



HOW TO TELL THE STORY OF ADOPTION

For children who have been adopted, understanding their past and where they began, is vitally important for helping them become grounded in who they are and where they belong. An adoptive parent has both the privilege and responsibility to help their adopted child learn how to make sense of their past. But for many adopted parents this can generate feelings of inadequacy, fear and anxiety in knowing where to begin and what to say.

WHERE TO BEGIN

In your child's younger years you are the keeper of your child's story. Remember that your child's story is not secret but **private**. Before you tell or post information about their past consider that once you let go of that information you lose control of it. Reflect on how you would feel if your child learns information about their history from someone other than you. Information learned from someone other than a parent can break trust in the parent/child relationship. Guard their information well; everyone, including close family and friends, does not need and should not know all of your child's story. When your child enters their teen years they need to know that you respected their privacy even at a young age and they need to feel that they have some control over their information.

Whether your child comes into your family directly from the hospital, through foster care, or an international adoption, from the very first day you can begin to help your child understand their story. You need to introduce the ideas of foster care, adoption and birth parents to them at a very early age. Your child may not understand the terms you are using, but if the story is presented in a positive way, they will understand the tone and feelings you have as you tell their story.

Discussing adoption in the day to day, ebb and flow, of life will show that it is a natural part of their story. As you initiate these discussions throughout the child's lifetime you will communicate to your child that adoption is a safe topic. Many children have reported being uncomfortable bringing up the topic of adoption with their parents because of the emotional response it elicits. The child is fearful they are hurting their parent's feelings or being disloyal to their adoptive parent if they ask questions about their past. So, let your child know that you are always available to them to answer any questions.

PARTS OF THE STORY

Every adoption story has three pieces; the birth parents, reasons for the adoption plan and your reason for adopting. Your child's adoptive story is very intricately entwined with your own, so whether you adopted from a place of wanting to make life better for a child or because of infertility, it is important that you have resolved any of your own feelings of grief, loss or discomfort before you talk with your child. When a child begins to ask questions about their past and birth family it might bring up feelings and emotions for you that can hinder your ability to be open and honest. Make sure that you will be able to manage your own feelings during these discussions. If you feel that you have not come to resolution with your own past, or you don't know when or how to discuss the harsh facts of their beginning, then please seek help from your Lifeline caseworker.

GUIDELINES TO FOLLOW

Follow these principles as you share the story.

- Consider your child's developmental stage and adjust the story accordingly.
- Communicate to your child that you are always available to answer their questions.
- When your child asks questions, share true, age appropriate information.
- Do not create information that isn't available or may not be true; responding with "I don't know", is better for your child.
- Help your child navigate the feelings and disappointments behind the loss of personal history, culture, and information.
- When your child brings up the topic, don't change the subject. If it is not a good time, give a brief answer and then let your child know you want to talk more. Then set a time as soon as possible to continue the conversation.
- Connect with your child's feelings and emotions about their story.

AGES AND STAGES

Birth to Six

Gone are the days when an adoption was kept secret, never to be revealed, or set aside to be discussed at a random predetermined age. Today experts recommend that you begin the discussion of adoption from the very first day your child arrives in your home. In these early years of development children are concrete in their thinking and understanding, but you will still want to use the correct terms as you tell their story. As you keep the adoption conversation open, you will be able to explain and correct their understanding of terms at later stages of development. Make sure that your child understands that they were first born to a set of parents; give a brief explanation that not all parents are able to care for their child. Let your child know that a plan was made to place them for adoption (they were not given away), and that it was not because of anything they did. Let them know that their birth parents were not ready or able to parent **any** child at that point in time. Then share your side of the story about the preparation and excitement you experienced as they joined your family. Reassure the child that they have security and permanency in your family. Many children may fear that if the first set of parents abandoned them, then they will be abandoned again. Your child's imagination will also begin to blossom during this stage. It is not uncommon for children to begin to develop very fantastical stories about their birth family. Connect with their feelings and emotions behind these narratives rather than the facts. There are many wonderful books on adoption for children this age that can help you get the conversation started. This is also the best time to begin your child's life book. (See resources)

Seven to Twelve

As children grow older they begin to understand that adoption makes your family different and makes them different from others. It is during these years your child's interest in their adoption may come and go, but don't assume that because they are not asking questions about their adoption, that they are not thinking about it. During this stage of development children gain a greater understanding that adoption into your family means loss of another family. They may begin to grieve that loss of not just the family but also unknowns about their history. Remember, while it may be hard for you to respond with, "I don't know", being honest is better for you and your child. During these years they also begin to develop the sense of fairness and loyalty. A child may not ask questions about their adoption as they may fear that it is being disloyal or unfair to their adoptive parents. That makes it vital for a parent during this phase to initiate and keep that topic of adoption open, while not over emphasizing it. If your child was adopted at an older age, they may now feel safe to share more of their memories about their past. It is important that you

accept their story as they remember it. Don't overreact to information they share, it may be shocking and hard to hear. It is your role to gauge your child's emotional wellbeing regarding their emerging feelings and understanding of their adoption. It is in these years that your child is beginning to interact more with the world and may be confronted with their adoption through school assignments or comments from others. Helping your child learn how to tell their own story will be very important during this time. (See resources)

Thirteen to Eighteen

During this stage of development your child will begin to wrestle with their identity and to ask the questions of "Who am I?" and "Where do I fit in?" The teen years are hard for anyone to navigate, but an adoptee can struggle with extra complexities of their identity and self-esteem. This is also a time of gaining independence while still needing your guidance and wisdom. A teen who has not resolved their past may have more difficulty making plans for their future. If you have followed the earlier guidelines of keeping the topic of adoption open and answering your child's questions honestly, then you have established a good foundation for this stage. Continue to initiate discussions with your child about their adoption. You may see your child begin to struggle with feelings of grief and anger over the lack of control they had in their life story and the missing parts of their history. Continue to support them as they integrate their past into their present. As your child matures, gauge whether they are emotionally ready to hear the harder, more difficult parts of their story. You may find that your role shifts during this stage from story teller to one of listening and helping your child navigate their emotions regarding their past. Keep in mind that the strong emotions that may be elicited are not to be taken personally. Your child may benefit from meeting with a counselor or peer adoption support group to help them sort through their thoughts. It can be helpful for your child to feel that they are not the only one who has a history of adoption. (See resources)

RESOURCES

Birth to Six

- *Forever Families* by Natalie Sutyak
- *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* by Rose Lewis
- *Shaoey and Dot* by Mary Beth Chapman and Steven Curtis Chapman
- *I Wished for You* by Marianne Richmond
- *A Blessing from Above* by Patti Henderson and Elizabeth Edge
- *A Sister for Matthew* by Pamela Kennedy
- *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis and Laura Cornell (*mostly applicable for domestic and for families with no biological children*)
- *God Found Us You* by Lisa Tawn Bergren and Laura J. Bryant
- *Logan's Journey* by Kathy Heath and Karla Martin (*for domestic/open adoption*)
- *Matthew Was Adopted* by Phoebe Dawson
- *Searching for the You We Adore* by Valerie Westfall
- *Why Was I Adopted?* by Carole Livingston
- *Babies Come from Airports* by Erin Dealey
- *Forever Fingerprints an amazing Discovery for Adopted Children* by Sherrie Eldridge

Seven to Twelve

- *Riding Freedom* by Pam Munoz Ryan, Scholastic Inc., 1998 Set in the mid-1800's, this story is about Charlotte, a girl raised in a boys orphanage. This award-winning book sets the

scene with Charlotte's rough start to life, and how she eventually becomes very successful. 4th grade reading level.

- *Who Am I? And Other Questions of Adopted Children* by Charlene C. Giannetti, Price Stern Sloan Pub., 1999 Insights and answers from teenagers and experts. Written to help adopted children ages 9 - 13 to feel more confident about their complicated lives.
- *How It Feels To Be Adopted* by Jill Krenentz, Knopf, 1988 Boys and girls from ages 8 - 16 share their thoughts about being adopted. The book shares various viewpoints.
- *Lucy's Family Tree* by Karen Halvorsen Schreck, Tilbury House Publishers. Story of how Lucy navigates the Family Tree Assignment from school and what she discovers about herself.
- *W.I.S.E. UP! Power book*, by Marilyn Schoettle, 2000, Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc. (C.A.S.E.) , www.adoptionssupport.org, Designed to help children think through and answer difficult and private questions from others.

Books for Parents:

- *The Whole Life Adoption Book* by Jayne E. Schooler and Thomas C. Atwood, 2008, NavPress
- *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens* by Debbie Riley and John Meeks, 2006 C.A.S.E. publications

Lifebooks:

- Creating an Adoptive Lifebook for your adopted child
<https://www.bethany.org/adoption/post-adoption-resources/adoptive-parents/lifebooks>
- Beth OMalley's Adoption Lifebooks www.adoptionlifebooks.com/
- The Value of Child-Created Adoption Lifebooks-Adoptive Families
<https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/adoption-lifebook/>

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