



WHEN AND WHAT TO TELL CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR ADOPTION

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My ten-year-old daughter is very inquisitive and asks about everything. She started with birth and adoption questions around the age of 2. They usually came when I was least expecting them: standing at the stove stirring a pot, driving home in the car or holding her in my arms late one night when she had trouble sleeping. Her questions were always zingers and sometimes I handled them better than others. I always vowed to be open and honest while considering what she could understand and deal with at each developmental stage, and I think I have done pretty good job. My younger daughter (age 6) asks very little, although I remember her asking if she came from my belly and where she was born. Knowing she doesn't often ask questions, I occasionally volunteer information, but it doesn't seem to faze her. She has always had adopted kids in her circle- two adopted friends and siblings and several more adopted children in her classes at school. We also have close friends who have adopted and she was part of their adopting experiences. It seems very normal to her, but I don't let this fool me. I'm sure questions are coming.

The following is written to help you understand where children get their ideas and what kinds of questions they may ask. Use this as a guideline only and seek more information from other parents, professionals, workshops, support groups, books and mostly from your children.

Questions Younger Children Ask

Once children learn to talk, they can repeat what they have been told about their adoption, but have no comprehension of what those words mean. Some children notice how they differ in appearance from their parents, siblings or other family members. By age 3, when many children are faced with a parent or other female being pregnant they begin to ask questions about where babies come from. When a child learns that babies come from ladies stomachs, they often follow up by asking if they came from their mother's stomach. Answering these initial, rudimentary questions can lay the groundwork for open communication in the years to come. Children easily and innocently share their adoption status with others, so what they are told is paramount.

Around the age of 5, a child's ideas of pregnancy, birth and adoption are starting to take shape. Many schools begin "family" curriculums, which include discussions of various family formations and ways families are formed. Children who are adopted become aware that their "birth" story is different from most of their peers. Often this is the time adoption is shared with teachers, to assure that the curriculum encompasses adoption as a normal family dynamic. Whether a child shares her adoption with the class is up to the child. Parents may find they walk a tightrope, trying to express to the child that adoption is not "bad" or a "secret" while encouraging the child not to "fully disclose" to classmates, fearing a negative experience for her.

Pre-adolescents Aware of More, Raise Many Questions

Between the ages of 7 and 11, children gain a fuller understanding of adoption. They are aware of the differences in how they became part of the family and how most children join families. In addition, they begin to have thoughts associated with the loss of birth parents—what life might have been like and their inability to control the past. Children ask lots of questions, sometimes over and over, as they understand more. They may also fantasize about birth parents and ask questions about reunion. Adoptive parents may become increasingly anxious as their children air their thoughts, but open communication established at an early age leads to continued conversations. As in all stages, a parent's ability to discuss issues and keep in check worries fueled by insecurities is critical. Children at this stage often benefit from talking to other pre-adolescents who share their concerns.



For children adopted from other cultures or racial backgrounds, or when they were over the age of 6 months, all of these issues are exacerbated. By the time children enter elementary school, they have begun to develop biases on their family's expressed or unconscious feelings, observed events in daily life and depiction of society in the media. Parents, and later children, are often questioned about their backgrounds, who their "real" parents are and why they are living together. Often children are relieved when a parent shares their adoption status with others. This way, they are not caught in the position of having to explain why they look different or have a period of their developmental years where they did not live with their "now" parents. During the pre-adolescent years, many families expose their children to inter-cultural or multi-ethnic experiences as a way to enhance the child's identity.

Savvy Adolescents Struggle With Adoption Issues

During adolescence, children gain an understanding of not only the emotional aspects of adoption, but the legal process as well. A child who understands and accepts adoption, has received support from family and friends, and learned how to react to society/media's influence, weathers this time best. All adolescents struggle with issues of independence.

For the adopted child, growing up and leaving home for college or independent residences may become confused with feeling they are rejecting their adoptive parents or that their birth parents rejected them. Some children go in and out of independent living, returning to their adoptive parents when feeling insecure.

In adolescence, many children of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds from their parents choose to associate with peers of the identifiable culture as they search for their identity. These peers can be supportive but may also raise difficult questions for adopted children and encourage searches for birth parents. This is an outgrowth of an adolescent's search for identity and fantasies of how many things could have been. A child's experiences up to this time help shape her positive or negative self-image.

Open and Honest Communication – A Continuing Challenge

Parents are often ignored in discussions of sharing adoption with children and others. The reality is that adults must be comfortable with how they became parents. There is no guarantee that a parent's comfort level will ensure a child's acceptance. However, children pick up messages from their parents: how we react to them, life events, their choice in clothing, friends and careers all determine their feelings. They most certainly pick up our concerns and comforts about adoption. The better parents prepare for their child's next stage of development, including questions about adoption, the better the entire family will fare.

Most parents talk to other parents and family members or read books about normal childhood development. Doesn't it make sense to prepare for issues of adoption? A useful exercise is role playing, in which parents can grapple with potential questions: "Did I come from your belly? Where is my real mother? Didn't she want me? Will I ever see her? Do I look like her? Where is my real father? Could my real mother or father come get me? What would you do if they rang the doorbell? What do you think they would do if I rang their bell?"

Each child is different. They hear information in different ways. They play parent against parent in everyday activities, so why not in adoption matters? They know which parent, or adult, to ask about their adoption and other important issues in their lives. They ask these questions at various ages and may repeat them from age to age as their ability to comprehend increases. Answers need to be given with honest, sensitivity and an understanding of a child's ability to comprehend information.

As a parent, the best way to help our children is to help ourselves. Talk things over with other adoptive parents. Prepare friends and family about how to react if a child asks questions. Develop a relationship with teachers and other important people in your child's life so they will alert you if your child is raising questions. With all the things that change over time, one of them needs to stay the same. You need to maintain an open dialogue with your child. This will ensure fewer surprises, less misinformation and less anxiety for you and your child.