

Talking to Your Kids About Adoption: 11 Tips

Posted by [Adoption Mosaic](#) on Mar 4, 2008 in [Articles](#) | [0 comments](#)

by Astrid Dabbeni

I recently stumbled across a list in Adoptive Families magazine titled "30 Things Adoptees Wish They Knew About Their Birthparents – But Often Are Afraid To Ask." Many of the

questions I grew up wondering about, and sometimes stressing about, were sitting in front of me on a piece of paper written and published by someone else. The fact that someone had taken the time to write these 30 questions was very validating for me. It was a profound moment.

Questions that stood out for me were:

- Where was I born?
- Did my birthmother see me or hold me?
- What did my birthmother name me?
- How old were my birthparents when I was born?
- Do my birthparents love me?
- Do my birthparents think about me? Did they ever regret their decision?

The answers to these questions require basic information. Yet they also call into play some very emotionally loaded subjects. My response, as an adopted person who has never known her birthparents, was, "Are there really people who have access to this much information about themselves and/or their birthparents?"

I was so intrigued by the list that I made it a permanent part of my adoption workshops. I recently met an adoptive mother who claimed she could provide all 30 answers to her child. I thought, "Wow! How lucky is this child!" But in the same breath I realized that just because a parent has all the answers does not necessarily mean they know how to comfortably approach delicate subjects with their children. In fact, having a lot of information might be just as challenging, at different stages in the child's life, as having none. The adoptive parent in an open adoption carries the extra burden (and privilege) of presenting information in a way that makes sense to the child.

From the day I was adopted at age 4, I knew it would hurt my parents' feelings if I asked about my birth family. Where did this come from? I had never been told I shouldn't talk about my birth family. I had never seen anyone get in trouble for asking about his or her birth family. Yet I knew it did not feel right to bring up the subject. At a very young age I thought the rules of love specified that if you loved one set of parents you were disloyal to them by thinking about, let alone loving, another set of parents. Growing up, I fantasized about any and every possible equation of who my birthparents (mostly birthmother) were. I had both simple questions and emotionally loaded questions. I was too afraid to ask my adoptive parents any of my questions.

I have heard parents say, "But we have an open adoption. Of course my child knows and will always know he can talk to me about his birth family." One challenge of open adoption is to remember that even children who know and love their birthparents go through stages in their lives when issues of loyalty flair up. How do you help your child achieve enough openness and confidence in you and your relationship to talk about adoption issues as they arise?

The following 11 points will help you get started:

Show your child that his or her birth family is on your mind, too. About four years ago I bought myself a "birthmother candle." Whenever I am thinking a lot about my birthmother and wondering where and how she is, I send her energy by lighting the candle. One night when I came home from work, I noticed my husband-to-be had lit the candle. "I was thinking about your birthmother a lot today," he said. I wept tears of joy and gratitude that she had become part of his life. I felt validated, loved and accepted. Accepting and honoring birthparents is accepting and honoring the child.

Tell the truth, and tell it often. Begin talking with your children about their birthparents and adoption even before they can talk. The story will help provide a solid sense of identity. But, of course, not all aspects of every open adoption are pleasant or easy. What about a birthfather who chooses not to be involved or a birthmother struggling with drug addiction? What about a birthmother who doesn't visit for several years? It may be difficult, but the same rule applies: Tell the truth, and tell it often. Children deserve the truth, and are remarkably able to cope with its implications. Of course, you should always keep in mind the next point.

Be age appropriate. This does not mean you should avoid talking about the hard stuff. There's a difference. I have yet to come across a topic that has stumped me so completely I cannot think of some age-appropriate way to address it with a child. Keep in mind both your child's physical and emotional age. If you are struggling with a topic, it might be helpful to consult a therapist about the best way to approach the issue. One resource for understanding age appropriateness is the article "Adoption and the Stages of Development," published by the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse.

Don't wait until they ask. It takes a lot of courage to ask hard questions. If your child comes to you with a tough question, he or she has probably thought about it a long time before working up the nerve to ask. A good rule of thumb is that if you think your child will say, "I remember the day my parents told me ___" about a particular adoption issue, you have waited too long. Provide your children the answers before they ask.

Develop a Lifestory Book. Different from a scrapbook, a lifestory book is your child's adoption story told in words and pictures. It helps the child and the parents talk about adoption and keep the facts straight. It honors the child's history. Several great resources can help you get started with lifestory books, including "Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child," by Beth O'Malley, and workshops I lead through Adoption Mosaic.

Include birthparents. When possible, work as a team with your children's birthparents, deciding together when and how to answer your child's questions. Some answers may be more appropriate coming directly from the birthparents.

Be aware of possible triggers. Birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day and school projects (family trees, for example, or an assignment to bring baby pictures from home) are occasions that might be difficult for adopted children. Be alert to how your child is feeling and behaving. But remember, these events do not trigger questions or concerns for every child, every time. And other events you don't anticipate might be trigger points for your child.

Minimize eye contact. Go for a drive or braid your child's hair. Children and adults alike are more likely to talk about sensitive issues when they aren't making eye contact. Take

advantage of this principle of human nature; you might have a more in-depth conversation.

Teach your child positive and negative adoption language. Yes, even negative adoption language. Talk with your child about how he or she might respond to comments like, "At least my mother wanted me." You will be providing the tools to handle awkward or hurtful situations and to educate others. This empowers children and helps them feel proud of their adoption expertise.

Remember it is their story, too. Ask your children how they feel about adoption questions they hear from strangers, friends or family members. How would they like you to respond? Your child might be more private than you are about adoption. Your child might be more outgoing, wanting to chat about adoption at every chance. Respecting and honoring these differences will help your child take ownership of his or her story.

Involve mentors. You can't be all things to your child at all times. When it comes to adoption, most adoptive parents don't have the personal experience to draw upon. Therefore, it's important for children to have other people in their lives with whom they are comfortable talking about adoption. Knowing I am adopted, children sometimes tell me how they feel. When I ask them if they have talked to their parents, the most common response is, "No, they wouldn't understand." (Even children in open adoptions have said this.) Sometimes it's best to accept that kids don't tell their parents everything, and to make sure they can talk to someone else.

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