, it is exactly this type of subject matter that impacts adoptive families on a regular basis, and parents can either ignore the issues, or learn to look at adoption-related talks as incredible opportunities for building family intimacy. Adoptive parents can use the power of talk to:

- Connect with their child
- Explain adoption to their child
- Create history for their child
- Help heal their child

Adopted children have experienced some important losses in their short lifetimes. They have lost birthparents, extended family, history and heritage. Internationally adopted children have lost a country, a language and ethnic identification. Adoptees may feel personal shame from their perception surrounding the circumstances of their losses, and may react strongly to triggered feelings of rejection or abandonment. Parents that understand the real, underlying reason for a child’s emotional reaction will be able to address the child’s core issue with empathy instead of bewilderment or anger.

Talking with adoptees about their early lives and losses means parents need to tiptoe softly through that messy minefield and make the first conversational step; adopted children are fearful of hurting their adoptive parents and are unwilling to risk rejection, so moms and dads must be the initiators. Talk is a powerful tool, but parents need to use it carefully and with sensitivity or it won’t produce positive results.

Holly van Gulden and Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb, authors of *Real Parents, Real Children*, suggest using the Pebbles Technique to open a difficult conversation, or to encourage a response without pressure.

"Pebbles are one-liners, not conversations, that raise an issue and then are allowed to ripple until a child is ready to pick up on it."



An example might be mentioning the child's beautiful, black hair and wondering out loud if she got her hair from her birthmother...essentially, throwing out a conversational pebble for the child to catch. If a child chooses not to respond to the pebble, the parent has still communicated a willingness and ability to talk about difficult issues, and can toss out another pebble at another time.

Some children will sense a parent's willingness to talk and will share their feelings with openness and relief. Some children will meet a parent's "pebble" with stony silence. And some wary children will test their parents by dropping a few pebbles of their own, and then will watch their parents closely for a positive or negative reaction to the question...

Talking with Young Children

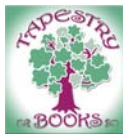
Personality, age and early life experience have a lot to bear on how a child reacts to talk about adoption, and on the gamut of personal feelings that adoptees grapple to understand. Young children are concrete thinkers, and tend to regard adoption as a happy, practical solution to a child needing a family and to parents wanting a child. Watching a child's adoption video, looking at the adoption photo album, or reading adoption-related children's books together, are all excellent activities that reinforce a child's own life story—and help a parent explain the bittersweet, broader concepts of becoming an adoptive family. These activities are a gentle introduction to the multiple layers of adoption, and help to prepare the child for a deeper understanding at a later age.

Children that reject adoption-related stories may appreciate age-appropriate books that deal with universal themes: love, loss, birth, death, good and evil. They can vicariously experience their own story, and deeply held feelings, through literature...right next to a parent willing to share and read these important sagas together and aloud. Discussing the story, and a character's feelings, allows the child to examine his or her emotions, beliefs and actions in a less personally threatening manner. Talk is powerful, but so is listening. Parents can teach young children to express themselves with 'feelings' words (sad, mad, scared and happy) without trying to eradicate the child's feelings of sadness, anger or loss.

Talking with Tweens and Teens

Older children are notorious for not wanting to talk to their moms and dads about private thoughts or emotional matters. Tweens (ages 8-12) are learning how to fit in to their social group and teens are learning how to separate from their parents. Both of these tasks make it sound like a parent's job is nearly done by the teen years, but in reality, a parent's work is forced to be more subtle than ever before!

Adopted tweens face a terror of rejection, which may place a tumultuous importance on making and keeping friends. Adopted teens must learn to individuate from two sets of parents—adoptive and birth—while seeking to form their own identity. The unknown variables in adoption (and especially birthfamilies) can make this teen business a frustrating process.



Parents can also become tongue-tied at this age and stage. In addition to the usual discussions on sex, drugs and alcohol, adoptive parents need to consider more complex conversations with their tweens and teens on adoption ethics, genetic factors in addiction, and the need to identify and deal with emotional turmoil.

Listening and observing, while quietly supplying parental support, will give parents the cues they need to continue to converse with their son or daughter. Chauffeuring an older child to a school or sports event has an up-side: car rides magically make it easier for teens and tweens to talk! And parents still have a back-up plan if the first conversational course of action gets shot down: books.

A few interesting books placed on a night-stand or coffee table will be quietly (or secretly) perused by an older child. Parents can throw out pebbles about the reading, but if their tween or teen is not very communicative, they shouldn't expect much conversation in return. Books on sensitive topics like adoption or teen sexuality can give an older child some direction, and be a reference point for necessary parent-child discussion on boundaries, healthy choices and decision-making.

Talking About Tough Topics

Building a communication base with a young child is foundational for the teen years, and for securing a solid, long-term parent-child relationship. Helping a young child use the feelings words (sad, mad, scared and happy), and regularly calling a teen on an emotional core issue *instead* of berating the symptomatic bad behavior, gives children the internal tools to eventually understand, express and direct their own feelings and reactions when they do find themselves in tough emotional situations.

Communication is a line of defense against loss, which is one of life's toughest issues for an adoptee with previous trauma. A family death or divorce may trigger a major loss reaction, but even lesser changes like going to camp, sleepovers, moving, or attending a new school may need to be deconstructed and acknowledged as an 'everyday' loss issue for an adopted child.

Honest communication is also a parent's strongest tool when having to discuss difficult information with an adoptee. An attachment or adoption therapist can also provide a family with additional guidance when it's age appropriate to talk about detailed reasons for a child's abandonment; birthfamily history of drug addiction or alcohol abuse, rape, incest, physical abuse or neglect; and disruption or dissolution.

A supportive, empathic parent who is not afraid to talk about tough topics or fragile feelings can help a child learn to build resilience. Emotional vulnerability is scary, as is truthful talking, but these make up the loving protective gear that will take a parent and child safely through adoption's emotional minefield.
