

# Adoption Network Law Center

Monthly Update Newsletter



February 2004

## Discussing Adoption Openly with Your Children

By Carol Gindi

Children understand that they were once babies and will someday be adults. This is reflected in their play, as they focus on make-believe games like “baby and mommy,” and dress-up games where they impersonate adults. This leads them to ask, “Did I grow inside you, Mommy?” The stage is then set for their first real understanding of having been adopted.

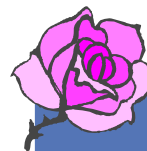
Remember that the child probably is not asking if he is adopted. All children eventually ask their mother if they grew inside them. So be sure to answer the question the child is asking – that he grew inside his birthmother, just like all children grow inside. But use the opportunity to also explain that after the child was born, his birthmother made a plan for the adoptive parents to raise him/her as their child forever. Be sure to mention the birth father’s existence and role in the child’s creation, even though he may not have been involved in the adoption. If you don’t, the child may conclude that his adoptive father is his birthfather. This may lead to confusion and possible upset down the road.

”Did I grow inside you, Mommy?” is universal. Other children in your family are likely to ask this question during their preschool years. This situation may lead to questions about who else in the family grew inside mommy and why the birthmother placed one child but not another. Answer questions honestly using concrete images. For example, instead of saying, “Your birthmother was too poor to take care of another baby just then,” you could say, “Your birthmother already had two children to take care of. She was having a hard time finding enough money to buy them food and pay for heat. She was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to feed all of you

and give you everything you deserve.”

During the elementary school years the child attempts to understand what it means to have been placed for adoption and why it happened to him. This struggle starts around seven or eight years old, but sometimes earlier. It is then that children go to school and become aware of how other families are formed. They learned that most of their classmates are being raised by at least one parent to whom they are genetically related, and that some of their classmates have parents who are young, single, uneducated, or struggling to make ends meet. Still believing they cause the events around them, they may conclude that they were placed for adoption because they weren’t good enough, lovable, or worth the time or energy the birth parents would have had to commit.

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### REMEMBER!

*Please be sure to inform ANLC whenever you have any modifications in your contact information. It is important that you notify us of new addresses, and of any changes in your home, cell phone, or work telephone numbers, including any area code changes. Having current information will make it easier to reach you when we have that “all important” phone call to make! You may fax or email us with any changes. Thank you!*



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Children try to evaluate their places in their families. If there are children by both birth and adoption in the family, they will try to determine whether their places in their families are affected by the ways in which they joined them. Like all siblings, they will look for signs that one or the other is more privileged, gets more recognition, or gets more love. Furthermore, children are aware that parents can be vulnerable to accusations that they are not behaving fairly toward each child and will try to see if making such accusations results in better treatment. Parents can respond to complaints that they treat their children unfairly by pointing out that there are three ways to join a family: by birth, by adoption, and by marriage. Then you can say, "How you joined the family is not an issue. No matter how you joined the family, once you are in, you are a member and you are treated like everyone else." Don't hook in to your child's testing of the limits.

Social worker Deborah Silverstein, L.C.S.W., or Newport Beach, California, suggests that parents use the child's emerging love of problem solving to help him arrive at the answers to his questions himself. By asking the child what he thinks, parents can help him look at the situation differently and positively. Furthermore, when children reason out answers to their own questions, the conclusions are often more credible.

Sometimes children do not ask questions about their origins or of the reasons for their placement. Parents who are unsure whether their child is

fully expressing his interest in his adoption can compare the child's approach to this topic with his approach to other topics. Does the child generally ask a lot of questions, or does he quietly go about investigating the world on his own? A child who is more intense about life may bring more intensity to his quest to understand his adoption than a child who is more easygoing. When a child's style of dealing with adoption is inconsistent with the way he approaches other situations, parents may want to look at whether there are other reasons for the child's apparent reluctance to talk about adoption and deal with the matter appropriately.



Children may wonder if asking questions will affect their relationships with their adoptive parents. Children may think that if they show too much interest in their birthparents they aren't being loyal to their adoptive family. Give them a comfort level and a forum to be able to ask to their heart's content.

Sometimes parents are advised not to give a child information until he asks.

A child who doesn't ask isn't ready for the information being provided. Parents needn't be overly concerned about whether the child expresses a desire to know. Furthermore, sometimes children's reluctance to hear the information is due to the fear that the facts could be disturbing. They are often relieved to hear the information and know that their fears are not true. And even when the information is disturbing, a known fact eliminates other unpleasant possibilities. Follow your instinct in dealing with situations in which a child seems reluctant to ask about his birthparents or his origins. But don't routinely let the child carry the burden of asking questions to get information. Be aware of what children are likely to be wondering about and provide them with the answers to their questions even before they are asked. Take natural opportunities to bring up discussions of birth relatives and the circumstances surrounding the adoption. Don't feel every piece of information needs to be provided in a formal setting. The more naturally you can discuss these topics, the more comfortable the child will feel about bringing them up.

In some cases in which a child grows up in open adoption and has a good relationship with his birthparents, the information he needs will be provided to him so naturally that you may not be able to isolate items when the child is seeking information. The child may get answers to his questions as part of the stories he is told about his family as he grows up – stories told by both his birth parents and his adoptive parents.



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My daughter Lauren described our adoptions a few years ago in the most beautiful way I have ever heard adoption expressed. I'd like to share Lauren's insightfulness with all of you.

"Mommy, I love Flor (Flor is the Birthmom of our two sons, David and Elan) so much for being able to carry my brothers in her tummy for us because your tummy was broken. Without Flor how would my brothers have been born? Thank God Flor's tummy didn't break and that my brothers didn't nearly die at birth like me. We're such a lucky family because of her. Isn't it a coincidence that me and David, Elan, Samantha and Jakey all look like Daddy? I guess God wanted it that way, so if one of us got lost, people would know who our daddy is. Mommy, are you sad that no one looks like you?" "No Lauren. I'm not sad at all. I'm so happy that God blessed me with five beautiful children and answered all my prayers." And then some...?

Lauren is an amazing child and is so proud of the adoption work I do. She tells me that she's proud of me and of the fact that I help women who can't

raise their babies and couples who need babies to love.

Remember Lauren's word when you talk to your children... She states it well and simply. The process of adoption discussions begins at birth and progresses throughout the formative years of a child's development. At different ages and levels of maturity their questions and needs in answers will change as rapidly as they do. Always be honest, open, and hear what your child is asking to learn.

Never hide adoption. It's not a curse, but rather the ultimate blessing of life. Your comfort with adoption will reflect in your child's comfort and adjustment.

To me, adoption is just a means of transportation...it's more powerful than the locomotive, more dynamic than the supersonic jet, a lot safer than an automobile...and it certainly knows how to get us to our destination...and always remember that "biological reproduction" is a means...not a destiny.

