

# Talking About Adoption



By Dr. Jenn Berman

*A friend of mine who is a social worker was placing an infant into the arms of her adopted parents. The new mother leaned over to the social worker and whispered, "When do we tell her she's adopted?" My friend leaned over and whispered back: "On the way home."*

~ A true story told by Adam Pertman, Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

## When Should I Tell?

Many years ago the conventional wisdom was that parents should not tell their adopted children their adoption stories until they were adults, if at all. There was a shroud of secrecy and shame surrounding adoption issues.

Fortunately, times have changed and understanding of adoption, identity and family psychology has evolved. As Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher point out in *Talking to Young Children about Adoption*, "now the advice is not simply to tell the child once about his adoption but to talk with him across developmental stages throughout childhood." Even before children understand words or the complex stories of their own adoption, they understand their parents' level of comfort with the discussion, which sets the precedence for dialogue in the future.

In the study *In Search of Origins: The Experience of Adopted People*, researchers found

that adoptees who had been told about their adoption early and in a positive way had a sense of "well-being," of being "special," and of having something to be "proud" of. Those who were told after the age of ten reported that being told late did harm to their self-image, leaving them feeling confused, bewildered and angry.

Ideally, parents should be talking about adoption from the start. They should not look to find an age to start talking about the issues but rather find age-appropriate ways to discuss adoption. Children's needs and concerns change over time and it is only if parents have created an atmosphere of open discussion that they will be able to help their children make sense of their thoughts and feelings.

This is not to say that parents have to constantly talk about the benefits of adoption—premature or un-asked-for information can overwhelm or confuse a child—but parents should be prepared to answer questions and help children integrate the information in age-appropriate ways that convey a positive feeling about adoption. Let children take the lead in the adoption questions and conversations so they can get their needs met.

## How Parents Can Support Their Adopted Kids

1. Keep the communication open. Always be ready to answer questions. Many parents report that questions usually come at unexpected or even inconve-

nient times. It is crucial that the ultimate message parents send is that it is safe and encouraged to talk about.

2. Follow your child's lead. Don't volunteer too much information. Pay close attention to what your child is really asking.
3. Let young children use play to express themselves. Use play scenarios as an opportunity to enter into the child's world and open discussions.
4. Use books to give children an understanding of adoption across different ages. Early adoption books are a great way to present the concept of adoption in a non-threatening way.
5. Create a Lifebook. Make a scrapbook that chronicles your child's life before she was adopted. This can help your child understand what happened and gain ownership of her story. This is especially important for older child adoptions.
6. Be aware of your own biases, fears and feelings about adoption and the birth parents. This is especially important so that parents don't collide with their child's fantasies. Children need to have the room for their own feelings and fantasies about adoption.

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