

# Growing Up Adopted

An **Adoptive Families** Age-by-Age  
Guide for Raising Your Child

*Everything you need to know about*

- ✓ TALKING ABOUT ADOPTION
- ✓ BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM
- ✓ TEACHING THROUGH PLAY
- ✓ ESTABLISHING A ROUTINE



from the editors of *Adoptive Families* magazine

# Adoptive Families

PUBLISHER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF	Susan Caughman <i>susan@adoptivefamilies.com</i>
FOUNDER & EDITORIAL ADVISOR	Susan Freivalds <i>sfreivalds@adoptivefamilies.com</i>
MANAGING EDITOR	Eve Gilman <i>eve@adoptivefamilies.com</i>
CREATIVE DIRECTOR	Orin Brecht
ART DIRECTOR	Ron Anteroinen
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR	Laura Broadwell
MARKETING	Sue Sidler <i>ssidler@earthlink.net</i>
OFFICE MANAGER	Marie Kiernan <i>marie@adoptivefamilies.com</i>

## **EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE:**

39 West 37th Street, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10018  
Telephone: 646-366-0830 Fax: 646-366-0842

*Adoptive Families*® is a registered trademark.  
Copyright ©2014 by New Hope Media LLC.

All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

**TERMS OF USE** Copyright © 2014 by New Hope Media. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, faxing, e-mailing, posting online, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the Publisher.

All trademarks and brands referred to herein are the property of their respective owners. All references to *Adoptive Families* and *adoptivefamilies.com* are trademarks of New Hope Media.

**LEGAL NOTICES** While all attempts have been made to verify information provided in this publication, neither the author nor the publisher assumes any responsibility for error, omissions, or contrary interpretations of the subject matter contained herein.

The purchaser or reader of this publication assumes responsibility for the use of these materials and information. Adherence to all applicable laws and regulations, both referral and state and local, governing professional licensing, business practices, advertising, and all other aspects of doing business in the United States or any other jurisdiction, is the sole responsibility of the purchaser or reader. The author and publisher assume no responsibility or liability whatsoever on the behalf of any purchaser or reader of these materials. Any perceived slights of specific people or organizations are unintentional.

# LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Dispelling adoption myths and misconceptions can be among the toughest challenges for parents. Here's how to handle the most common communication issues:

## Good Answers

Smart ways to handle nosy or difficult questions from acquaintances and strangers.

**IF OTHERS ASK:** Her birth mother was a teenager, right?

**YOU CAN SAY:** We're keeping the information about Janie's birth family private right now.

**OTHERS:** How could anyone give up such a beautiful child?

**YOU:** Her birth mother decided she could not raise any child right now.

**OTHERS:** I hear adoption is outrageously expensive. How much did you have to pay?

**YOU:** After tax credits and employee benefits, adoption was no more expensive than giving birth. And, you don't buy a

baby—the legal and social work fees are all approved by the courts.

**OTHERS:** Aren't you worried his birth parents will come and take him back?

**YOU:** No, we're not. We're Michael's family by law.

**OTHERS:** Aren't most adoptees really troubled?

**YOU:** Studies show that adoptees are as well-adjusted as their non-adopted peers.

**OTHERS:** It's too bad you couldn't have a child of your own.

**YOU:** Janie is our own.

## Finding the Right Words

### ADOPTION-FRIENDLY TERMS TO USE:

■ **Birth parent, birth mother, and birth father** to describe the man and woman who conceived and gave birth to the child. Some prefer the term **first mother** and **first father** or **biological mother** and **biological father** describe birth parents.

■ **Parent, mother, father, mommy, daddy, and child** to describe the adoptive family members. It is not necessary to say "adopted child" or "adoptive parent," unless the context is adoption.

■ **Make an adoption plan** or **choose adoption**. These terms acknowledge that the birth parents were responsible and in control of their decision.

■ **Parent her child**, when an expectant mother decides not to choose adoption.

### TERMS TO AVOID:

■ **Real parent, real mother, real father, and real family**. These terms imply that adoptive relationships are artificial and temporary.

■ **Natural parent, natural child, and one of your own**. These terms imply that the parent-child bonds of an adoptive family are not as strong or as lasting as the bonds formed through birth.

■ **Abandoned, surrendered, released, relinquished, gave up for adoption, adopted out, or put up for adoption**.

■ **Keep her child**, which implies that the child is a possession and ignores the responsibilities of parenting.

# Welcome Home!

You are your baby’s voice, so choose your words wisely when you tell her story. Here’s how. **BY MARYBETH LAMBE, M.D.**



If you don’t want to answer a question in front of your child, offer to discuss it later.

**I**t’s too bad you couldn’t have your own child. Why did her real mother get rid of her? Are you going to tell her she’s adopted? Part of the excitement of bringing home our adopted children is sharing our happiness with others. In our joy, however, we’re often caught unawares by unexpected, even rude, questions and comments. Family and friends may unwittingly say less-than-sensitive things. Even strangers at the park, grocery store, or mall feel compelled to get into the act: It’s awful how they dump babies in that country. Aren’t you worried about fetal alcohol syndrome? It’s a shame his parents didn’t want him.

When we adopt, particularly if our child looks different from us, we are sure to receive our share of stares, intrusive questions, and insensitive comments. During their early years, children rely on us to speak for them and to field such comments. But how? It’s as simple as 1, 2, 3.

**1** Protect your child’s privacy. In the excitement of the moment, it’s easy to reveal too much about your baby’s background. This is your child’s private history, and the information you share with others will affect him. As

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

he grows, he will want to decide who knows the facts of his life, including the status of his birth parents, and how he came to be adopted. It is crucial to anticipate and respect your child’s future needs rather than being overly concerned about the curiosity or discomfort of a stranger. You do not have to answer every question.

Answering questions selectively is about privacy, which is not the same as secrecy. Privacy means offering personal details only to those who have a need to know. Secrecy involves shame, and we know that there is no shame in adoption. We are advocates for adoption, just as we are advocates for our children’s right to privacy.

**2** Practice the right language. Now’s the time to learn what to say to others about adoption. Your baby can’t understand your words at this point, but she soon will. So start handling questions and comments now.

**3** Be a teacher. You can help others understand what it means to form a family through adoption. You can also clarify misconceptions about birth parents and situations surrounding adoption plans. First, find out the reason behind the person’s query. Say, “Why do you ask?” This will silence some and reveal the sincerity of those who really want to know more about adoption. Perhaps this friend, acquaintance, or stranger has been considering it and is curious about how the process unfolds. You can answer, or offer to give more details later. If the questions are too intrusive, you might say, “I’m sure you understand that the information you seek is personal to our family.”

Some may use adoption as a qualifier in relationships (“This is Mary’s adopted daughter”) where they would not otherwise (“This is Nancy’s breech-birth son”). Others will talk of adoption as a second choice (“Do you have any children of your own?”). Remember, we respond to these statements to help our children deal with such comments. And what better time to learn to speak about adoption? You get to practice saying what you want your baby to understand when she’s older. As she grows, she’ll grow to understand your words—and how proud you are of the way you became a family. **AF**

MARYBETH LAMBE is a family physician and writer in Washington state.

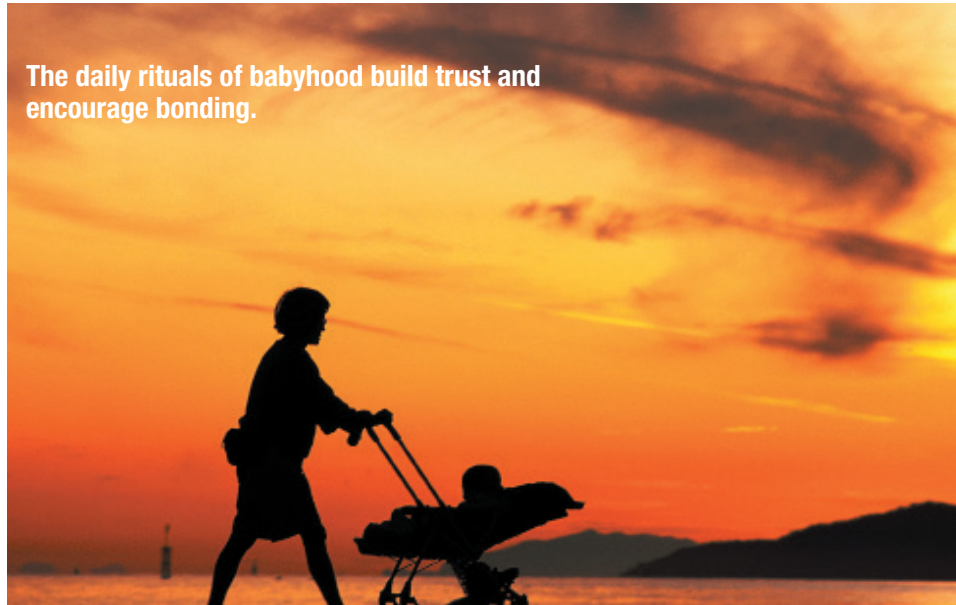
Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

Adoptive Families

# Establishing a Routine

When it comes to easing your baby’s transition to your home, consistency is key. **BY BONNIE PERKEL**



The daily rituals of babyhood build trust and encourage bonding.

**W**hen she first arrived home, my one-year-old daughter, Kira, was developmentally delayed. As we recovered from jet lag, the routines we established were unexciting by my past standards, but the positive results for Kira and me were undeniable.

Each day, Kira and I rose early, had breakfast together, and went out to the park for a morning stroll. After taking a nap and eating lunch, we’d drive around in the car, where she’d take a second nap. At this point, I made sure I had some quiet time, too. Both of us would rise at 4 p.m., have a snack, and go back out. Pretty boring, right? But these days were sacred to us.

No matter the age of your baby—two days or 20 months—the patterns you establish should ease the transition to a new life. These routines provide the framework for trust and bonding, and a daily rhythm creates internal calmness, to help your baby develop physically and emotionally.

## Make Eye Contact

Take advantage of every opportunity to bond with your new baby. Some children are clingy, others withdraw from your touch, so adapt contact accordingly. Find a stroller that lets you and your baby see each other. Use a carrier that allows you to comfortably hold her close to your body for long periods of time. At feeding time, establish eye contact. Older infants may be used to feeding themselves and resist the help, but it’s important that children con-

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

nect parents with nourishment.

If your baby is ready to crawl, all she needs is a soft rug and a safe environment to explore. A physical therapist suggested that I not use “exer-saucers” or “johnny jump ups,” so that Kira could learn to maneuver her body naturally. I lay on my back and put Kira on my chest. By slowly raising my knees so that her feet could push against them, Kira quickly learned to crawl over my shoulder.

### Early to Bed

Bedtime also had its rituals. Although Kira was at first frightened by the bath, soaking and splashing in the water soon became a favorite activity. Afterward, we moved through a consistent routine of bottle to snuggles to singing familiar lullabies before she drifted off to sleep.

Concerned that any unhappy moments may disrupt bonding, some parents are hesitant to enforce a schedule on their new children. But the result may be a stressed-out household where an infant sets policy.

Children, especially those who have had a lot of turmoil in their young lives, relish routine. Even if it takes a while to establish, the routine must be unwavering. Once patterns are established, there will be opportunities to adapt them as the child grows. Parents who fail to establish order in their new child’s life are doing their child, and themselves, no favors. **AF**

BONNIE PERKEL lives with her daughter, Kira, in Newton, Massachusetts.

### THREE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR CHILD FEEL AT HOME

- Touch is crucial to bonding. After bathing her, massage your baby with body lotion.
- If your child is in day care, talk about your routines with her caregiver. Home patterns should be applied whenever possible.
- If your baby is anxious about being left alone to sleep, sit within view, and catch up on your reading.

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

Adoptive Families

# Parents Rule

If you're feeling squeamish about disciplining your child, remind yourself why you must. **BY FRAN EISENMAN**

**H**ave you noticed? Your precious toddler is becoming a new person—a preschooler. He still explores, reasons, and tries to make sense of his world, and you still share the moments. But now some of these moments happen outside your line of sight. Your child wanders a little farther from the nest, perhaps attending preschool or day care. He tests his larger environment to see what the limits are. Yet even as he pushes for independence, he clings and fusses—and parenting takes on new meaning.

## Time for Limits

Welcome to the age of discipline, when your child needs a clear set of rules and limits to feel good about himself and grow into a well-adjusted person. The classic challenge of parenting is to establish a disciplinary style which is firm yet loving, consistent yet flexible, and which meets the needs of both child and parent in a variety of settings.

This is a balancing act for parents, because we may confuse leniency with kindness and discipline with meanness. As adoptive parents, we are often so overjoyed to finally have a child to love that we hesitate to react in any negative way to his behavior for fear of seeming ungrateful. We sometimes feel that we have no right to discipline our child, or fear losing his affection if we do. That unspoken dread—realistic or not—of hearing “My real mommy wouldn’t be so mean to me” has given way to many indulgences.



We do our preschoolers no favors if we allow them to make or bend the rules in our household. In this developmental stage it's natural that they want to be in charge, but they need to have boundaries set by the adults they love and trust. Without limits, children become frightened, angry, and socially troubled. They may act inappropriately in preschool or other social settings, garnering negative feedback that leads to decreased self-esteem. A world without rules seems scary and unpredictable. And ultimately, children without limits lose respect for the adults who allow this to happen.



## Clear Benefits

There are few more important things for your preschooler than for you to create structure—rules about safety, cooperation, kindness, patience, consideration, and public behavior. The clearer the limits you place on him, the better your child navigates inside them. He'll gain approval from adults and peers for his behavior, and he'll feel safe, trusting that you and other adults will be there for him.

Back to that delicate balance. We can love our children to pieces, even as we shape safe and acceptable behavior patterns for them. Give your child choices in little things (the kind of sandwich you pack for his lunch, the color of his shirt, which book to read) but maintain the right to make and enforce important rules (bedtime, safety, health care, social behavior). When you meet some resistance, tell your child that it's your job to set rules to keep him healthy and safe. Discipline ushers your child into a world that is predictable and comfortable, where he can take chances, learn, and thrive. **AF**

FRAN EISENMAN is a New England–based social worker and family counselor.

### 10 PARENT-TESTED DISCIPLINE TIPS

- 1 Tell your child what you expect in short, clear sentences.
- 2 Be specific when you describe acceptable behavior.
- 3 Use a calm but firm tone, and try to control anger.
- 4 Correct the behavior, don't criticize the child.
- 5 Correct your child promptly, as misbehavior occurs.
- 6 Be flexible on minor points, as long as the larger goals are achieved.
- 7 Give your child small, age-appropriate responsibilities and decisions to make.
- 8 Recognize good behavior with approval and affection.
- 9 Let her know it will get easier with practice, and that we all make mistakes.
- 10 Tell her you love her, even if you dislike her behavior.

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# Starting the Adoption Conversation

Keep talks with your child simple and relaxed. Your ease with discussing adoption lays the groundwork for a lifelong dialogue.

BY FRAN EISENMAN



Use a common experience to demonstrate what adoption and caring mean.

Talking to young children about adoption is an opportunity to shape their attitudes and expand their knowledge before influences outside the family come into play. Such discussions build self-esteem and contribute to the child’s sense of safety and security.

Every child who was adopted should be able to talk about it openly. This is true even in placements where the child resembles the parents and adoption is not evident to casual observers. In such cases, parents are not likely to have adoption-related conversations with strangers in public places—and their children miss chances to listen and learn.

Preschoolers are concrete thinkers. They see things as either black or white, and cannot appreciate the gray areas in between. They interpret what is said to them literally; metaphor and innuendo are lost on them. They do not have the experience or the

abstract thinking to see the bigger picture. It is no wonder that parents struggle to find just the “right” words to launch this childhood-long conversation.

## Teachable Moments

Sometimes the best way to talk about adoption is to use a common experience as a teaching tool. For example, a mother and child are talking about a

**Growing Up Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

neighbor’s new puppy. As the child expresses her feelings about the puppy, the mother can point out how young animals, just like young humans, need care day and night. Someone must protect, shelter, and feed them. The mother might prompt the child to think about what might have happened if the puppy had no one to take it to the vet, or keep it warm and safe. Together, mother and child can share their relief and joy that this puppy now has a home and everything it needs to grow up healthy and happy.

Accompanying her words with a hug or quick kiss, the mother can conclude by saying that children need care, too, and that she is thrilled to be a mother to her child. Thus, a casual observation about an everyday event becomes a feel-good lesson about adoption for the child.

Other teachable moments occur when a child notices a pregnant woman; when friends or classmates comment about differences in his appearance from his parents; or when a new baby comes home, either by birth or through adoption, to a family you know. Use calm and snuggly times, like bedtime, bath time, or reading time, to share the story of how your child came to be a part of his family. You want him to associate pleasant emotions with the words. By doing so, you’ll create a foundation for later exploration of more complex issues. **AF**

FRAN EISENMAN is a New England-based social worker with two internationally adopted children.

## STARTING ADOPTION CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR PRESCHOOLER

- Use simple language and examples familiar to children (like pets or neighbors).
- Keep your tone casual and relaxed.
- Accompany discussion with feel-good actions: snuggles, smiles, laughter.
- Use positive adoption language.
- If you’re questioned by a stranger about your child, say that you’d love to chat, adoption has been great for your family, but this is not a good time. If appropriate, take the person’s phone number and offer to call later. Your upbeat response lets your child know the topic is not taboo, while protecting his privacy.
- When you talk with your child about adoption, end with an affirmation of how happy you are to have adopted her.

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# The Land of Make Believe

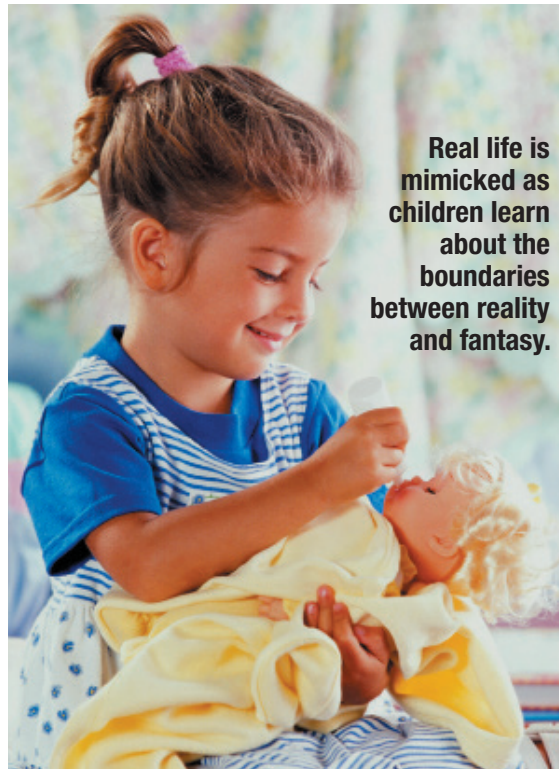
Fantasy play is your preschooler’s safe arena to learn about life—and work things out.

BY JOANNE SOLCHANY, R.N., PH.D.

**F**our-year-old Sarah is hosting a tea party. Dolls and stuffed animals sit with her. As she pours imaginary tea and passes around imaginary cookies for her guests, she says, “I’m happy my birth mommy is here with me and my mommy and my sister. I like parties, don’t you?” She says to her birth mom, “Mommy loves parties, too. She is nice and makes cookies.”

Play is the work of children. In its many forms, it helps them understand their world. Perhaps the most important type of play for preschoolers is fantasy or pretend-play. Pretending helps children practice everyday things, as when they play house. It reinforces that safe feeling of home and family, and allows children to take on different roles—parent, sibling, even the dog.

Pretend-play can also be a path to healing, letting children release feelings of fear and sadness. By enacting a troubling scenario, they can make sense of the event, move through their feelings, and take control. For the preschooler who was adopted, common play themes may include joining her family, fear of being taken away, having babies, or battles of “good mommies” versus “bad mommies.” Observing such scenes, you



Real life is mimicked as children learn about the boundaries between reality and fantasy.

may wonder if your child is having a hard time. Rest easy—this type of play is healthy and healing. Here’s what you’ll notice, age by age:

- By age two, toddlers begin to experiment with pretend play. Basic needs and normal everyday activities, such as feeding babies or driving cars, are common themes.
- By age three, children begin to link the pieces of a story together, problem-solve, and make plans. Play expands to feeding the baby, putting her to

**Growing Up Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

bed, hearing her cry, and soothing her—mimicking real life. Games like “I’m gonna get you” afford rapid shifts between being the “monster” and being oneself. These games also help children experience the anticipation of intense emotion and learn impulse control in a safe setting.

➤ By age four, pretend-play becomes more complex, yet more literal. Feelings, ideas, wishes, and fears become more apparent. Themes in play may last longer—playing “house” for a week or “school” for an entire month. While themes remain constant, the roles, dialogue, and outcomes change and develop.

### 6 WAYS TO SUPPORT FANTASY PLAY

- **Follow your child’s lead.** Let her be in charge and express feelings, supporting where she is emotionally at that moment. Encourage her to talk about it, too.
- **Avoid correcting.** If your child displays anger at, say, a pretend birth mother, don’t try to make it better by defending her. He has the right to be angry and express it.
- **Expand on your child’s play.** If you go to her tea party, accept your tea, comment that it needs more sugar, and ask your child what to do. Be playful!
- **Provide creative materials.** Offer your child items such as dress-up clothes, large boxes to create spaces with, and craft paper.
- **Set limits around safety issues.** Monitor such things as hitting or playing too rough with things, and offer support as needed.
- **Know when to step in.** If pretend-play turns aggressive toward others, constantly ends badly, or escalates into meltdowns or tantrums—or never occurs at all—consider seeking help from an early childhood professional.

Parents may be tempted to “make it all better” by intruding on play, trying to take away hurtful thoughts or feelings—or the play itself. But we need to encourage these games and follow our child’s lead, no matter where his fantasies take him. The child who plays out his fear of being abandoned and creates his own happy endings will ultimately feel more in control and better able to cope with everyday separations from his parents. Working through feelings in pretend-play makes it less likely that they will intrude on real life. **AF**

JOANNE SOLCHANY is an assistant professor of nursing at the University of Washington in Seattle.

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# Birth Parent Fantasies

Ever heard, “My real mother wouldn’t make me do that”? Don’t despair. All kids, adopted or not, conjure fantasy parents.

BY JULIE MICHAELS

**S**even-year-old Allison was furious. She wanted the new bicycle she saw in the store window—and she wanted it right now. When her mother told her that wasn’t possible, Allison scrunched her face into a frown, looked daggers at her mother, and said, “My *real* mom would have bought that bike for me.”



Listen and reassure your child as she shares her fantasies and daydreams of the “other parent.”

## Make-believe Moms and Dads

Welcome to the world of fantasy parents. Most children, adopted or not, go through this phase. They have gone beyond seeing their parents as all-powerful and all-knowing. Suddenly Mom and Dad are human, flawed, not as pretty, or as young, or as rich as somebody else’s parents.

In an attempt to rationalize such imperfections, many children invent a “family romance,” writes Elinor B. Rosenberg in *The Adoption Life Cycle*. They fantasize that

they are not, in fact, the offspring of these less-than-perfect people. Instead, they were born to noble parents—a prince and princess who were good and perfect and kind.

For an adopted child—who, at this age, comes to understand more fully that he or she was born to one set of parents and is being raised by another—the fantasy becomes more intense, and more complicated. Some children, like Allison, conjure a fantasy parent when they are mad at the parents they have. Their “real” mom would be perfect, never giving them timeouts when they misbehave or asking them to clean their rooms or set the table.

But some adopted children find it impossible to conjure a reassuring image of their birth parents, says Rosenberg. If a child has been told her mother was “too young” or “too poor” to care for her properly, or that she “wanted

**Growing Up Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

you to have a better life,” she can’t imagine that such a parent could come and rescue her.

### BOOKS FOR KIDS AGES 6-8

Wherever your child was born, the following books can help him think and talk about his two families.

- *Carolyn’s Story*, by Perry Schwartz
- *We Adopted You*, Benjamin Koo, by Linda Shute
- *When You Were Born in China*, by Sarah Dorow
- *When You Were Born in Vietnam*, by Therese Bartlett

## Resolving Fears

Fantasies of adopted children often revolve around responsibility and blame. A seven- or eight-year-old might imagine, “I must have been a bad baby, so that’s why she gave me away.” Or, “she went to parties all the time and didn’t take care of me.” Rather than seeing himself as a “bad baby,” a child might allay such feelings by deciding that his adoptive parents stole him from his birth mother. Or he might think that, since his mother was bad, he must be bad, too. Such thoughts can lead to testing his adoptive parents’ love by misbehaving and acting out.

An invitation to share her fantasy can open the door into a child’s private world. Parents can begin by saying, “Sally, when I was a little girl and mad at my mom, I used to dream that my real mother was a ballerina. Do you ever think things like that?” If your child shares her fantasies—or fears—of the “other parent,” Rosenberg says the best response is to listen and reassure. **AF**

JULIE MICHAELS is the former editor of *Adoptive Families’* Growing Up Adopted section.

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# When a Birth Parent Moves On

It's not that she doesn't care, it's that life takes twists and turns.

BY JULIE MICHAELS



**Talk honestly with your child about why a birth parent is no longer able to write or visit as frequently as she did in the past.**

One of the chief complaints of parents who have participated in an open adoption is that birth parents too often fade from the scene later on. Just as a child becomes old enough to develop an awareness of adoption and an interest in his past, the birth parent(s) may be increasingly unavailable.

This is what happened to Billy, age eight, whose birth mother used to visit him every year. She had always sent him cards on his birthday and presents at Christmas. Over time, however, Billy heard from her less and less.

“Sandy was young when she had Billy,” says his mother, Brenda, “but she was totally committed to his well-being. She was very active in selecting a family that would welcome her continued involvement—which we did.”

In the early years, Sandy loved visiting Billy and didn't mind the three-hour journey from her home. In addition to their annual visits, Brenda would often arrange for them to meet her halfway. But, within a few years, Sandy began to move on. When Billy was six, his birth mother married and had another child.

“Birth parents tend to be younger than adoptive parents,” writes Lois Melina in *Making Sense of Adoption: A Parent's Guide*. “They are busy establishing careers, developing new relationships, and building their own families.”

Melina counsels parents to be honest. When a child insists his birth mother has forgotten him, don't tell him that he's mistaken. Instead, use the

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**



conversation to acknowledge feelings and explain the birth parent’s behavior without excusing or condemning it.

Brenda explained to Billy that, now that she was a parent, Sandy didn’t have the time and freedom she’d had in the past. Rather than wait for the next call or letter from Sandy, Brenda suggested that Billy write to her and send a drawing to the new baby.

### SURVEY ON OPEN ADOPTION

Adoptive Families surveyed its readers who adopted domestically.

- Nearly two-thirds would characterize their adoptions as being very open (37%) or open (28%).
- Half of the families met the birth mother in person before she gave birth; 15% met the birth father before the child’s birth.
- Amount of contact decreased over time for 26% of the families; stayed about the same for 51%; and became more open for 23%.
- Eight percent have lost touch with the birth family entirely since adopting.
- More than half (56%) would like their adoption to remain the same; 39% wish it were more open.

### Being Flexible

When life situations change, families should consider changes in their visiting arrangements. You may have to explain to your child that regular visits are no longer possible. Or, as your family becomes more mobile, you might do the traveling.

Billy’s birth mother was delighted when she received his letter, and in return, she sent photos of his little half brother for him to keep. The photos made Billy feel more included in her life, and he proudly put them on his bulletin board. Brenda felt better, too. By allowing their arrangement to evolve, they’d preserved a vital connection. **AT**

JULIE MICHAELS is the former editor of *Adoptive Families’* Growing Up Adopted section.

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

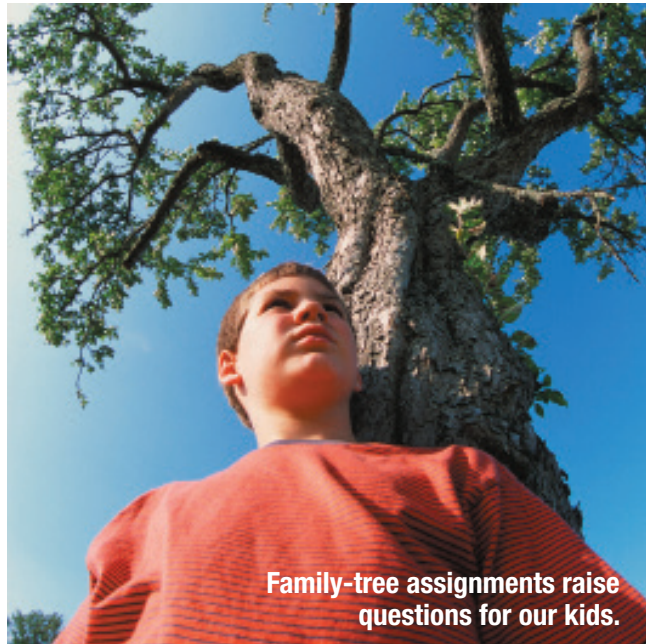
Adoptive Families

# A Forest of Family Trees

Inclusive assignments help your child and her classmates learn about their lives and the world around them.

BY NANCY NG AND LANSING WOOD

**E**ight-year-old Laura burst into the house after school, yelling, “I can’t do it, I won’t do it!” The “it” was an assignment to make a poster showing her important family members, including photos, with labels describing their relationships to her. The posters would be displayed at the classroom open house. The teacher felt it would make each child proud and highlight the diversity of her classroom. Adopted at age five, Laura still struggled with the loss of her birth mother and biological half-sisters, who had been adopted



Family-tree assignments raise questions for our kids.

by relatives in another part of the country. All she could think of was how important they were to her and that she didn’t have photos of them.

Perhaps the most dreaded of school assignments for families touched by adoption is the ubiquitous family tree. Students may encounter versions of this fearsome task from preschool through high school. The very

idea can raise questions of belonging, relatedness, difference, divided loyalty, confusion, and embarrassment—not only for the adopted student, but for her birth and adopted siblings and students in foster families. All may struggle with fitting their various relations into a standard format of genetic lineage.

## Exploratory Assignments

Grade-schoolers are just becoming aware of differences in families, and they are most concerned about fitting in and being like their classmates. Adopted or foster children may be happy to include only their current family in family trees. But they may also be spurred to think about their birth-family members, making the assignment emotionally taxing.

When presented with thought and care, however, family tree projects can be wonderful. For teachers, the assignment offers opportunities to educate

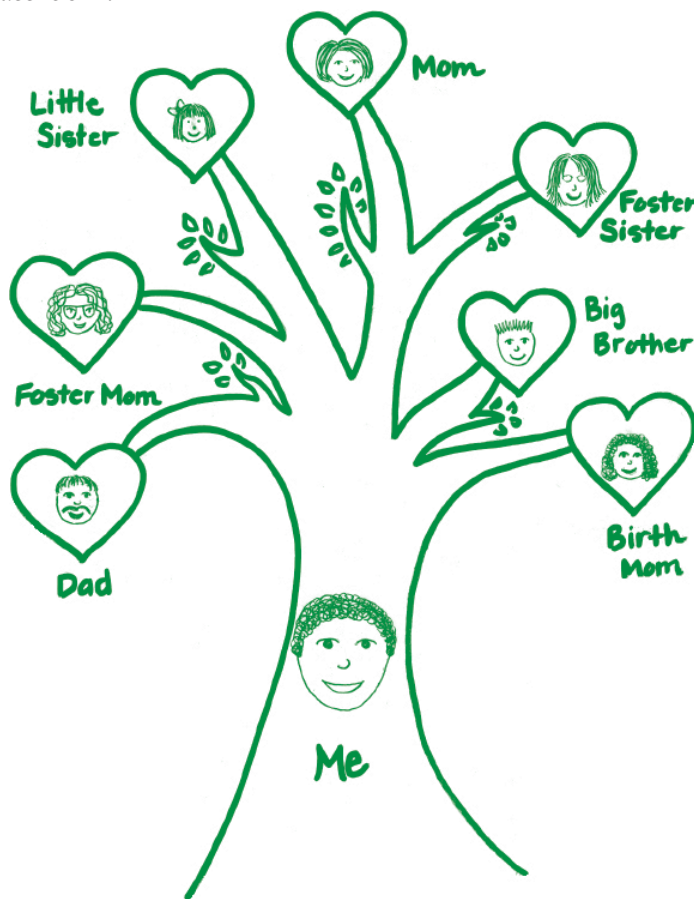
**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

about the meaning of family; to help their students share with one another their ideas of what constitutes family; and to encompass family diversity in our society—including multiracial families, gay and lesbian parents, foster families, children raised by grandparents and other kin, non-related households, step- and blended families, as well as adoptive families.

For adoptive families, the family tree can open up a healing dialogue between parents and child. Through her assignment, Laura’s parents can re-confirm their empathy for her losses and perhaps help her obtain the photos and other information she needs to complete the assignment. They could also help her depict all family members and help her decide if she wants to include information identifying her as adopted in a project to be displayed in the classroom.



The Loving Tree lets children honor those who love them, including parents, siblings, birth relatives, foster parents, grandparents, and caregivers, without regard to time or place.

### Age-by-Age Tree Ideas

With children’s developmental needs in mind, teachers can create inclusive assignments. You can help by conferring with the teacher early on in the school year about family-related projects or curriculum. Then, casually of-

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

fer your child some information about her family members and history. You can also suggest various family-tree templates to your teacher, if needed [see “Tree Finder,” below]. Use the following information to guide you.

## TREE FINDER

Here’s where to look for specific examples of inclusive family trees:

- Adoption and the Schools, by Nancy Ng and Lansing Wood, a guide to help parents and teachers anticipate problematic assignments, communicate effectively, and support learning.
- Adoptive Families: Tackling Tricky Assignments ([adoptivefamilies.com/free-downloads](http://adoptivefamilies.com/free-downloads)) offers creative solutions to six common assignments, including biographical timelines, star of the week, and science projects about genetics, in addition to the family tree.
- Lucy’s Family Tree, by Karen Halvorsen Schreck

Young elementary students like to create a realistic-looking family tree, including a strong trunk (self) with branches and, possibly, roots representing cultures, ancestors, and even birth-family members. The Family Peony Bush described by Cheri Register in *Are Those Kids Yours?* is a beautiful way to depict family diversity. Teachers may utilize such family trees as an introduction to history, to help students organize their own stories for writing projects, or to begin teaching about society.

At age six most children view adoption as a sunny event. Their trees reflect one big happy family, perhaps including birth, foster, and adoptive parents and siblings. Parents and teachers should honor such perceptions and not correct for factual reality. One kind of assignment might be to draw all of the people who live with you, and then all the other family members you know of. Follow your child’s lead in helping her organize this depiction. If it’s likely that her artwork will be posted in the classroom, prepare her to answer such questions as: “How come you have five sisters and two brothers in your picture? Don’t you have only one baby sister?”

By age seven, kids become more self-conscious. They like to fit in, dread being put on the spot, and can be easily embarrassed. Because they’re aware that adoption is not a universal experience, they sometimes do best with a simple response to the family-tree assignment, such as using only their adoptive-family information on the tree or artwork, coupled with a private, in-depth discussion in the safety of home.

At age eight many children have a dawning realization of the loss inherent in adoption. They are starting to make connections between past,

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

Adoptive Families

present, and future, and are intrigued by their own histories. Many like the concrete assignment of a realistic-looking family tree, which captures this information. Yet, because they are not yet able to distinguish between family and public information, kids this age often need help with assignments that involve personal relationships. Prepare for such assignments by clarifying your child’s adoption information and discussing answers to intrusive questions. Let your child know she can decide what answers to give.

The family tree can be an excellent opportunity for adoptive families to demystify and normalize their family experience. Parents should not hesitate to approach teachers with relevant information about their family. When you offer your teacher simple, age-related information and suggestions, you smooth the way for your child and, indeed, all students. Teachers who are aware of the sensitivities of adoption-built families can make the family-tree experience truly educational for all. **AF**

LANSING WOOD and NANCY NG are board members of FAIR (Families Adopting in Response, [fairfamilies.org](http://fairfamilies.org)).

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# Out on Their Own

At school, children have to fend for themselves. Here are words they can live by. **BY FRAN EISENMAN**



**A**s our children enter the school-age years, they spend more time away from our sheltering presence. They’re pretty much on their own when it comes to social and verbal interactions at school. Among grade-schoolers, interactions about any personal subject can be emotion-laden. So we need to prepare our kids for exchanges about being adopted or looking different.

In all likelihood, you’ve already set the stage with honest, loving talks about your child’s adoption and how you formed your family. And she’s probably heard you speak proudly and comfortably to others about adoption. Chances are, she’s dealt with some simple questions from young peers.

## Common Questions

But during elementary school, things may intensify. Children and adults may ask personal questions that are difficult for her to answer. Through discussion and practice, you can give your child the language—and the ease—to talk about her family without divulging private information.

What your child may hear: “How come your parents didn’t keep you?” or, “Where’s your real mother?”

How to prepare: Have casual conversations with your child about why birth parents make adoption plans. For example: “Sometimes the people who give birth to a baby (or have a child) are not able to take care of that baby. They may be too young, too poor, too alone, or too sick. Your birth parent

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

could not take care of you, but cared enough about you to make an adoption plan, so somebody else could love and take care of you. That is how you came to be our child.” You can also reinforce that you are his parent, and the people who conceived and gave birth to him are his birth parents. By using appropriate words, your child can educate his friends and schoolmates in a way that preserves his self-esteem.

**What your child may hear:** “Too bad your real mother dumped you,” or, “Why do you have Chinese eyes? Your mom doesn’t.”

**How to prepare:** Some kids can be downright mean when it comes to differences. To prepare for this, suggest that your child respond with something like: “I guess you don’t know very much about me or about adoption. We can talk about something else now.” If the meanness persists, let your child know it’s her right to say, “My private stuff is none of your business. Please don’t talk to me about that again.”

You can also show your child that not all questions require an answer. You might respond to a query: “What you are asking is private family information, but if you’d like more information on adoption, I can give you a phone number that may help you.”

Preparing our children for the outside world is a challenge. With adoption talk, as with other life issues, the keys to success are: information, understanding, and practice. **AF**

FRAN EISENMAN is a New England-based social worker and family counselor.

**WISE Up!**

The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E., [adoptionssupport.org](http://adoptionssupport.org)) offers W.I.S.E. Up!, a strategy to help kids respond to questions about adoption. Try these options:

- W**alk away or ignore what is said.
- Say “**I**t’s private.”
- S**hare something about your story.
- E**ducate others about adoption.

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# When Your Kid Clams Up

If your preteen is suddenly silent about adoption, look for “reachable” moments.

BY JAYNE SCHOOLER

Once upon a time, Josh was quick to respond with positive comments or questions when his mom brought up adoption and asked about his feelings. Right around his eleventh birthday, all that changed. If Carol mentioned the word “adoption,” Josh would sullenly reply, “I’m fine and I don’t want to talk about it.” Carol didn’t know what to do.

## What’s Going On Here?

As children enter their preteen years, their ability to think in abstract terms increases dramatically. They really comprehend the meaning behind the words of their adoption story. At the same time, they’re striving to be successful and industrious in school, in sports, and with same-sex peers. They want to be capable and to be similar to their friends. If adoption makes them feel different, they may try to avoid the subject.

In addition, preteens are concerned about fairness. Attention to the rules in game-playing with their friends reveals this mindset. They also worry about the fairness of adoption—that they are not being “fair” to their parents if they have feelings or questions about their birth family, particularly if they sense discomfort in their parents. This is why Josh became reluctant to discuss his adoption and birth parents.



Create “teachable” moments by remarking on a physical trait or talent your child may have inherited from a birth parent

## 3 Things You Can Do

When children aren’t talking about adoption, don’t assume they aren’t thinking about it. Instead:

- 1 Look for “reachable/ teachable” moments. It’s generally healthy to keep the dialogue going. While your child should not be forced to discuss adoption-related issues, keep letting her know that you’re open and comfortable with the subject whenever she is ready. You might occasionally remark about your child’s skills, looks, or interests, indicating that some of these attributes probably came from her birth family: “You play the piano so well. I wonder if anyone in your birth family has musical talent. Do you ever wonder about that?”

**Growing Up Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**



2 Be alert for “anniversary reactions.” A child may be especially somber or withdrawn around his birthday or adoption day. Instead of allowing him to suffer in silence, anticipate his sadness, and help him express it: “I always think about your birth mother around your birthday. Do you think about her, too? Do you have any questions about her that I could try to answer?”

3 Let children know they can love two sets of parents. Preteens may feel disloyal to their parents if they have questions, or even emotions, about their birth family. Assure your child that you expect her to love both you and her birth parents. Explain that parents do not stop loving a child who is already there in order to start loving a child who has just arrived in their family. In the same way, children can love more than one set of parents. **AP**

JAYNE SCHOOLER is co-author of several books, including *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*.

### STILL NOT TALKING?

If your preteen remains silent on adoption after you’ve tried to reach her, look for other ways to engage her:

- Suggest an “orphan-lit” book, such as *Dave at Night*, by Gail Carson Levine
- Talk to her about attending a peer-group adoption workshop, suggesting she might like to hang out with other adoptees her age.
- Get together with another adoptive family who has a child close to your child’s age.
- Consider a counselor for her to talk to in private.
- And keep in mind that she may not be talking because she’s at a comfortable place and it’s not a need.

# The Emerging Storyteller

As preteens strive to define themselves, they must work adoption into the story. **BY DEBORAH GRAY**

**A**mong adolescents, a necessary developmental task is making sense of their life histories. Children are fact-gatherers at the start of this stage, and they become storytellers by the end.

Adopted children are often working with precious little information when they start out on the journey of self-discovery. There may be conflicting story lines or gaps in available details. As a result, they may react emotionally when they look into their past.



Take Georgio, for example. With the holidays approaching, Romanian-born Georgio resisted visiting relatives. Finally he admitted that it was difficult for him, an adopted child, to hear how certain cousins were tall like an uncle or had the same nose as a grandparent. At nine years old, assembling the facts of his life story, he had so little to go on. “I mean, who would *want* a nose like Grandpa’s?” he asked. “That’s not what makes me angry! What makes me mad is that I

have no idea who I look like!”

To help their son in his quest, Georgio’s parents visited a Romanian church in the region, and, at coffee hour, asked if they could take some photographs of children and parents in the church’s congregation. Later, Georgio spent hours on the computer, digitally matching children who had his nose or eyes with pictures of their parents.

## Shutting Out a Parent

Lily, age 12, tried hard to avoid her mother after her middle school’s holiday concert, preferring to hang out with her friends and their families. In a later counseling session, Lily spat out, “She looks nothing like me. My mother should just wear a sign: ‘I adopted her.’ I try to keep her out of my life.”

That “life” was Lily’s social life. Parents often try to be sensitive to their child’s feelings, but even the most careful discussions can be met with, “You bug me.” Preteens like Lily may confuse negative feelings about themselves with feelings for their parents. Thus, feeling inadequate, Lily decided it was her mother who was the inadequate one.

Until preteens have spent enough time working through their feelings

**Growing Up  
Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

about adoption, they don't like being questioned. They don't want to be asked, "If that's your mother, does that mean you're adopted?" When preteens are able to answer such questions from their peers or others outside the family with confidence, it means they have processed a big part of their story.

Sometimes children need to have real or fictional models to help them. In my practice, 11- to 12-year-olds love to hear adoption stories read to them. They are relieved to hear of someone else's identity struggles. Often, I introduce them to older teens who have addressed the same questions in their own lives. Using the templates of other children's experiences, they can connect the threads that make up their own. **AF**

DEBORAH GRAY is the author of *Attaching in Adoption: Practical Advice for Today's Parents*.

### HELPING HANDS

Parents who understand this stage of their child's emotional development are better able to help. Here's how:

- Adoption storybooks
- Adoptive family/culture camps, weekends, and kid groups
- Requesting additional information about birth parents from your agency
- Reviewing information that children have. Often they have forgotten pieces that did not seem pertinent before.
- Exposure to teens who are further along the developmental phase
- Sensitivity to family events at which missing histories may be filled in
- Positive questions about what birth parents might think: "I wonder what she would say if she could see you play *The Ghost of Christmas Past*?"

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

Adoptive Families

# Developing a Body Image

It can be hard for adopted children to imagine how they'll look as adults. We can help them feel proud of their changing bodies.

BY JULIE MICHAELS

**M**y 11-year-old daughter is an inveterate “bra-shopper.” Take her anywhere near a mall, and she’ll start searching for the right brassiere to hold her developing bosom. Not that she wears the bras we buy. “Someone might see the straps under my shirt,” Lily explains. For now, the bras remain tucked in a drawer, waiting for the day she feels safe enough to wear them.



I’m willing to pay for these purchases because I remember my own puberty and the confusion I felt at the transformation of my body. Like I did, Lily struggles with being both proud and embarrassed by her emerging figure. And like I did, she looks at

her mother’s body and compares: “Mommy, will my breasts be like yours? How old were you when you started wearing a bra?”

## Self-image Struggles

But there’s a significant difference. By looking at my mother, I could formulate a pretty good idea of what I would look like as an adult. Being adopted, and of a different race, my daughter can find few clues to her own physical future in me.

This is a concern for all adoptive parents, as they see their children struggling with self-image. “From their earliest moments of puberty adoptees wonder whom they are like as developing adults,” writes therapist Elinor B. Rosenberg in her book, *The Adoption Life Cycle*.

Children who have photographs of birth parents, or actually have met them, are at an advantage here. These are real people to whom a child can compare himself. The child who has very little information—who knows

**Growing Up Adopted**

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

only that her birth mother was “petite” or her birth father was “heavysset,” or who knows nothing at all—will inevitably wonder.

### Searching for Clues

How can parents help? Talking about puberty is a good start. Lily and I have talked about how my body is different from hers. We discuss what she might expect as her body changes, what her biological mother might look like, and how she compares to the rest of the girls in her class. Though I can provide few answers, she seems truly appreciative of my joining in her musings.

Being resourceful, Lily has also looked elsewhere for clues to her future looks. During a trip to New York City, she studied all of the Asian women we passed on the street. “Mom, see that woman,” Lily whispered to me. “I think I’m going to look like her someday.” Or, “I think I’ll be taller than that girl when I’m grown.”

Lily’s comments remind me how important it is that transracially adopted children have older role models of the same ethnic background. We are lucky to have quite a few Asian friends. But just as important, I think, are more incidental role models. Last winter, we drove to Boston to attend the Wellesley College Asian Students’ Cultural Festival. My daughter could not have cared less about making origami animals or fashioning Chinese lanterns. What Lily wanted was to watch the girls—to see how they dressed, laughed, and talked. And to see how big their breasts were.

In this period of identity formation, the adopted adolescent will inevitably struggle with the “Who am I?” question. Parents cannot alleviate all of their sadness or confusion. But we can certainly acknowledge their task and help in small, but important, ways. **AF**

JULIE MICHAELS is the former editor of *Adoptive Families*’ Growing Up Adopted section. She lives with her family in Massachusetts.

Growing Up  
Adopted

from the editors of

**Adoptive Families**

# Adoptive Families

## A SCHOOL HANDOUT

# Helping Classmates Understand Adoption

**NOTE TO ADOPTIVE PARENTS:** Distribute this handout to other parents at your child's school, or send it home with his classmates after an adoption presentation.



## “Where’s Billy’s Real Mom?”

Children are naturally curious. Until now, your child probably assumed that being born into a family is the only way families are formed. If she learns that a friend or classmate was adopted, she'll have lots of questions. She'll want to know what adoption means and how it comes about. She might even feel anxious about the permanence of her own family.

If you're unsure of how or where to begin the discussion, start with this handout. We've compiled two pages of adoption facts, sample Q&As, and talking guidelines. Adoption is not shameful, nor is it secret. Adoptive families talk openly about adoption from the time their children are very young. Take the lead by making it clear that adoption is a wonderful and normal way to build a family, and your children will follow your cues.

## ADOPTION Q & A

### Child-to-Parent

When your child learns that a friend or classmate was adopted, chances are, he'll have questions. Here are responses to questions kids ask about adoption.

**Q: Why doesn't Billy look like his mom?**

**A:** Billy's family is an adoptive family. He was born in Ethiopia to a family who looks like him, but who couldn't take care of a baby when he was born.

**Q: What happened to Billy's real mother?**

**A:** Do you mean the woman who gave birth to him? She is Billy's birth mother. Sometimes a person has a baby but isn't ready to be a parent.

**Q: Why isn't he with her?**

**A:** She may have been too young to raise a child, or needed to work and didn't have anyone to take care of him. So she found a family who wanted a baby. Billy's mommy and daddy will be his parents forever.

**Q: Do you think Billy's real mother misses him?**

**A:** I think his birth mother probably does.

**Q: Is Sara Billy's real sister?**

**A:** Yes, they are brother and sister because they are part of the same family.

**Q: Emily told me she was adopted. What is adoption?**

**A:** Adoption is when a family who isn't able to take care of a child finds a family who will take care of her forever and ever. Emily's parents love her as much as we love you.

**Q: Will Emily ever meet her real mother?**

**A:** Do you mean her birth mother? That's a hard question to answer because I don't know. Sometimes adopted children meet their birth parents and sometimes they don't.

**Q: Why did Emily's parents adopt her?**

**A:** Because they wanted to have a family, and adopting a child is one way to do it.

**Q: What did Emily do that was so bad that her real parent(s) didn't keep her?**

**A:** I think you are talking about Emily's birth parent(s). Adoption is no one's fault. It is a decision made by grown-ups when they don't feel able or ready to be parents.

**Q: Am I going to be adopted?**

**A:** No, because I (or Daddy and I) was ready to be a parent when I had you. I will be your mother forever.

# Explaining Adoption to Young Children

Tell your child that families can be formed in many different ways. Children can live with the family they were born into, like her family, or with a family that adopts them, like her friend's family.

Let your child know that, sometimes, a parent who gives birth isn't able to raise the child. She looks for another family to take care of him. That family adopts the child and becomes his family forever. Reassure your child she will be part of your family forever.

Even if you know the specific circumstances of the friend your child is asking about, steer the conversation to a more general discussion of adoption. While adoption isn't a secret, each child's story is personal and is his to share. Some children are comfortable talking to friends and classmates about their adoption. Others prefer not to discuss it outside of their own family.

It's important not to cast adopted children as "special" or "different." Adoption is simply one of many ways to become a family.

## ADOPTION Q & A

### Child-to-Child

Even after you talk with your child about adoption, don't be surprised when he asks his friend questions that you may fear are rude. Don't worry—adopted children are used to being asked questions by other children. Here are some of the responses your child may hear.

**YOUR CHILD:** Is that your real mom (or dad)?

**PEER:** "Why are you asking?"

"Would I call her Mom if she wasn't?"

"Yes, a real mom is the person who takes care of you."

**YOUR CHILD:** Why didn't your real mom keep you?

**PEER:** "My birth mother couldn't take care of me, but my mom will always take care of me."

"This is stuff we talk about at home."

"I don't feel like answering that question."

**YOUR CHILD:** What are you?

**PEER:** "What do you mean? Do you want to know my ethnicity or where I was born?"

"I'm American, like you."

"I'm from outer space."

## POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE

Words not only convey facts, they can unintentionally express negative feelings. Here are some positive terms to use when discussing adoption:

>> **Birth parent or biological parent**—rather than "real parent"

>> **Parent**—rather than "adoptive parent"

>> **International or intercountry adoption**—rather than "foreign adoption"

>> **Make an adoption plan**—rather than "give up a child" or "put up for adoption"

>> **Was adopted**—rather than "is adopted"

## 5 MYTHS & REALITIES ABOUT ADOPTION

**1 MYTH:** Birth parents can show up at any time to "reclaim" their child.

**REALITY:** Once an adoption is finalized, it is permanent, and the adoptive parents are legally recognized as the child's parents.

**2 MYTH:** Birth parents are irresponsible and don't care about their children.

**REALITY:** Birth parents want the best for their children. They make adoption plans because they know they aren't able to take care of a child.

**3 MYTH:** It costs a lot to get a child.

**REALITY:** While most adoptions involve fees, the fees are for services rendered. They are never in payment for a child.

**4 MYTH:** Adoptive parents don't love their children as much as parents in families formed through biology.

**REALITY:** The love is the same, regardless of how a family is formed.

**5 MYTH:** Adoption is second-best.

**REALITY:** Adoption may sometimes be a second choice, but it is never second-best.



## Recommended Reading

Read these books about adoption, alternative families, and diversity with your child.

**AGES 2 TO 6:** We're Different, We're the Same, by Bobbi Jane Kates; The Family Book, by Todd Parr

**AGES 3 TO 8:** The Colors of Us, by Karen Katz; A Mother for Choco, by Keiko Kasza

**AGES 4 TO 8:** Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born, by Jamie Lee Curtis; Families Are Different, by Nina Pellegrini

**AGES 8 TO 11:** Lucy's Family Tree, by Karen Halvorsen Schreck; If the World Were a Village, by David J. Smith

Compiled by MARGARET MINTZ, an adoptive mother, and RONNY DIAMOND, the former director of Spence-Chapin's Adoption Resource Center in New York City. Visit [adoptivefamilies.com/free-downloads](http://adoptivefamilies.com/free-downloads) to download this and other adoption handouts as PDFs.

Find many more school resources, including book lists and sample letters explaining adoption, at [adoptivefamilies.com](http://adoptivefamilies.com).