

Talking with Children About Adoption – This Author’s View

By Christine Mitchell, author and illustrator



Recently my daughter asked me, with a sad expression, “How come babies have to come out of their mom’s tummies?” I wondered if it was bothering her that she did not ‘come from my tummy’. I considered asking her if this was troubling her, but I didn’t want to ‘plant’ an idea if my suspicions were incorrect. If she brings this up again, I plan to say, “Some kids who were adopted are upset that they weren’t in their mommy’s tummy. Is that how you are feeling?”

A Fine Line – It is a delicate balancing act that we face, as adoptive parents, in talking with our children about adoption in general, and about their particular histories. When should we tell them they are adopted? How much do we tell them about their birth family? How do we explain why they were adopted? In our case, the first question was easy. Because our younger daughter joined our family at age four, she already knew she was adopted. She also remembers quite a bit about her birth family, although that sometimes brings more questions than answers. I still struggle with explaining the ‘why’s, because our situation is complicated – as is often the case with older child adoptions.

Start Talking to Your Child Early – The general consensus among experts and adoptive parents is that you can never start too early talking about adoption. A great way to begin, especially for very young children, is with a simple story about how much the parents wanted a child, and how joyous it was meet him and bring him home. Additionally, children’s books are an excellent avenue for introducing adoption concepts and terms. They provide a comfortable backdrop for children to voice their questions and concerns. Youngsters also find it reassuring to know that other children have been adopted as well; that they are not the only one.

What Is Our Goal? – As parents, our purpose in discussing adoption with our children is not simply to give them information. We also want to establish a two-way conversation and convey our own willingness and availability to discuss our children’s concerns and questions. Typical concerns of young children include the following:

- Wishing to look like the adoptive parents
- Sadness that he was not in adoptive mom’s ‘tummy’
- Wondering why her birth parents could not keep her
- Wondering about his ‘real’ parents; what do they look like?
- Will she be in this (the adoptive family) forever?



Older Child Concerns – Unfortunately, things are even more complicated for children adopted at older ages (beyond infancy). These children, particularly after abuse, neglect and multiple moves, may have some of the following worries and concerns:

- Will he be hurt again? Will he have enough food, clothes, and a place to live? Will someone from the past come back to hurt him or take him away? Will he have to move to another family again? Feelings of grief & loss for people & places from his past Difficulty trusting the new adults in his life
- Difficulty believing he will be safe

Keep the Conversation Going – While we can and should start early in talking about adoption, it takes many years before children are developmentally ready to achieve a full understanding. Along the way we try to ensure that we are open and available for their questions, answering them in an honest yet age-appropriate manner. We try to ease their feelings of rejection by explaining that her birthparents couldn't parent any child. We remind them that a child can love or care about two families, just as parents can love more than one child. Hopefully, along the way, our children will build that sense of well-being, and of being special, that we want so much for them.