

Adoptive Families
Special Collection

Raising Adopted Children

Great Articles from the Archives

TALKING ABOUT ADOPTION WITH KIDS

ANSWERING INTRUSIVE QUESTIONS

BIRTH FATHERS

SCRAPBOOKING

ADOPTION & SCHOOL



from the editors of *Adoptive Families Magazine*

Adoptive Families

PUBLISHER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Susan Caughman
susan@adoptivefamilies.com

FOUNDER & EDITORIAL ADVISOR Susan Freivalds
sfreivalds@adoptivefamilies.com

EDITOR Beth Kracklauer

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS Amy Klatzkin
Julie Michaels

MANAGING EDITOR Eve Gilman
eve@adoptivefamilies.com

ART DIRECTOR Ron Anteroinen

MARKETING Sue Sidler
ssidler@earthlink.net

OFFICE MANAGER Marie Kiernan
marie@adoptivefamilies.com

EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE:

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

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CONTACT INFORMATION

New Hope Media
1-646-366-0830
39 West 37th Street, 15th Floor
New York, NY 10018

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Fated for Each Other

Was it destiny that matched me with my child? Whether by chance or help from above, our coming together feels positively miraculous. BY BONNIE PERKEL.

Recently, my six-year-old daughter snuggled up against me and returned to our ongoing discussion about how we became a family. I was hoping I'd answered all her questions clearly, when she suddenly implored, "Oh Mommy, let's not talk about that terrible thing!"



I amazed that she could look upon one of my happiest memories as "that terrible thing." Then she blurted out, "What if someone else got me? What if you weren't my mom?"

Now I understood. Patiently, I told her how she is the only child for me and reiterated how we were meant to be together. Yet she had finally asked the question that's always intrigued me—and other families formed by adoption.

I remember the concerns I had when I began the adoption process. I wondered how we would become joined in our journey as mother and child. Who would pair us together? Was a bureaucrat making this decision, or was some kind of divine intervention guiding our destinies? Or was it both?

I wondered how the destinies of birth parents are linked to those of us who wait for children, whether abroad or closer to home. Do our destinies determine that one family will carry these children into the world and another will raise them to adulthood? Is this coming together a totally random act?

Like many people waiting to be united with a child, I found myself writing a journal, for myself and the unknown child I was carrying—in what I called my "invisible pregnancy." Around the same time, an Internet discussion arose among some of us who were waiting or who had recently come home. We began to talk about destiny. Often when I logged on, I would read about the "red thread" that linked a parent to his child. Some people even began wearing red strings as a way to assert their belief in being fated to meet their child.

It was a concept I also came across in other sources. Ed Young's beautifully illustrated book, *The Red Thread*, tells the story of a man and woman destined to meet and marry. Although hardship and lost opportunities keep them apart, nothing can break the red thread that eventually brings them together.

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Jeff McClure, a therapist and speaker on adoption, has said, “Adoptive families are destiny believers. They always feel [their child] is a miracle. [That] just one change in their lives would have made everything different, [and] that things have happened for a reason.”

As I pondered the idea of destiny and the red thread, I wondered who was looking at my paperwork. Would they look at the photo of me and choose my child based upon my sad expression, the energy I exuded, my size? Would they actually read what I had written and develop their own reasons for linking us? Although I wanted to believe that destiny was forging the path, I also imagined the person, or people, who actually matched children with families.

Rumors surfaced, in conversations and on the Internet, about the matching of children and families. I heard that the process was often handled at the orphanage, where a worker took two piles of documents—one for children, one for parents—and the papers on top of each pile were unceremoniously clipped together. I can almost hear the orphanage worker chanting, “this parent, this child” as she flips the pages. This parent, this child—for life.

As I continued to wait, I wrote letters to my baby “Shu.” I called her this because my mother’s chattering lory, a talkative bird, had started saying “I love you my Choo” (or something that sounded like that) about the same time I started the adoption process. I knew that Shu was a Chinese name, so I began calling my unknown child my “little Shu.” When I chose my future daughter’s official American name, it was Kira, because I intuitively felt that it suited her. It meant “the sun.” I found myself calling my unknown child Kira Shu and planned to do so until I learned her Chinese name, which I would then give her as a middle name.

Days came and went, while my concerns ebbed and flowed. Sometimes the fears took on tidal wave proportions. How could I know I was doing the right thing? I felt the presence of my child waiting for me, and it was palpable. But I was still afraid. Then, one February morning, my phone rang at work. It was my social worker, calling to tell me I had a daughter in Jingdezhen. She was born on May 10th, and her name was Chu. From that moment on, I have never had the slightest doubt that we were meant to be together.

In an attempt to learn about others’ experiences, I contacted families who had adopted domestically and in various countries abroad. I asked: “Do you believe that destiny played any part in your adoption journey? If so, how?” Parents often told me that they had found a “sign” that linked them to their child and that the child was perfectly suited to them.

“The thing that drove the fate point home for me,” one mother replied, “was when I stumbled upon the INS letter notifying the U.S. consulate of my official approval to adopt. It was dated the very day Ruby was abandoned and brought to the orphanage.”

Another mother said, “As a Christian, I have a hard time with the idea that God chooses one child to live and be in my family. That means that God

“We are so much alike. We needed each other and were destined to form a family together.”

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selects others to die, to remain in the orphanage, to end up on the streets. I don't see God working that way. I don't believe in predestination.

"Having said all that," this woman continued, "the oddest thing happened at Easter this year. I am sitting in church and a feeling overwhelms me that somehow a series of events had already unfolded, that decisions had been made that would lead to the abandonment of the girl who would become my daughter. It wasn't that the outcome had been decided, but her destiny had become fixed. We were going down two roads that would eventually converge."

When parents spoke about the belief that their child was perfect for them, their conviction was clear. "I believe in my heart of hearts and soul of souls," one woman said, "that the daughter I now have was the child God created for me. I know that as surely as I know the sun will rise tomorrow. We are so much alike. We needed each other and were destined to form a family together."

Yet I still wondered how much could be attributed to a perfect match, and how much to the long-awaited outpouring of love that has been stored up in the hearts of those who so desperately want these children. How can you quantify the pent-up maternal or paternal love that is finally directed toward the child who becomes your own?

As Adam Pertman, author of *Adoption Nation*, told me, "I sort of do feel destiny played a role, and I sort of don't. So much of the journey feels like happenstance. For instance, we chose the agency through which we adopted Zack simply because it was close by and because it had succeeded in finding children for friends, not because we did anything wise. Similarly, Emmy came into our lives because several birth mothers decided to parent their children for very diverse reasons, rather than because we did anything thoughtful or deliberate. But, yes, there's always the feeling in my soul that all of this was meant to be, that this is the path I was intended to travel, however circuitously I might have arrived at it.

"The answer is unknowable," Pertman continues, "rooted in belief and faith. Inevitably, it's a self-satisfying prophecy, because we all want to believe that there's a reason we wind up where we do in life, and—especially for those of us committed to our families—that we were destined to be with the children we love so profoundly."

Of course, there were parents who didn't think destiny played any role in matching them with their children. One friend simply said, "I don't believe in destiny, and the adoption process did not change my belief. My daughter and I are a great match, and I feel that my agency had more to do with choosing my child than anything else."

Years ago, when I first began the process of adopting, I spoke with some of my philosophy professors about the theme of adoption and destiny. One said that international adoption may be a new kind of conception, in which "a being may be going through whatever body they can" to arrive in the fam-

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**“There’s always the feeling in my soul that this was meant to be.”
—Adam Pertman
(pictured with his son, Zack)**

and I feel that their birth parents, even those who are unknown, are now part of our destinies as well.

As for me, I know that my daughter and I might not be together if either of us had been born a few years earlier or later; if events in my life had not directed me to a man who told me I should call his wife, a program director in an adoption agency; if I had married the “wrong” man; if circumstances had not made it financially possible to afford the adoption. There are so many “ifs” I cannot possibly list them all. But there is one fact with no if, no uncertainty, attached: my daughter is simply, positively my daughter. As she snuggles by my side, she feels like a pure miracle—whether placed there by mere chance or by divine intervention. **AF**

BONNIE PERKEL lives with her daughter, Kira, in Massachusetts, and is on the board of Families with Children from China (FCC), New England.

ily and culture where they belong. In other words, destiny will bring them to a new kind of family not based on biology.

I have never forgotten this image and was surprised when I found it echoed in a story from *The Lost Daughters of China*, by Karin Evans. This time, however, it was one of the Chinese facilitators of the author’s travel group who was voicing this belief. “We have a saying in China,” he declared. “We say that maybe these babies grew in the wrong stomachs, but now they have found the right parents.”

It is difficult to think in terms of “right” or “wrong” in this instance. I know that we are deeply bonded to our children,

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A Link to the Past

An adoption scrapbook lets parents and children create a sense of history and of belonging. **BY MYRA ALPERSON**

How many of you have finished the adoption scrapbooks you pledged to put together before you had your child? Raise your hands?

Hmmm...

I see a lot of downturned looks...

If you're like me, maybe you've done a couple of quick photo albums of your adoption trip and the first year or two with your children. Thick envelopes of photos fill many boxes, and dozens of items you collected before and during your journey toward adoption—your home study, adoption conference programs, airplane ticket stubs, hotel menus, postcards, newspapers from the city your child is from—are in a closet. Maybe, like mine, they're crammed into a shopping bag you got on your trip. Someday, I tell my daughter, Sadie, some day...

But as resources to create high-quality scrapbooks become increasingly available, a growing number of parents are assembling memory books. For many, this is a continuous process, because these scrapbooks represent an ongoing biography of our lives together. For our families, adoption scrapbooks create a sense of history, a sense of belonging. They assure our children that their history and heritage are valued, that their adoption story is worthy of chronicle and open discussion.



Getting started

You don't need to do anything fancy. Hallmark, for instance, markets adoption scrapbooks with labeled pages, but these have drawbacks. For one thing, as single mom Leslie Kizner found, they are often designed with two-parent families in mind. Fortunately, albums suitable to adoptive families are increasingly available through adoption book shops such as AdoptShoppe.com and Tapestry Books.

Materials

It's easy to become a scrapbooking addict. Once you begin, you'll learn about fancy, chemically-treated papers, special scissors, and accessories to build

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your scrapbook. If you're budget-conscious, you can get a how-to book (or free tips from a scrapbooking Web site), then shop at a discount store like Costco or Target.

A more direct way is to go to companies such as Creative Memories, which sells “photo-safe” albums that protect photographs from yellowing and preserve documents. Elana Hanson, a Creative Memories consultant and mom of two daughters adopted internationally, advises parents to purchase albums with acid-free paper and special tools, such as

- 1) scissors or cutting knives to crop photos,
- 2) special adhesives to place the photos in an album, and
- 3) stickers, die-cuts, and colored paper, to liven pages up.

Hanson has made adoption memory books for each of her daughters, chronicling the process leading to their adoptions, adoption trips, and milestone family experiences.

A scrapbook can also be the repository for precious documents. Shelley Reben, whose daughter Jessica is almost eight, inserted an invitation and photos from her baby shower, Jessica's referral picture and medical report, photos of the adoption trip, plane tickets, the adoption contract, Jessica's adoption announcement, and her Jewish conversion certificate. “The families in our travel group exchange Christmas photos. Each year we add the latest photos, so we have annual photos starting from when the kids were babies, and continuing to the present in our album,” says Shelley.



If you are an artist and compulsively organized, like Andi Lieberman, your single album will soon grow into a collection. Prior to adopting her daughter, Arden, Lieberman assembled pages of other waiting families, the family house and dog, and the preparation of Arden's room. She even chronicled the process of buying baby supplies and packing the suitcase for travel, and she added a page of their itinerary. Then she made an album for each month of Arden's first year home. “I take one roll of film per week,” Andi confesses.

When Andi gave birth to her second daughter, Jona, she created an album that begins with Jona's delivery and then, as she had done for Arden, made one album per month for the first year. For subsequent years, she made family memory books.

Andi advises that if you don't start a scrapbook right away, at least label your photos—with dates, names of places, and impressions—and put them in a box with dividers marking the month and year so you can find them when

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you're ready to start. Keep the pages simple. "The importance of the album lies in the pictures and journaling, not all the decorative stuff!" she warns.

Multiple roles for adoption scrapbooks

Lisa Wittorff, who has adopted domestically three times, has compiled "pre-adoption" books, usually called lifebooks, for each of her children, including descriptions of their house, neighborhood, friends, relatives, and important people in their lives. These lifebooks have been very versatile. The lifebook she made for her son Eli, now nine years old, includes photos of some of the foster families who cared for him prior to adoption, including their names and addresses and any other information she could obtain.

For Eli, who joined Lisa at age three, the lifebook has been useful "to help him understand the time before we became a family." He also takes it to school to help tell his story when his class is covering units on families. Eli decorated the book with pictures that he drew.

For her five-year-old daughter, Nyasha, who was 16 months old at placement, Lisa prepared a book with laminated pages so that Nyasha could look at it without damaging it (remember your kids at that age!) during the month-long period of pre-placement visits before Lisa was able to bring her home.

When Lisa decided to adopt for a third time, she made what she calls an "advertisement album" to help her be matched with a baby. This scrapbook, bound and filled with family photos, was aimed at adoption professionals who could assist in her search.

For her children, Lisa planned lifebooks to cover their lives before their adoptions and to end when the adoptions were finalized. Since Eli's finalization took just seven months, she decided to take his book through his first full year with her, and they named it *Our First Year Together, A Year of Firsts*. Nyasha's finalization took 18 months, so hers covers that period. Aria's lifebook will cover their first year together.

It's never too late

Although Leslie Kizner adopted her daughter Emily as an infant, she didn't get around to starting the formal scrapbook until Emily had turned nine. (Until then Kinzer had used the Hallmark book and a few photo albums.)

Despite a hectic family life, Leslie makes steady progress through periodic "scrapbooking parties" organized by members of her support group. These parties include dinner and playdates for the children. Says Leslie, "Knowing that we are going to get together encourages me to do some work at home on my book."

Not long ago, Leslie and Emily made scrapbook pages from materials collected during a trip to Emily's birthplace in San Antonio, which included a visit to the adoption agency Leslie used. Having an ongoing memory book project

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provides a link to the past, says Leslie. And, she adds, “my daughter enjoys it, so it’s a fun activity for us to do together, and we relive events as we do this.”

Scrapbooking can also be a terrific bonding experience. “The most unexpected thing that happened as a result of scrapbooking has been the making of lifelong friends,” says Andi Lieberman. “The first scrapbook class I had was with a group of adoptive families I’d met online. We didn’t really know each other except for the fact that we wanted to learn about making an adoption scrapbook. Now we are all close friends who shared each others’ adoption journeys. We continue to get together and of course share our children’s lives and albums!” **AF**

MYRA ALPERSON and her daughter live in New York City. Myra is the author of *Dim Sum, Bagels & Grits: A Sourcebook for Multicultural Families*.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

What do you imagine your child will wish to know about her earliest days, months, or years? Even though you probably don’t have the answers to all—or even some—of these questions, it’s helpful to keep them in mind.

1. Who gave birth to me?
2. Why couldn’t my birth parents raise me?
3. How and when did I get from my birth parents to the orphanage, foster parents, or other caretakers?
4. Who gave me my name?
5. What type of area or community did I live in?
6. What did my home look like? Did I share a room, crib, or bed?
7. With whom did I live? Who took care of me? What were their names?
8. What was my life like? What was my daily routine? What was my general health? What skills had I developed? Did I have any special friends? What were my favorite toys or foods? Do you know someone who may have photos or additional information about my early life?
9. Why was I not adopted sooner? (Your child was older.)
10. Where and how was my special need diagnosed? What special services or help, if any, did I receive?
11. Is my medical condition common in my country of origin?
12. Do I have biologically related siblings?
13. Did my birth parents die?

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Too Many Questions

When you and your child look different, the world wants to know why. **BY ELIZA THOMAS**

My daughter and I stand at the bathroom mirror to brush our teeth. Her skin is smooth, and she has a freckle on her right temple. When she smiles, she has two dimples, not on her cheeks, but beneath the corners of her mouth. From above, the curve of her eyelid reminds me of a swallow, skimming on the wind. Sometimes I want to cry when I look at her, she is so beautiful.

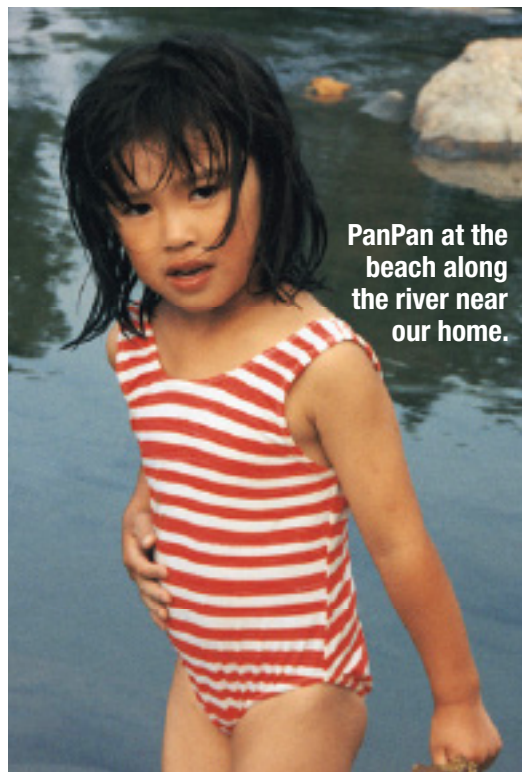
Above her face I see my own. Short, unkempt brown hair and brown eyes, deep-set behind strong glasses. I've never thought I was pretty, but at age 52, I don't mind. My daughter and I look very different. I don't mind this, either.

My daughter PanPan is Chinese. She was abandoned somewhere near the coastal city of Ningbo and taken to the Children's Welfare Center when she was a few weeks old. She was about five months old when I adopted her. This is all I know for sure about her beginnings.

Over the years we have fielded many questions from strangers. We live in Vermont, and as an interracial family, we stand out. Some of the questions are ridiculous—"Does she speak English?" I was once asked when my daughter was seven months old. Some are thoughtless and rude—"Where did you get her?" a veterinarian asked when I took our dog for a rabies shot. (I never went to him again.) Most people ask where she was born, how old she was when I adopted her, who her birth parents are. To most questions I can truthfully say, "I don't know." But the questions never go away.

A Difficult Encounter

The most difficult encounter, however, was with a little girl who looked a lot like PanPan. Two summers ago, my daughter and I visited a beach along the



PanPan at the beach along the river near our home.

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river near our home. PanPan was splashing in the shallow water a few feet from the shore. When I spotted another Asian girl, I looked around for the parents, thinking that maybe I'd found another family like our own. Instead, I saw a white father and a dark-skinned woman, perhaps from the Philippines. The girl looked more like her mother than her father, and nothing like anyone else on the beach. Except my daughter.

The girl stared at PanPan and then at me. She drew closer, her stare needy and intense. Probably she had been stared at in just this way.

"Are you her mother?" she asked me, her voice filled with skepticism.

"Yes," I said. "Where is her real mother?" she insisted.

I knew perfectly well what she meant. "I'm her real mother," I said. I looked over at PanPan, standing apart in the water, a few feet away. She had stopped splashing. A little girl with features like her own wanted to know if I was her real mother. I waded over to stand by her side. "Here I am," I said.

"But," the little girl continued in some confusion, "she looks Chinese."

"We're a Chinese-American adoptive family," I said, loading all the information in one short sentence. "Soon we'll be celebrating our family day," I said, cheerily. "We'll have a big cake."

"Where is her father?" This child was relentless. I sidestepped, and said something positive about single-parent households.

"Why did you adopt her?" the girl persisted. The answer is simple. I wanted a child. But I don't know why the names Shen PanPan and Eliza Thomas came up together. I put my arm around my daughter's shoulder. "We were always meant to be a family," I told the little girl. I looked down at PanPan. "I waited for a long, long time for you," I said to her.

"Me, too," PanPan said. She's heard the story a million times, me waiting in Vermont, the tiny referral photo, her waiting in China, our trip home. Her favorite part is how the woman from New York threw up on the plane.

The girl's mother called out to her daughter. "Anna, stop bothering those people." Anna backed away slowly. PanPan and I decided to make a castle. I thought we were safe, and for a while we were.

We made a tower. We dug a tunnel and laughed when our hands met. PanPan, who is more fastidious about such things, went to the water's edge to rinse the sand off. I bent over to dig a moat, and when I looked up, Anna was back. Inescapable. Her parents, towels and beach paraphernalia in hand, called to their daughter.

"Anna, we're going now," they kept saying. But she just stood there. PanPan returned. Then Anna asked her final question. "Why did her mother give her away?"

Wondering Why

I have tried to imagine the event. A woman carries a bundle in the early morning hours. She hurries down the street to the train station or the police

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station; she must leave her child somewhere she will be found. This is China, 1994, the one-child policy is firmly in place, complete with fines and sanctions. The economic and social pressures to have a healthy boy are ancient and extreme. This baby is too great a burden. This baby is a girl.

She lays her bundle gently down. Maybe the baby cries. Maybe the woman does too.

“Too many questions,” I said.

I turned my back on Anna, and picked up my daughter. She buried her head in the crook of my shoulder. I saw Anna’s parents pulling her away across the beach.

“That was a lot of questions, wasn’t it?” I whispered. She nodded into my shoulder. “We can talk about them any time you like,” I said. She nodded again.

Later, in the back seat of the car on the way to get ice cream, PanPan said calmly, “What about our talk?” This was the first time someone had said PanPan’s mother had given her away. Although it came out of the blue on a sunny afternoon, this sorrow will reappear, at odd moments, as implacable as Anna. I know our talk was only the beginning of a long conversation.

Imagining her Birth Family

I told PanPan we would never know her birth mom, but that I was sure that she loved her. I told her that her birth mother made sure she would be safe while she waited for me. I told her we could only try to imagine her birth father.

“Actually, I think I do know something about your birth mother,” I added. “She must have been smart and stubborn and funny and beautiful.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because that is the way you are.”

“Why would we be exactly the same?” she asked reasonably.

This is a good question. Maybe she got her crossed toes and wacky sense of humor from her birth father. I imagine her birth mother has beautiful eyes and a determined nature, but maybe I just imagine it. Maybe my daughter is stubborn and smart and funny simply because that is the way she is. Maybe we are just lucky that we find the same things funny, or maybe this is something we’ve developed together over time.

When PanPan wants to explain something, which is often, she uses her hands, palms up, presenting her ideas as if on a platter. This isn’t a gesture she has learned from me. I’m sure it is as genetic as her lovely crossed toes. Lately I find myself making the same gesture. I’ve picked it up from her. I read articles on nature vs. nurture, but on some level I simply don’t care. We are a family.

I have a Xerox of a tattered note with her birthdate and name on it, but I’m not sure whether her birth parents or the caretakers at the orphanage filled

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in the information. The interpreter in China told me that the word “PanPan” means “anticipation.” He suggested that perhaps the name had been chosen in anticipation of a boy. Better luck next time, something like that. But then, on our way home, the Chinese immigration officer who issued PanPan’s visa smiled at me. “Your daughter’s name is beautiful,” she said. “It means ‘hope.’”

Now PanPan is six and in first grade. Her current concerns are spelling tests and math problems. She has a new cat. She says she will adopt a child when she grows up.

I told her that I was going to write this essay. I asked her about the conversation on the beach, if she remembered any of the questions. “Sure,” she said. “The little girl asked why you adopted me.” Practical as ever, she asked, “Why are you going to write about that?”

I was glad that this was the question she remembered. The reasons why I adopted PanPan are filled with hope and happiness. But she will wonder again why her first mother left her, and we will have to put the pieces of that together.

When PanPan was three, I got her a toy telephone. She’d sit on the kitchen floor and pretend to dial everyone she could think of. Sometimes she’d call China. “Hello, this is PanPan,” she’d say into the phone. “How was your day?” she would ask politely. After an appropriate pause, she would say, “We are fine, thank you.”

I’d like to believe that PanPan’s reply could, by magic, bounce over the Pacific and find the person longing to hear that answer.

We are fine. Thank you. **AF**

ELIZA THOMAS and her daughter live in Montpelier, Vermont.

TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH INTRUSIVE QUESTIONS

When my daughter Hope started kindergarten at her progressive school here in diverse New York City, we were both taken by surprise by the persistent, direct adoption questions she faced from classmates, questions that adults would be reluctant to pose. I’ve since learned that her experience is virtually universal. Like my daughter, many adopted kids report feeling embarrassed, angry, and helpless in the face of continual questioning. Many never tell their parents or teachers what’s going on.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO:

- 1.** Make sure your child knows she does not have to reveal personal information and has a choice about how to respond.
- 2.** Empathize/Practice answers: “Sometimes it hurts the most when school friends don’t even realize that their questions make you feel bad. Well, we can’t change them, but we can figure out answers. Let’s see what we can come up with together.”

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from the editors of

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3. Find an older adoptee mentor.
4. Join an adoptee support group for your child.

WHAT TO SAY?

Below you'll find questions that adoptees are frequently asked along with strategies for responding. The answer your child chooses will depend on the situation, her relationship with the questioner, her mood that day.

Q: Why didn't your real mother want you?

Ask a question: "Why do you want to know?" "Are you asking why I was placed for adoption?" "What do you think?" "Do you want to know about adoption?"

Disagree: "She didn't give me away. She gave me my parents." "Of course, she wanted me. That's why she made sure I was adopted." "Actually I was always wanted. My parents wanted me even before I was born."

Confront: "It's an adoption thing. You wouldn't understand."

Use humor: "It was an accident. She turned around and a tornado came and before you knew it my crib was floating into the sky like in *The Wizard of Oz* and I landed here."

"I'd love to tell you but my father, the king, does not permit it."

"That's privileged information. You don't have security clearance."

Divert: "That's a good question. Want some candy?" "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Want to play on the swings?"

Educate/Explain: "Lots of kids join their families through adoption." "Some moms are too young to keep their babies." "I'm just lucky. I've got two moms." "Don't you know that millions of kids are adopted?" "The laws of China made her do it. It had nothing to do with me."

Share: "My birth mother was too young" "I was born before she was ready." "I really don't know why but it must have been sad for her."

Withdraw: "I'd love to tell you my life story, but I have to go home now." "I don't really feel like answering that." "It's private."

Q: Where do you come from?

Ask a question: "What do you mean?" "Are you asking where I was born or where I live?" "Where did your ancestors come from?"

Use Humor: "Outer space."

Educate: "I was born in Korea but I come from New York City now."

Q: Is that your real mother?

Ask a question: "Do you mean my birth mother? No, I don't live with my birth mother." "Are you asking about adoption?" "Who do you think it is? My fake mother?"

Use Humor: "She's the one who makes me eat green vegetables."

Educate: "That's my real mother—the one that adopted me." "You saw my real mother. She dropped me off at school today."

By Susan Caughman, with lots of help from Gail Steinberg (PACT, Richmond, CA, pactadopt.org), Joy Lieberthal (Adoptive Families), and Debbie Riley (CASE, Silver Spring, Maryland, adoptionssupport.org).

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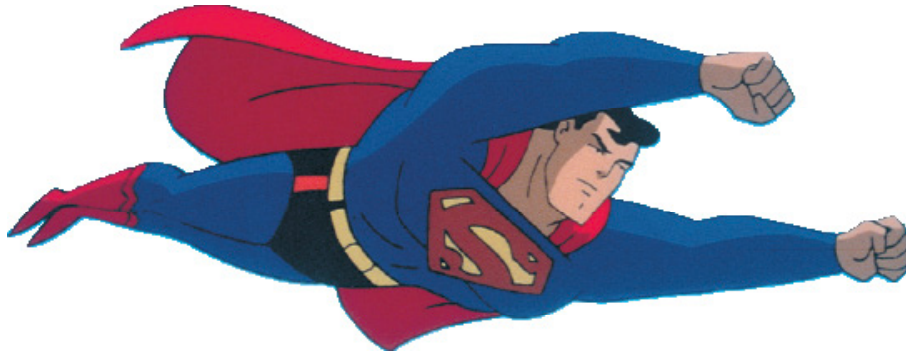
from the editors of

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In the Company of Heroes

Am I overdoing this adoption thing?

BY JANIS COOKE NEWMAN



Tarzan was adopted,” I tell my six-year-old son, Alex. I hand him a videotape box with a man in a loincloth on the cover. “So was Stuart Little.” We make our way down the children’s aisle of the video store.

“They’re just like you,” I say.

“Tarzan was adopted by gorillas,” Alex informs me. “And Stuart Little is a mouse.”

He puts the videos with the adopted heroes back on the shelf.

“I want *The Phantom Menace*.” The box he hands me has a man with horns coming out of his head.

When I was Alex’s age, nobody talked about adoption. The only adopted person I knew was the daughter of friends of my father’s. She was a tall, dark-haired girl who always looked a little out of place next to her short, fair-haired parents. The grown-ups rarely mentioned the fact that this girl was adopted. They’d wait until after dinner, when they thought we’d gone to sleep, and whisper the word, the way they whispered “divorced” and “cancer.”

All this whispering made me think there was something unnatural and slightly shameful about the adopted girl. Instead of being born like the rest of us, maybe she’d been built by scientists.

My husband and I didn’t want Alex to think that being adopted was something to be ashamed of. So from the time we brought him home from Moscow, at the age of 16 months, we’ve gone out of our way to mention his adoption.

“Where’d he get that blond hair?” a stranger might ask in the supermarket. “We adopted him,” we’d say, “from Moscow.” “Do you think he’s going to be tall?” someone else would say. “Oh, yes,” we’d nod. “After all, he is Russian.”

Once, when Alex was two years old, he came into my office and started looking through the guidebook we’d taken with us to Russia.

“See this, Alex?” I pointed to a photograph. “That’s Red Square. It’s in

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Moscow, the place you were born.”

Alex looked at the picture and placed a finger on the people walking along the cobblestones. “Are they all there to get their child?” he asked, making me realize that he thought Russia was a country of orphaned children.

It’s bedtime, and Alex and I are choosing a story.

“How about if I read *Horace*?” I say, taking out a book about a spotted leopard who is adopted by striped tigers.

“That’s boring,” he tells me.

“What about this one?” I pull out one of the adoption books I’ve piled onto Alex’s shelves. The cover has a drawing of happy parents beaming at a small child. “At the end there’s a little song about adoption we can sing together.”

“Jeez,” he says, shaking his head.

“How about *Peter Pan*?”

I show Alex the picture of Peter dueling with Captain Hook, knowing that he is unable to resist anything with swords.

“There’s lots of fighting,” I tell him. “And the Lost Boys get adopted in the end.”

He tosses Peter back on the shelf.

“I want *Captain Underpants*.”

“I think I’m overcompensating,” I tell my friend, Wendy, who has a biological son and an adopted daughter. “I think I’m bringing up the subject of adoption with Alex a little too much.”

She pours me another cup of tea.

“You know,” she says, “just the other day somebody asked me which one of my kids was real.”

“Would you like to have a play date with Xi Xi?” I ask Alex that afternoon when I pick him up from school. “You know she’s adopted, too.”

“Xi Xi is a girl,” he says. He looks disappointed in me.

That’s it, I’m backing off, I think. And for the next several days I resist telling Alex that the reason he can beat the pants off me in chess is because he’s Russian. I refuse to point out that Pinocchio was adopted, and I do not once offer to read him David Copperfield.

A day or so later, I’m driving Alex and his new friend, Aidan, to our house for the afternoon.

“You’re adopted, aren’t you?” I hear Aidan ask Alex in the back seat.

I lean back, listening for anything that might resemble shame or embarrassment in Alex’s voice.

“Yeah,” he says. He sounds so matter-of-fact, they could be talking about anything.

I find his face in the rearview mirror. He’s wiggling a loose tooth with his tongue.

“Wanna see my stegosaurus?” Aidan asks him.

When we get to the house, the two boys leap out of the car and run inside.

“My husband and I didn’t want Alex to think that being adopted was something to be ashamed of. But was bringing up the subject a little too much?”

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“I’m going to show Aidan my Harry Potter game!” Alex says. They race up the steps.

“Okay,” I say, picking up their lunch boxes and jackets.

Then, just before they disappear into Alex’s room, I stand at the bottom of the stairs and shout up at my son.

“Did you know that Harry Potter was adopted?” **AF**

JANIS COOKE NEWMAN’s work has appeared on Salon.com, in *Sesame Street Parents*, and *Adoptive Families*. She is the author of a memoir, *The Russian Word for Snow: A True Story of Adoption*.

ADOPTED HEROES: READ ALL ABOUT IT

We all know that reading books with orphaned or adopted characters may help our kids feel good about themselves. But as reader Nancy Reynolds points out, we may concentrate on picture books or books whose function is to explain adoption to our kids rather than provide a great read. What makes a book resonate long after kids close the cover is the quality and depth of the writing, says Reynolds. Kids who are adopted need to see themselves as people first and adoptees second. As your children grow, look for books in which the hero must make her way alone to achieve a goal. While the hero acquires allies (and must deal with enemies) along the journey, ultimately the hero is responsible for her own success or failure.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OUR READERS:

Witch Week by Diana Wynne Jones. One of a wildly inventive series of books in which the characters are adopted. Jones deals with issues like institutionalization in a lighthearted yet not superficial way. **Charmed Life** and **Homeward Bounders** both deal obliquely with adoption and separation from the birth family. My kids love her books. —Nancy Reynolds

The Orphan Train a series by Jean Lowry Nixon. The first book is *A Family Apart*. Relinquishment and feelings of abandonment are central themes in this book. The other books in the series (I think there are seven) follow the lives of the six children after they reach their adoptive homes in the midwest. They all include some suspense and action. —Susan Avery

Holly and Ivy by Rumer Godden. In this Christmas story, Ivy is an orphan in London who is about to be sent to the infants’ home for the holidays because no one has asked her to visit. Beautifully written and a real tear-jerker. —Chris McDermott

Good Night, Mr. Tom by Michelle Magorian. Will, abused by his mentally ill mother, was evacuated to the countryside in England during World War II and assigned to a grieving widower who eventually becomes his new father.

One of the best ever books about being in foster care is **The Great Gilly Hopkins** by Katherine Patterson. Gilly is abandoned by her mother, finds a family in a foster home and eventually goes to live with her grandmother. —Jessica Gerard

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Heaven Eyes by David Almond. In this fantasy about an orphaned girl who has unusual spiritual power, the girl is found by three other orphans who periodically make an adventure out of running away though they always go back.

—Susan Kunhardt

AND DON'T FORGET....

Ballet Shoes by Noel Streatfield

Ella Enchanted by Gail Carson Levine

Harding's Luck by Edith Nesbit

Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling

James and the Giant Peach by Roald Dahl

Meet the Austins by Madeleine L'Engle

The BFG by Roald Dahl

The Boxcar Children by Gertrude Chandler Warren

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Tombs of Atuan by Ursula LeGuin

The Little White Horse by Elizabeth Goudge

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech

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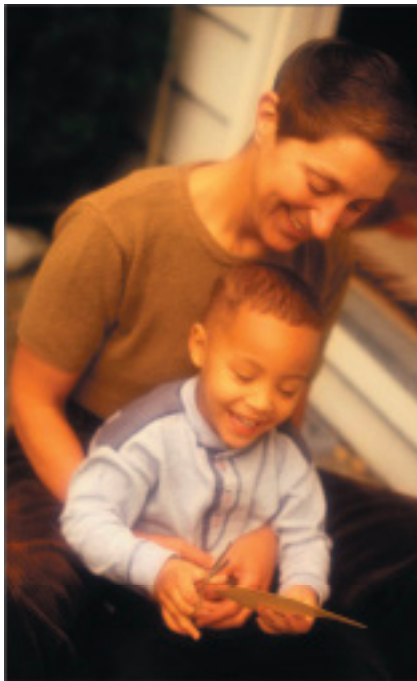
Adoptive Families

The Evolving Conversation

Should parents initiate talk about adoption or wait for their child's questions? Sometimes you lead, say the authors, and sometimes you follow.

BY BETH HALL AND GAIL STEINBERG

How will I talk to my child about adoption?" This is a question every parent asks himself or herself. Even as your new baby takes her first steps, you wonder if you'll be ready when the questions come. Soon you realize that your child is simply your child, not your "adopted" child, and it becomes difficult even to imagine an adoption talk. But you'll have this conversation, not just once, but over time, offering more information as your child matures. Sometimes its coming will take you by surprise, launched by the query of a curious child. Sometimes you'll see an opening and take it, offering the



the chance to talk if the feelings fit. The key here is comfort, to create an atmosphere of openness and warmth in which both parent and child feel free to approach a hard topic.

What if you miss an opportunity? What if a question's asked and you deflect a thought? Relax. You have a whole childhood in which to talk. Sometime between ball games and play dates, math tests and family reunions, you'll have your conversations. In a way, talking about adoption is like dancing with your child. Sometimes he leads and you follow. Sometimes it's the reverse. And with each conversation, successfully joined, the dance will become more graceful. So go ahead, take that first step.

DIRECTED PLAY: Following a child's lead

Three- to five-year-olds often use words without having a clear idea of what they mean. The goal with even the youngest child is to create a healthy intimacy. A preschooler feels like the star of his own adoption story when it is presented as something that makes his parents happy. And don't be fooled by their using the right words. Research makes it clear they are sometimes mimicking more than understanding.

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Haley, at four, is delicious. All seriousness and concentration, she cooks our breakfast at her toy stove in the backyard—sand oatmeal, pebble popovers, squashed raspberries, pretend vanilla ice cream. Pouring cold water tea from a red flowered pot into thimble-size cups, she serves up her feast as grandly as a queen. I take imaginary sips from my little cup. We have time today to do anything we choose, the sun is shining, and I'm filled with every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous inch of her. It's hard to keep from scooping her up and holding her close. Then she says gravely, "Remember when I came out of Daddy's tummy?"

Curiously, I am not panic-stricken. What do I say? How do I say it? I think. I breathe. I pay attention. I tell myself, "This is not the only chance I will have to talk about adoption."

"Haley, you didn't come out of Daddy's tummy. Only mommies can grow babies inside of their bodies, not daddies. I've been your mommy since you were born, but you were not in my body either. Daddy and I adopted you. Your birth mommy, Ellie, carried you in her body, and when you were ready to be born, you came out of her."

"Nope, your body," Haley insisted. "If I wasn't in Daddy, I was in you."

"I can see how you might have thought that," I said. "Actually, Daddy and I came to get you at the hospital when Ellie gave birth to you. You grew inside your birth mommy, just like all babies do. And when it was time for you to be born, you came out of your birth mommy, just like all babies do. Ellie was sad that she couldn't take you home with her and care for you, but she couldn't. She didn't think she could take care of you in the ways she knew you would need. So she picked us to be your other real mommy and daddy forever."

"What did you say when you first saw me?"

"We said, 'How amazing! How wonderful! You are our most important dream come true! We are so happy!' And we wrapped you in your yellow blankie and drove home very, very carefully, right to the place where you were going to be forever. With us, your very real parents!"

"Oh," she said, relaxing against me. "Would you care for some more tea?"

The best way to read children's feelings about adoption is by their actions rather than their words. To know what your child is thinking, play with her. Use dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, scarves, trucks—whatever toys she enjoys making up stories with. Let her be the boss and tell you what your character in the story should do. For example, if she asks you to be a lost puppy, while she is the mother dog, ask her how to do it. Rather than initiating the pretend plot, ask your child if the puppy is scared, or worried, or hungry. Your child will probably be delighted to be in charge and direct your actions.

Follow your child's lead and don't push to give the story a happy ending. You want to learn how she interprets the situation. You may be surprised but try not to seem distressed. Remember, this is a window into your child's

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thinking at this one moment. If the story is unhappy or anxiety-provoking, come back to it later. Over time you will have opportunities to clarify and expand understanding.

SHARE YOUR FEELINGS:

Leading by example

When I picked Jordan up from school that day, I hoped he couldn't see how crummy I felt. During a visit that morning, my aunt had implied that I could never love Jordan as much as I would a child who was born into our family. She talked about blood being thicker than water. I felt hurt and angry. I was doing my best to hide it—afraid my little boy would pick up on it.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” he asked.

“Nothing, honey. Don’t worry about it.”

We drove in silence for a while, me not trusting myself to say more, Jordan seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. During our long drive home, I had a lot on my mind, and I could tell Jordan was concerned by my silence. I wondered if I should share my feelings with him. Wasn't it up to me to protect him from the hurtful views some people have of adoption and not to burden him with adult concerns? On the other hand, we always asked Jordan to share his own feelings.

“Are you okay, Mom?” he asked again.

“Sometimes it’s hard to talk about things, honey, but thank you for asking. Something upsetting happened to me today. I’ll try my best to tell you about it, but I’m embarrassed, hurt, angry, and sad all at once. It doesn’t have anything to do with you. Someone I thought was close to me said some stupid things about my not being a real mother, and it really hurt my feelings. Some people just don’t understand that you are my real son, I guess.”

“Oh,” he said. A few minutes later he added, “I wonder if it’s like how I feel when kids ask me why my real mom didn’t want me?” I was astonished.

“Maybe.”

“Why didn’t my birth mom want me, Mom? Do you think maybe I cried too much?”

Wow, I thought. Jordan had never mentioned this before. With a sigh, I reached over to rub his back.

“Babies are supposed to cry,” I said. “Crying is how babies tell us they need something before they can talk. Sometimes when a baby is born, his parents have problems that keep them from being able to take care of him. It’s not ever the child’s fault.”

Jordan and I were quiet the rest of the way home. We held hands across the seat, and we both had a feeling that something important had happened. When we got home, as we were getting out of the car, Jordan said, “I’m glad you told me, Mom. I like it when you tell me how you feel, even if you feel sad.”

“Me, too,” I said.

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One way to take the lead in discussing adoption is to offer your own experiences of being an adoptive parent, both the happy and the sad. Disclosing difficulties often has more impact than sharing only joyous feelings. Kids know it's not easy to talk about the hard stuff, and they feel honored to receive "privileged information." It's important, too, to give permission to express their concerns about birth parents without denying their feelings or trying to fix things. Parents can show that they accept their children's feelings with an empathetic sigh or hug, a soft exclamation, or just by saying "What a way to feel." When parents share painful as well as joyous experiences, children feel free to follow.

THE CASUAL COMMENT: Lead by opening topics you think matter

Another way to lead is by making casual comments and letting them resonate. Your child may not respond to these at all. Nonetheless, by putting them out there, you are saying you are ready to discuss these issues when they are. Do this often, simply by thinking out loud about things you've read or seen on TV, your child's genetic inheritance, or feelings. Here are some examples:

"You're such a talented pianist, and now you're even composing your own songs. I wonder if someone in your birth family was a musician."

"I always think about your birth mother when it's time for your birthday. I wonder if you think about her, too."

"I read that lots of adopted kids think it's their fault they got placed for adoption."

Adoption is but one aspect of your family's life. Remember, the goal is to create a reasonable balance between talking about adoption and just living daily life. Ask yourself, when was the last time adoption came up? If you can't remember, it's probably time to raise the subject. But none of us is defined by a single feature of our lives. We are parents first, not adoptive parents. Never forget your most important job—creating the close family you dreamed of when you began the journey toward adoption. Life is a gift. Our children are treasures. Cherish them above all. **AF**

BETH HALL and GAIL STEINBERG are the co-founding directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, and the co-authors of *Inside Transracial Adoption*.

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Your Child's Story

Children are able to grasp different aspects of their adoption stories at different ages. Through the years, let your child's ability to understand guide your ongoing discussion of how your family came to be. **BY LOIS MELINA**

Years ago, parents communicated with their children less directly than we do. A carefully chosen book about adoption (or reproduction) would be left on the child's bed. The parent might say, "If you have any questions after you read this book, ask me." The child who didn't ask was assumed to be content with the information he got from the reference.

Parents today are more proactive about communicating with their children, and more interactive. While this tends to promote deeper understanding, it's also possible to go overboard. Parents can achieve balance by recognizing what children can understand about adoption at different ages as well as the limits to their understanding.

Knowing Our Stories

Most of us believe that we each have a right to our own story—to the truth about who we are and what has happened to us on this journey of life. That belief sometimes conflicts with our instinct to protect our children.

In telling our children that they were born to one set of parents who then decided to turn their care and family membership over to another set of parents, we know we are exposing them to the reality of loss. By telling our children the truth about the circumstances of their birth and entry into our families, we may open them up to feeling abandoned or rejected by their birth families.

Most of us have heard adoptees talk about the sense of loss they have experienced as a result of separation from their birth families. But we have also heard them say how their adoptive parents have made them feel. Many have felt—quite accurately—that their lives were saved by adoption. How our children interpret their own stories is, to a great extent, beyond our control as parents.

Most adoptive parents have heard that it is inadvisable to tell an adoptee that they "chose" him over all the other babies. Although the rationale is to emphasize that the child was wanted (to counter any feeling that he was unwanted), many adoptees have said this story left them feeling burdened by expectations. How could they live up to the hopes and beliefs that went into their selection? If they didn't measure up, could they be un-chosen?

Some tell us what a comfort it was to hear that they'd been chosen: "It made me feel special." Is it unusual to want to feel that we are special to our parents?

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Two children in a family can interpret the same circumstances differently. The story of a mother's carrying a high-risk pregnancy to term can make one child feel wanted, while it makes another child feel guilty that her conception placed her mother at risk. Yet another might believe that a "higher-risk" child has to accomplish something extraordinary to make the risk worthwhile.

It would be nice if our children saw their stories as we see them. But we don't know why some adoptees see being chosen as a burden, while others take comfort from it. We don't know why some look at relinquishment as rejection and carry the belief that they are inherently unworthy of love.

Examine your feelings for hidden attitudes and expectations that might creep into nonverbal communication. Then communicate openly, and with unconditional love, the experience of adopting children. Acknowledge your array of emotions in dealing with infertility (if that was a factor) and adoption, recognizing that children also experience a variety of emotions. In doing so, we show them that a single event can evoke a variety of responses, and that we can choose how to react.

Developmental Stages

When children are young, they don't need a lot of information about their origins. We needn't go out of our way to construct opportunities to talk about adoption. Toddlers want details, but preschoolers really can't understand the concept of a child moving from one set of parents to another without changing their biological origins. They may be able to tell their story, but that doesn't mean they understand it. That will have to wait until they're old enough to understand reproduction.

During these early years, the story that parents tell their child should be accurate but basic, allowing for more details to be added as the child grows and can understand more complexity. For example, parents can simply say that the child was born in Los Angeles, but that her birth mother and birth father couldn't take care of "any child born to them at that time." Parents can add that they wanted to have a child join their family and talked to a woman who told them about a child who could become their daughter. They can say that it was sad when the child had to leave her birth parents, but that they are happy to be a family. And, of course, children love to hear, "And that little girl was you!"

Around the age of four, children begin to understand that events happen outside the present moment. Their parents were once babies. Grandma and Grandpa live in another place. This leads to curiosity about the time when they were babies—or not even born! The door is open to discuss the conception and birth of a child. Because the four-year-old has limited experience beyond her own family, she is likely to be accepting of whatever process allowed her to find her way into her family.

It isn't until the middle childhood years—ages seven to 11—that children begin to compare their own lives and experiences to those of others, and to react to those differences.

Examine your feelings for hidden attitudes and expectations that might creep into nonverbal communication. Then communicate openly, and with unconditional love, the experience of adopting children.

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During these years many children become curious about details—were their birth parents married? What did they look like? Do they have any other children? Parents may see that their children are experiencing adoption as a loss, feeling insecure, or feeling unworthy.

In the middle childhood years, children are soaking up information, and unless the information is so disturbing that it needs to wait until the child is more mature, this is a good time to share it. If there is a letter the birth mother wrote to the child at the time of relinquishment, or even a photograph of the birth mother, introduce it now.

Children at this age are also honing their problem-solving skills, trying to solve puzzles and figure out riddles. This is a time to engage them in exploring some of the mysteries about their origins, again being open to natural opportunities rather than constructing artificial occasions. Parents can say, “How old do you think your birth parents were? Why do you think birth parents make an adoption plan for a child? What would it be like to be raised by someone who was 17?”

It is not just our job to provide information to our children, but also to attend to how they are interpreting the information and how they are reacting emotionally to it. We can encourage our children to tell us their story, to draw it, to write letters to their birth family (even if they are “imaginary” letters because we don’t know where to find the birth parents). In these ways, our children can put the pieces of their lives together, and we can get a window through which to see how that picture looks to them.

Ultimately, we can validate the feelings of our children, and help them understand that they can choose how they want to feel about their own stories. **AF**

LOIS MELINA is an internationally recognized authority on adoptive parenting and the author of *Raising Adopted Children, Making Sense of Adoption*, and other classic titles.

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Why Didn't They Keep Me?

Answering Kids' Questions About Birth parents

BY CARRIE KRUEGER

Six-year-old Michael wants to call his birth father in Texas and ask why he didn't keep him.

Eight-year-old Rachel asks her mother, "Did I look funny when I was born? There must have been something wrong with me."

Nine-year-old Suzanne wants to know whether her birth mother has freckles like she does.

Why Now?

All three of these school-age kids are thinking about their birth parents. Their questions and behavior are typical of this age but often surprise adoptive parents. Even when the joyous adoption story has been comfortably and frequently discussed during the preschool years, the reality of the poignant (and pointed) questions of seven or eight year olds can be painful for parents to hear.



It makes sense that kids this age would try to understand what it means to have been placed for adoption and why it happened to them. Lois Melina, author of *Raising Adopted Children* and *Making Sense of Adoption*, points out that this is the age when children consider life and death, when school exposes them to all kinds of families and they become acutely aware of their own. So, although adoption may seem less important than activities such as soccer or scouts, a lot of thinking about it is usually going on under the surface.

"Just a couple of weeks ago, my daughter said she wanted to know what her birth mother looked like," says Charise, the adoptive mom of an eight-year-old. Elementary school children typically want to know who their birth-families are, what they look like, where they live.

Even children who never talk about adoption are probably wondering about their birth parents. Ronny Diamond used to run group sessions for adopted kids ages seven to 13 for Spence-Chapin in New York City. She tells of one session in which "a significant number of parents thought their children didn't think much about their birth parents," says Diamond. Having just been with their kids, the group leader reported to parents that all the

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children wondered about their birth parents and wished they knew more about them.

Set the Stage

As it turns out, Diamond says, “although preschoolers may know their adoption stories and tell them with pride, verbatim, they don’t understand them.” Nonetheless, early discussions lay the groundwork for questions that will emerge in the school years. Some parents are very comfortable talking about the joy and beauty of adoption but shy away from mentioning birth parents. If you are comfortable, talk about your child’s birth parents in a natural and casual way from the earliest age. For example, toddlers love to admire themselves in the mirror. It would be natural to say, “You have such pretty eyes. I wonder if your birth mom has eyes like that?”

A four-year-old’s “mommy” games will often lead her to ask, “Did I grow inside your tummy, Mommy?” This is the opportunity for parents to tell their child that she grew inside her birth mother, just as all children grow inside a woman, and that she was born, just like other children. This is also the time to set the stage for adoption talk by distinguishing between giving birth to a baby and being able to care for one. Parents can explain to the child that, after she was born, her birth mother could not raise her, so she made a plan for her adoption.

What’s important to underscore is that it was the birth parents’ situation, not anything the child did, that led to his adoption, that a child be told specifically that his birth parents would not have been able to care for any child.

What Are You Really Asking?

Despite lots of early talk, most adoptive parents are caught off-guard by the tough questions of their seven- or eight-year-old. My own daughter asked repeatedly, “Why, Mommy, why?” Before you answer specific questions, try to find out what your child is thinking. In the case of a nine-year-old who asks to see her birth mother, Melina asks, “Is she asking, ‘Do I look like my birth mother?’ Is she saying she has something she needs to know or to tell her?” Resist a quick answer that ends the dialogue. Instead, use the opening as an opportunity to learn what your child is thinking and worrying about.

Ronny Diamond adds, “When a child says, ‘Can I call my birth mother?’ that’s not a literal request. She may mean ‘I want to know more about this person.’ That’s an opening. Ask, ‘What do you think she’d be like? What would you say to her? What do you think she might say to you?’ There are many places you can go with a question like that.”

Most children have questions about why their birth parents decided on adoption. It’s important that your child talk about these questions. Suggest that she write a letter to her birth mother asking the questions on her mind. If you are in a semi-open or open adoption, providing answers to these ques-

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tions is often all that's necessary to satisfy a child's curiosity. For those children for whom there are no answers, sending a letter to the adoption agency or orphanage may help.

Despite parents' assurances to the contrary, children this age are self-centered and may decide that they were placed for adoption because of something they did. It's usually not enough to simply assure them that this isn't the case. Parents should share as many facts as possible to help children come to more reasonable conclusions on their own.

From Adam, age 9, to his birth mother, Sherry

Dear Sherry,
Do you have any pets? We have 5 dogs and 3 cats. I take karate. I am the best sparer in my division. I like to play sports. I've got a joke for you:
It's snowing. You go in a house. There's a lamp, a stove, and a fireplace. You have a match left. Which one should you light first? (Answer on back.)
Here are some things I'd like to know:
How tall are you? How old are you?
What is your hobby? Are your neighbors nice? Do you play sports?
Do you sew?
Love, Adam
(answer to joke: the match)

If you have no information about your child's birth family, don't assume there isn't much to talk about. Adopted children with no information have as much curiosity as those in open or semi-open adoptions. And they need just as much support in thinking it through and asking the all-important question, "why?" "Adoptive parents often feel concerned that they have little or no information," says Ellen Singer, of the Center for Adoption Support and Education in Burtonsville, Maryland. "But you can help a child understand the circumstances or governmental policies that might have led

It isn't until middle childhood years—ages seven to eleven—that children begin to compare their own lives and experiences to those of others, and to react to those differences.

a birth parent to make an adoption plan. It is important to acknowledge that it may feel unfair."

Don't forget that your job is to provide your child with as much information as you can and then let her come to her own conclusions. Says Diamond, "Parents are not supposed to make it neat and tidy. Children have to keep figuring it out and revisiting it.

Fantasies and Sadness

Patricia Martinez Dorner, an adoption professional in Texas and author of *How to Open an Adoption*, notes that kids often wonder what their lives would have been like had they not been adopted. Dorner says, "Some children imagine that life would have been perfect if only they lived with their perfect birth parents." Dorner notes that these feelings are normal and may emerge

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as sadness or anger over adoption. Parents should remind themselves that these feelings have nothing to do with a child's love for her adoptive parents. If anything, school-age kids need more reminders than ever that adoption is forever. Internationally adopted children may benefit from a homeland trip as a way to cope with fantasies about life in another family. Mostly, parents need to let kids know that it's okay to feel sad (or angry or worried), a difficult task for any parent, and even more so for those of us for whom adoption has brought such joy.

Don't Give Up

Often opportunities to talk with your child crop up unexpectedly. "It's usually when you're not even discussing adoption," says Melissa, mother of a nine-year-old in a semi-open adoption. "It's something they have been chewing on." Adds Diamond, "If you miss an opportunity, bring it up at another time. If you blow it, go back and try again later." This can be difficult and emotional. No parent handles every query perfectly and seizes every opportunity. But a commitment to listen and to support your child will go a long way in helping her deal with one of the most complex issues she will ever confront. **AF**

CARRIE KRUEGER is a single mom of three in Washington state. She spends a lot of time talking about birth parents!

From Myung Hee to her unknown birth mother in Korea

Dear Mom,
Do you remember me? I'm Myung Hee. My American name is Melanie. Are you in Seoul still? America is good. But I wish I could see how Korea is. I always wonder about Korea. Why did you send me away? Didn't you love me? Well, even though I don't really know you, I love you. What happened to Daddy? How old are you? Do I have siblings? I love you!!!! I miss you. Please contact me.

Love always, Myung Hee

MAKE THE STORY CONCRETE: ADVICE FROM LOIS MELINA

Answer questions honestly using concrete images and as many details as possible, says the author of *Making Sense of Adoption* and, with Sharon Kaplan Roszia, *The Open Adoption Experience*. "A child needs to understand that his birth parents are real people, not fantasy figures. If you have a picture, show it to him, and put it in context. Say something like, 'Here you are with Susan on the day you were born.' Telling your child who attended his birth, what people said, and what he looked like can go a long way in helping him understand that his birth was normal and had nothing to do with his adoption. If you don't have any information about your child's birth, you can explain what conditions were probably like where he was born.

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Instead of, “Your birth mother was too poor to keep you,” you could say, “Your birth mother already had two children to take care of. She could barely find enough money to buy them food and pay for heat. She was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to feed all of you.” Sharing a birth mother’s letter describing rundown housing, the meals she could barely afford, and the difficulty of getting to the grocery store without a car, will help a child will understand concretely why she was placed for adoption.

TAKE ACTION!

Things you can do with your child as she explores adoption:

■ Draw your heart out.

Art is great therapy, according to adoption specialist Ellen Singer. Suggest your child draw pictures of what he is thinking or how he feels.

■ Get it on paper.

Let your child write or dictate letters to his birth mom. These can be kept in a box for possible delivery at a later date or forwarded to the agency if it is a link to her.

■ Play detective.

Is it possible that there is some information out there about your child’s birth mom that you aren’t aware of? Even the smallest tidbits of information have significance.

■ Role-play.

Allow your child to fantasize that his or her birth mom is there in the room.

What would he like to tell her? Grab a couple of dolls and let him act out a reunion.

■ Make a birth mom box.

This can be a place for your child to store documents, letters and artwork. The box gives a child something tangible, something to visit from time to time.

■ Create rituals.

Light a candle to honor birth parents. Pray for them if your beliefs include praying for others. Create a tradition of throwing a stone in the lake each time you walk by to say thank you to birth parents. Simple rituals can help kids more than you think.

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Flights of Fancy

Through normal, imaginary play, children in the preschool years can conquer their fears, conjure their birth mothers, and learn to understand their stories.

BY HOLLY VAN GULDEN AND LISA M. BARTELS-RABB

The preschool years are a magical time for children. Imaginations soar because logic does not yet interfere with creativity. In other words, anything is possible. Parents can tap the imaginative capacity of children ages three to five to help them understand their adoption stories in ways they can't yet articulate.

The Importance of Play

The most common themes of preschool play tend to be babies, birthdays, superheroes, and bad guys. Through these themes, children fulfill their need to be in control and have a sense of power; and they experiment with adult roles. Through



play, children can take control of bad guys, determine outcomes of events, and even revisit their babyhoods.

When a child plays adoption games that don't reflect the facts of his own adoption, parents may become concerned. In fact, through such games children often are merely working out feelings by rewriting the script.

Tall Tales About Life Before Adoption

Preschoolers are great tellers of tall tales—particularly when they are caught doing something wrong. They even believe their own tales. But explaining misdeeds isn't the only use for tall tales; children tell such stories about any number of things. It's not uncommon for children to make up stories about life before adoption with their birth parents or caretakers. In most cases, especially if your child was adopted near birth, the best approach is to nod and give an interested "Oh," rather than debate accuracy. If the tale is about something that has recently happened, correct the child's facts; if you are unsure of the facts, don't worry about it.

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Repeated Questions

When a three-year-old repeatedly asks the same questions about his adoption, parents sometimes worry that he is obsessed with adoption or that they, as parents, aren't answering in a way he can understand. In fact, three-year-olds just like to ask questions over and over again, in part to see if they will get the same answer as before. But sometimes when a child repeats a question, it's because he is thinking about the topic and wants to discuss it again, but doesn't have the language ability to carry the conversation further. You'll want to probe gently to find out which applies to your child.

Answers for “You’re Not My Real Mom!”

At about age four-and-a-half, temper tantrums may return, and kids' imaginations can lead to fears of the dark, imaginary creatures, or strange noises. When children, in anger, say things like “I hate you,” “I wish you were dead,” or “You're not my real mom or dad,” parents may overreact, interpreting such outbursts as rejection or as evidence that there is no attachment. But they are usually only expressions of frustration, not commentaries on the state of the parent/child relationship.

If you overreact to your child's outbursts, you'll turn them into “buttons” your child can push to coerce you into giving in to his wishes. The best approach is to deal with whatever triggered the anger. Statements such as “I know you are angry that...” recognize your child's feelings without getting into whether the child has a “right” to feel that way.

Address “You're not my real parent” at another time. If you feel you must to respond immediately, say something straightforward like, “You are my son. I know you are angry.” Whatever you do, don't argue about whether or not you are the parent. By coping firmly with the issue at hand, you show that you are your child's mother or father because you are being a parent.

Get the Story Straight Now

Three- to four-year-olds, particularly girls who know something about pregnancy, are apt to have questions about their origins, but may not always express them. Although it may seem simpler to delay adoption explanations until a later age, it is better to get the story straight now. Minimize any fears your child may have that she might have to leave you (just as she left the woman who gave birth to her) by explaining to her that adoption means she is your daughter and will live with you until she grows up. Let her know that even after she is a grown-up, she will still be your daughter and you will see her often and love her as much as you do now.

Preschool girls tend to look actively for their birth mothers and are more likely than boys to approach strangers and ask, “Are you that other lady?” When this happens, parents sometimes fear that their children are seeking to

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replace them. In fact, what they seek is tangible evidence of the missing character in their story (the birth mother) and proof that they, too, were born, just like all the other children they know.

TIPS FOR PARENTS OF PRESCHOOLERS

- Tell your child the story of his life. If you haven't made a family storybook yet, make one with your child. Be sure to begin your child's story with her birth.
- Use concrete examples to reinforce that your child will always be your son or daughter. Talk occasionally about the love you'll share as he grows up and after he becomes an adult.
- Tell your child about his birth and adoption. Include any information you may have about his birth parents. The more real and human you can make your child's birth parents, the better.
- When talking about the birth parents' decision not to parent, be sure to include feelings. Make sure your child knows it was a difficult and painful decision. ("They cried.")
- Celebrate your child's heritage, along with those of all members of the family. Don't just celebrate the cultural heritage of the child who is most unlike the rest of the family.
- Make sure your child knows that her family structure is normal. Look for books that reinforce the idea that there are all kinds of families.

HERE ARE SUGGESTIONS:

GREAT BOOKS FOR PRESCHOOLERS:

A Koala for Katie, by Jonathan London
 Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born, by Jamie Lee Curtis
 The Day We Met You, by Phoebe Koehler
 How I Was Adopted, by Joanna Cole
 Families Are Different, by Nina Pellegrini
 Mommy Far, Mommy Near, by Carol A. Peacock
 Oliver, by Lois Wickstrom

—Holly van Gulden & Lisa M Bartels-Rabb

Talk About Your Child's Birth

Many of us find it difficult to talk about our child's birth. For any adoptive parent, it is far easier and more fun to talk about the child's life since joining the family, because that is the part in which we share. Parents may need to create moments to talk with their children about their birth. Pregnancy—whether a friend's or relative's—provides a wonderful opportunity for opening such discussions. You'll want to tell your child stories about her earliest life, begin-

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ning with her birth, even before she's able to understand reproduction. Children who know nothing about the circumstances of their births may, in their concrete thinking, believe they came from an adoption agency, orphanage, or country, as opposed to having been born like all other children. You can help your child by assuring her that her birth was a miraculous and happy event.

Fears of Being Taken Away

A child may look for her birth mother and yet, at the same time, fear that her birth mother might take her away. Reinforcing through actions and words that your child belongs in your family will alleviate these fears. Showing your child photographs of the birth mother, having your child draw pictures of her, and giving the birth mother a name (using her first name if you know it, or making one up saying, "I don't know her name, but let's call her...") will lessen the urge to search by offering some of the information your child is looking for.

Open Adoption: Who Are the "Real" Parents?

Even children in open adoptions may dream about a parent/child relationship with their birth parents. Adoptive parents and birth parents need to be clear in words and actions as to who are the "real" parents—the ones responsible for raising the child—and to differentiate them from the people who gave birth to, care about, and visit the child, but who are not active "parents." Preschoolers who go on outings or day-long or overnight visits with birth parents are easily and understandably confused about the role these people play in their lives.

Is That My Birth Mother?

When preschoolers who were interracial or internationally adopted go to cultural gatherings where adults of their ethnic or racial heritage are present, they often imagine that their birth parents are there, waiting to take them back. Before the event, explain to your child that he will go with you and return home with you afterward. Tell him in advance that there will be a lot of people who look like him, but that they have families of their own and are not related to him. During the event, reassure your child by holding his hand or letting him sit on your lap. If your child asks if a certain person is his birth parent (and that person is not), say something like "No, she is (African-American, Korean, or whatever other ethnic or racial group) like you, but she isn't related," or "No, I think your birth mother is still in (fill in the country, city, or state), and that's very far away."

Growing Together

Adoption can raise many questions for parent and child alike, but most of all, it creates countless blessings for the entire family. Adoptive families flourish together, despite or perhaps because of the potential challenges. Supporting each

Reinforce through action and words that your child belongs in your family forever.

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other through periods of questioning and growth only strengthens our bonds. **AF**

HOLLY VAN GULDEN and LISA M. BARTELS-RABB are the authors of *Real Parents, Real Children*, from which this article was adapted.

TIPS FOR COPING WITH QUESTIONS

Parents of preschoolers are sometimes questioned about their adoptions—bluntly and in front of their children—by strangers. Instead of giving in to your desire to share your joy by educating the questioner about adoption, consider redirecting the conversation. The key is to keep answers brief, friendly, and matter-of-fact. For example:

- Where is your child from? A simple answer is the name of the city in which you live. Another approach is to give the lineage of the entire family: “Well, I was born in Illinois, but my grandparents on my father’s side came from Germany. My husband was born in Maine....” etc.
- Isn’t she lucky? We’re the lucky ones.
- When did you get her? I picked her up after school to come to the store.
- Was her real mother a teenager? Why do you ask? We don’t know much about her birth parents.
- How could her mother have given up such a beautiful child? It must have been very difficult. Her birth parents couldn’t take care of any child.
- What do you know about his real parents? Well, we’re the real parents. We’re bringing him up.
- How long have you had him? It’s hard to remember a time when he wasn’t part of our family. It seems like he’s always been with us.
- Do you have pictures of his parents? Yes, we’ve got lots of albums of our entire family.
- How much did it cost? She’s priceless. About the same as giving birth in a hospital.
- I thought it was impossible to adopt now. How long did you wait? Oh, adoptions happen all the time.
- Are they real brother and sister? Yes!

—Holly van Gulden and Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb

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Explaining Adoption to Friends and Family

Family members, friends, and other parents can use our adoption experiences to broaden their children's sphere of understanding.

BY LOIS MELINA

When I was growing up one of my playmates was a girl who lived alone with her mother. Single parent families were not common then—at least not in our subdivision—but I was given an explanation for their situation even before I formed the question. “Julie was adopted,” my mother told me. The statement may have been whispered; I don’t recall. And I wonder if I would have been told at all (or if my mother would even have known) if Julie had had two parents.

Apparently I thought that no further explanation of the adoption process was necessary, and I don’t believe I ever talked to Julie or her mother about it. What I was really interested in were Julie’s apricot-colored toy poodle and white bedroom set with a canopied bed. If I ever connected these luxuries with the idea prevalent at the time that single, adopted children often were spoiled, I don’t recall.

Look at what my mother’s statement about a friend’s adoption might have brought to mind. Was adoption something secret? Or was it something to be desired (because it comes with a poodle)?

Was a barrier thrown up by the comments, as there might be if someone tells a child that her playmate is of a different faith?

What information, if any, was conveyed about the reasons people adopt and how children become available for adoption? If I’d asked why Julie didn’t have a father, would my mother have known what policies were toward single parent adoption in the 1960s?

Most important, if Julie’s mother had known I would be told about Julie’s adoption, how would she have wanted that information conveyed?

Learning By Example

As parents, we want to teach our children about the world. Often, we start with the center of our world—our own family—and move outward. As our children encounter new people and situations in the world around us, we help them make sense of the unfamiliar. We hope to create understanding, empathy, and a wider sphere of comfort.

We explain why chemotherapy caused Aunt Rachel’s hair to fall out; why a neighbor who fought in the Gulf War is too sick to work; why the woman in the grocery store covers her face with a veil. In most cases, we draw on our own experiences and general knowledge for these explanations. We don’t do a search of medical journals before explaining chemotherapy. We rely on

If we offer a brief but empathetic picture of adoption, we may ensure that a few years later this parent won’t pass on a shallow judgement when talking to this child.

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what we have retained from explanations we've heard, news accounts and memoirs we've read, specials we've watched on the Discovery channel.

Because those sources have satisfied us, we believe they will be adequate for our children. And, in most cases, they will be. The broad picture is understood. Only the fine points may not be grasped as precisely as they should be.

Family members, friends, and the parents of our children's classmates will use our adoptive family experiences and stories to broaden their children's sphere of understanding. Adoption can say a lot about how the world works in ways other than we think or expect. Birth control can fail. People of different races can be sisters. Two men can be fathers to the same child. Collectively, our adoptive families are a rich source of social, economic, and ethical commentary.

However, individually we tend to have more immediate and mundane concerns: Is my own family accurately described? Is my own family better understood?

Start With the Parents

We can help others explain adoption to their children by helping them understand the subject better themselves. Because they will rely on accumulated information when they talk to their children, whatever we can do to make sure it is accurate information will help.

That means that, from the start, we correct any misinformation they may have—without being so defensive or sensitive that we become boors on the subject. We might be tempted to ignore a statement like, “I just don't understand how anyone could give away a beautiful baby like that.” However, if we give the speaker a brief but empathetic picture of birth mothers and relinquishment, we may ensure that a few years later this parent won't pass on that shallow judgment when talking to his child about our son or daughter.

At the same time, we want to protect our child's privacy. It is her story (or his story), after all. She has the right to decide who knows the details of her life, including the circumstances of her birth parents, how she became available for adoption, and her own physical, mental, and social condition at that time. If the ethical reasons to maintain a child's privacy were not compelling enough, there are practical considerations as well. We do not want our child's friends and classmates to know her story before she learns it from us herself.

Some parents take a formal approach, writing a letter to friends and family members outlining preferred adoption terminology, information about the adoption process, and insight into any cultural issues that might be relevant, such as how independent adoption works in the U.S. or the “one-child” policy of China.

Key Concepts

Whether you convey information in this way, or simply become alert for opportunities to share information casually, you will probably want to com-

Let your family and friends know that they do not have to be experts about adoption when talking to their children. You stand ready to be a resource for them.

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municate the following ideas to parents of nonadopted children:

- u Children can't understand adoption until they are old enough to understand reproduction—usually around the age of five or six. Preschool children probably will not think anything about adoption requires explanation. Children don't understand genetics until about age nine. Until then they will not expect children in a family to be racially alike or otherwise resemble their parents.
- u When children are old enough to understand adoption, they may wonder if they were also adopted, even if they don't ask the question. Parents may want to include in their discussion of another child's adoption the facts about how their own child joined their family.
- u Children will find it difficult to understand why birth parents relinquish children for adoption because they don't have enough life experience to understand the social and economic factors that contribute to such decisions. It is sufficient for parents to explain that, for whatever reason, the birth parents were unable to care for a child born to them at that time in their lives. It was not a problem with the child that necessitated the adoption.
- u Parents who have neither relinquished a child for adoption, been adopted, nor experienced infertility or adoption may look at our decision to adopt and think, If that were me, I would not have the [biologic] children I have. How sad. How could I live without my children—how could any other child be acceptable to me? They may inadvertently convey this attitude, or they may overcompensate, making adoption sound perfect because the child has been “chosen” or because the birth parents had the “perfect love” necessary to make such a sacrifice. Tell them that it is not only all right, it is desirable to talk about adoption as an experience of both joy and sorrow.
- u Parents should not forget to mention that children who were adopted not only have a birth mother, but a birth father. Otherwise, children outside the family may conclude that the adoptive father is the biological father. Parents also should know that birth parents can be active participants in a child's life, sometimes even after international adoption.

There are many myths about adoption and much misinformation about adoption practices and members of the adoption triad. Let your family and friends know that they do not have to be experts on the subject when talking to their children. You stand ready to be a resource for them. **AF**

LOIS MELINA is an internationally recognized authority on adoptive parenting and the author of *Raising Adopted Children*, *Making Sense of Adoption*, and other classic titles.

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Let's Play Adoption

Fantasy play can be a comfortable way to explore adoption with your child. **BY SUSAN TOMPKINS**



I smiled and listened closely as I overheard my daughter, Lillianna, and her friend, Rachael, playing with their dolls the other day. Lilli said, “Let’s play orphanage.” There was no hesitation. Rachael picked up the theme in a heartbeat and said, “I’ll be a mom coming to take my baby home.” And thus began an hour of play between these two adopted seven-year-olds and their dolls.

We adoptive parents have made it a practice to talk to our children about their adoption story. We retell it, discuss it from time to time, and add facts and information when it seems appropriate. There may also be times when it does not seem right to talk or encourage our children to talk about adoption, as well as times when the pressures of parenting cause us to forget about keeping up the discussion.

We find that younger children ask questions about their adoption story. As they grow older, we know they continue to think about adoption-related issues. But, ironically, as their thinking becomes more concrete, they tend to ask fewer questions and engage less in discussion about adoption.

But, as Lillianna and Rachael teach us, there is another way for adopted children to work out their feelings about adoption, and that is through play. Playing is comfortable, natural, and more fun than talking. And, lucky and fun for us, we can be a big part of it.

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Barbie's Home Study

This realization came to me one day when Lilli asked me to play Barbie with her. I had never been a big fan of Barbie and her friends (although I would have to concede that they now come in plenty of great colors). On this day, I decided to put my own agenda into the mix to make it interesting for me. Accordingly, I suggested to Lilli that Barbie and Ken wanted to adopt a baby from China. Usually Lilli doesn't care for my imposing on her fantasies of dress-up, princesses, and the like. However, on that day she took my suggestion.

We played for quite awhile. Lilli took the lead in the dialogue between Barbie and Ken about adoption. I proposed that the social worker come to Ken and Barbie's house for a home study so we could be sure that they were suitable parents. (I played the social worker.) Barbie and Ken did quite well in the interview and seemed to have a perfect marriage. Barbie and Ken then flew to China in the pink Corvette convertible that is fashionable among Barbies. They, of course, went to an orphanage and came home with a beautiful baby.

So when I heard Lilli say to Rachael, "Let's play orphanage," it was music to my ears. Hearing her suggest this on her own meant that my daughter was comfortable enough to share her feelings and beliefs about adoption with her friend. It probably helped that her friend had a similar adoption story. The playing gave Lilli and Rachael another way to work out their feelings. It has helped Lilli to understand and accept her past. Playing adoption gives me a gentle and effective way to provide my daughter with more information. Lilli now knows that families have to pass a social worker's scrutiny to adopt. Later, I can add more bits about the adoption process and her own story, if I choose to and if she's interested.

Many Ways to Play

I like everything about playing adoption. It is a positive way for my daughter to explore and become more comfortable about her own beginnings. You can play about adoption in general, or you can go deeper into the child's own adoption story. You can also probe feelings if it seems right. You can explore how it must have felt (fear of being in a new place, abandonment, coming to an adoptive family), and how it feels now. There are many levels to the play. You and your child can decide what is most comfortable.

When you ask questions or suggest scenarios, the child can go with it, if she wishes. If she feels threatened by the direction the play is taking, she can say nothing, end the play, or change the story line. You'll know what is working when you see it.

Not for Girls Only

Dolls are a perfect venue for playing out scenarios. So, what about our adopted boys, who may not want to play with dolls, G.I Joe or otherwise? Do boys prefer to sublimate their feelings rather than discuss them? I decided

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to try other strategies with Tino, my son, who is eleven and does not care to discuss his adoption story very much.

Legos are my son's "thing." He plays out stories constantly with them as he builds and rebuilds. Star Wars, rescue missions, World War II battles, and current events are his realms. I entered this world one evening by asking, "Can I play Legos with you?" He was surprised, since I do not venture into this arena often. "What would you want to play?" he asked. "I was thinking of building your orphanage," I replied. A barrage of questions ensued. How many stories would it have, did we have any baby Lego people, would it have a roof, and what about a crib? Tino was delighted to play this with me.

Our play was part reality, as I recounted details of the day I met him, and part fantasy, as we played out a rescue mission with a Lego car that turned into an airplane. Tino had built it specially for this event. During our time together, he learned details of his own story that I had never told him. These were minor things, but every one became important to him. At the end of our play, Tino said, "I'm just so happy I got to come home to this family."

Our children need to accept the past so they can grow and become emotionally healthy adults. Playing with them about their adoption can help get them there. **AP**

SUSAN TOMPKINS is executive director of Journeys of the Heart Adoption Services. She lives with her family in Oregon.

PLAY BY THE RULES

- Do not be afraid to bring up adoption in the context of play. It can help children process their feelings, get comfortable talking, and bring you closer to them as you share this fun and private time.
- If your child has not wanted to discuss adoption in the past, playing might be the way to get him or her to open up. Play also encourages creativity, helps develop a sense of trust and reduces anxiety. Play can set up a healing stage where your child's buried feelings of sadness or anger can be expressed, explored, and explained.
- Stop the play and/or consult a professional if your child exhibits excessive anger, worry, sadness, fears, aggressive behavior, or new separation anxiety.

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What The Books Didn't Tell Me

When Christopher joined our family at age three, I had to set aside my tried and true parenting methods in favor of the sort of nurturing he'd never known.

BY CARRIE KRUEGER



I am a serious student of Parenting Theory. I collect parenting books the way a gourmet collects cookbooks. And I once presumed I had a fairly complete parenting tool belt. Then came Christopher, who arrived in our home a few months after his third birthday. I was already an effective parent to two children; why wouldn't I do just as well with a third?

What I didn't know was that conventional parenting techniques are often ineffective when used on children undergoing transition and trauma. Children who have spent their early years in institutions or in foster care require another approach, one you rarely read about in parenting books. My tool belt, it turns out, was lacking some vital equipment.

A Counterintuitive Approach

When my first child was two, I took a class called STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting). The system involves active listening, establishing which problems a child owns, helping her solve them, and allowing her to experience natural or logical consequences. When my little one felt cold, she learned to wear a coat next time. I helped clarify her ideas, and she was quick to solve her own problems.

But active listening is hard to do with a child who won't or can't communicate. In Christopher's case, there was a language barrier. And even as that dissolved, he was not much of a communicator. The trust and ability to share just weren't there. Where some children might say, "I don't want to go to day-

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care,” Christopher would simply refuse to come downstairs. Active listening wasn’t an option, but sitting with him and saying “Are you feeling anxious about leaving mommy?” sometimes worked. It took a while to figure out that he didn’t come downstairs because riding in the car made him feel sick.

Logical consequences are a mainstay of most parenting plans. Yet with Christopher, they didn’t work. He was so used to being uncomfortable—cold, hot, hungry, even sick or hurt—that he did not respond to the kind of discomfort that sends other kids scurrying for jackets. To make him live with the consequences of, say, forgetting his sweater, was not only ineffective, it was downright mean. I had to help him identify what his body was experiencing. I had to name the cold he felt when the wind blew, then demonstrate how we block it. I had to teach him that he has the right and the ability to be comfortable. How counterintuitive! With my other children, I allowed them to feel discomfort and learn from it. With Christopher, I had to teach him to be comfortable.

Of course, logical consequences go beyond physical comfort. Many of us use isolation—a time out—as a consequence for anti-social behavior. You can’t be nice, so you have to go away. But when an older child is adjusting to a new family, this is exactly what you don’t want to do. In Christopher’s case, there were plenty of tantrums. But to isolate him, even in a corner near the rest of us, was to reinforce the idea that he was “bad,” unworthy, not a permanent part of the family. It fed his enormous fear that he might in fact lose this home and family at any moment. What I needed to do was slow down, sit, and hold him, even as he raged, and assure him over and over that I would be here for him to help him through this hard time. Unlike my other children, who were given little or no attention when acting out, Christopher needed more attention at such times.

Those Vital Early Years

I am learning that I don’t need to parent Christopher today in the way I hope to parent him as a teenager. Instead, I must think of him as a younger child, incapable of the responsibility I expected of my other children by the time they turned four. For now, I must own his problems, because he isn’t ready to own them himself. That doesn’t mean he won’t be some day! But it does mean that I need a bigger parenting tool belt, with different tools for different kids. I have to give Christopher the early childhood he never had.

One of the parenting principles that’s worked for me is to meet the child’s every need for the first two years, then begin showing them how to meet their own needs and how to fit into the world at large. You feed a baby on demand, but you teach a toddler to eat on the family’s meal schedule. Adopting a child of three looked easy: he would be ready to fit in. I now know that there’s no skipping that first year or two of meeting every need.

Yes, it is strange to see a child so large and so seemingly competent asking to be carried or becoming distraught when a request for food is not quickly

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met. But I have learned there is no point in expecting him to wait for food or other basics. I have also learned that doing this will not “spoil” him. There is plenty of time to help him grow up and learn to fit in. It isn’t the kind of parenting I planned on, and it’s not what I hope to be doing in a few years. But I believe it is the kind of parenting that works with a child who never knew the joy of a nurtured infancy.

I recently read *Parenting with Love and Logic*, a good source of a few new tools for my belt. Authors Foster Cline and Jim Fay describe several ineffective parenting styles, including that of the “Helicopter Parent” who constantly hovers, ready to swoop down and rescue the child from all difficulties. It’s easy to see why it wouldn’t be effective to parent my other kids in this way. But then there’s Christopher. He has never had anyone who cared enough to help him remember his jacket and to sit with him when emotion overwhelmed logic. How wonderful to be the helicopter in his life. **AF**

CARRIE KRUEGER is single mom to three children, all through adoption. They live near Seattle, Washington.

DON'T FORGET BIRTH FATHERS

A child’s story begins with her birth—and even before,” says Ronny Diamond, the former adoption resource director for Spence-Chapin in New York City. “Children need to hear that all children are born to two people, and that they are no different.” Since young children tend to focus on their birth mothers, you need to make a special effort to include their birth fathers. Diamond suggests these talk techniques:

Include the birth father from the beginning. The concept of a birth father is easier to grasp when kids are three or four, before you need to explain reproduction.

You might say: “It takes a man and a woman to make a baby. The baby grows inside the woman, who then gives birth to the baby. You were born the same way everyone else was. But some babies stay with their birth parents and some don’t. Your birth parents couldn’t raise any baby at the time you were born. So they made sure to find a family that could take care of you forever. Some children are adopted, and adoption is forever.”

Say what you know. If you know a lot about your child’s birth father, he can have a significant presence in your story. If you know very little about either birth parent, you may want to speculate based on what you do know about the situation of your child’s birth.

You might say: “Your birth parents may have decided together that they weren’t able to give a baby a good life, so they probably talked about what would be best for you. That’s why they took you to a place where people who cared about you could make sure you went to live with a family who would love you and take care of you forever.”

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Add age-appropriate details. When your child is five to seven years old, you need to be more specific in your conversations. Again, it's OK to speculate. The key is to be neutral and use language that doesn't label either birth parent in a judgmental way.

You might say: "Your birth mother and birth father made you. But they weren't together as a couple when you were born, and neither one felt they could raise a baby alone." Or, "Your birth parents didn't know each other very well and your birth mom didn't tell your birth father about you. She felt that neither of them were grown up enough to take care of a child."

Remember that birth fathers care, too. If you don't know a lot about your child's birth father, don't assume that he didn't care. Birth fathers are often just as interested in their kids as birth mothers. Your child should know that.

RECOMMENDED READING

When choosing a children's book about adoption, look for one that mentions birth parents, not just birth mothers. Here are three choices for young children: *How I Was Adopted* by Joanna Cole; *My Special Family* by Kathleen Silber and Debra Parelskin; *Over the Moon* by Karen Katz.

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A Memo to My Fellow Teachers

When it comes to adoption, instructors need to check their curriculum and their stereotypes.

BY LEONLIDA DITOMASSO

My twin daughters enrolled this year in our local public elementary school. As their advocate, I am committed to educating my fellow teachers about ways in which a positive approach to adoption can improve all children's education. Here are some of my thoughts.

As the teacher, what you believe matters. Your unconscious stereotypes will be communicated to the class. Don't assume "Sean McLaughlin" cannot be the correct name for the child who looks Asian or Guatemalan. Or that an adopted child's family of origin was impoverished or unstable. Don't assume that a child is lucky to have been adopted or say, "What would her life have been like if...?" You would not say that to a biological parent, so please don't say it to an adoptive one.



There are neither real families nor fake families. Adoptive parents are parents. In families with children through both adoption and biology, all the children are their parents' children. So don't ask, "Which are yours?"

Genetics and immigration can be taught without requiring students to trace their nuclear family roots. Children can be given options for the family tree projects, such as including all the people in their lives who love them. Biology students can do genetic coding based on any given set of characteristics. Don't make kids feel different by asking them to do something they cannot do.

"Student of the week" projects can be structured to encourage students to share their lives from any age. For many children it is impossible to share details from their infancy. For those children, expecting baby pictures or descriptions of their first year of life is unreasonable.

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There are many excellent children's books about adoption. Schools will want to have at least three or four per classroom and more in the library.

Intrusive questions about adoption and birth parents from their schoolmates are a fact of life for many kids, especially in the very early grades. Your attitude and the information you provide will help children in your class handle their classmates' curiosity.

Adoptive families often celebrate different family milestones. These include "Gotcha Day" (the date the child joined the family), Adoption Day, (the date the legalities were completed), along with the child's actual birthday. Some families include mention of their child's birth family in Mother's and Father's day celebrations. Teachers will want to discuss "alternative" family celebrations with parents of children in their class.

Children born outside the U.S. are not experts on the culture and language of their birth countries. As "American" as most of their peers, they should not be expected to serve as representatives of the cultures of their birth in the classroom.

Information on adoption is widely available in bookstores, online, and through local adoption organizations. Nowadays almost every classroom is likely to include adopted children. Search out and use information about adoption. A great place to start is by ordering a copy of *Adoption and the Schools: A Resource Guide for Parents and Teachers*, by Lansing Wood and Nancy Ng from FAIR, fairfamilies.org. ^{AT}

LEONLIDA DITOMASSO is a teacher and mother of twin daughters from Calcutta, India. This article first appeared in *HCR Reporter*, a newsletter from the Connecticut Education Association.

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