



Explaining Adoption to Your Child

A Guide for Adoptive Parents

 Adoptions
with Love, Inc.



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Talking About Adoption

Talking about adoption openly in your home can help your child understand and embrace her adoption story, as well as build an identity.



Introduction

Talking about adoption with your child is a crucial part of being an adoptive parent. Adoption is an essential piece of your child's identity, and a story that must be told time and time again. If you have recently adopted, you may be wondering how to approach this conversation with your little one. If you are just beginning the adoption process, it is time to start thinking about how you will do the same.

It can be difficult for parents to find the words to talk about adoption with their children. Some fear that having the "adoption talk" will affect their relationship with their child. Some worry it will make their child feel less special, sad, or as though he or she does not belong. Others believe it will only confuse their son or daughter. The truth is, talking about adoption – and talking about it early on – can have a very positive impact on your child's sense of self.

Discussing adoption with your child now can help lay the groundwork for a positive, lifelong conversation. It can also help your child understand and embrace adoption. That is why Adoptions With Love encourages all adoptive families to keep adoption an open, ongoing conversation in their homes.

Every child who was adopted deserves to talk about it. Adoption is not a one time "talk." As a parent, you cannot just tell your child that he or she was adopted and move along. Adoption is a lifelong conversation that will evolve as your child grows. Keeping the conversation going will allow your child to ask questions as well as understand, grow confident in, and become proud of his or her adoption story.

Ongoing adoption discussions build self-esteem in children. These conversations give adopted children a sense of security in their families. These talks also normalize the concept of adoption for growing children who might feel "different" from their peers. As a parent, it is up to you to set the stage for adoption from the very beginning — compassionately, honestly, proudly, and regularly sharing your child's adoption story.

For over 30 years, Adoptions With Love has helped adoptive parents navigate these very conversations – from explaining adoption to their child for the first-time, to answering the more difficult and unknown questions about adoption. In this guide, we will help you do the same.





What All Adopted Children Must Know & Understand

If you read our “Guide to Talking About Adoption,” you know there are two important things that adoptive parents should instill in their child from the very beginning. The first is ensuring your child knows he or she is in a stable, permanent family. You are not going away. All families – those by birth and those by adoption – are permanent, and your child will be safe and loved with you. Forever.

The second thing you must explain to your child is that there are many different ways to create a family. Children can be raised by their birth parents, by their adoptive parents, by grandparents, foster parents, or step-parents. All these types of families are “real” families, and one is not any more “real” than the other. Families are built on love and support.

By emphasizing these two facts, adoption will become an integrated and normal part of your child’s life. He or she will understand that adoption does not define your family. Children accept things as normal if we present them as so. Help your child understand that adoption is a normal way to grow a family.

Here are some other ways you can help your child understand (and be positive) about his or her adoption story:

- 1. Use positive adoption language.** Do not say that your child was “given up” or “put up” for adoption. This can leave a sense of abandonment and low self-esteem in a child. Instead, explain that the birth parents made a plan before your child was born, so that he/she could grow up in a safe, supportive, and loving home. It is important that he/she knows and understands the decision was not about them, the child, but about the birth parents’ ability to raise a child.
- 2. Talk about your child’s birth parents respectfully and compassionately.** When talking to your child, always reflect how the birth parents made a very selfless and thoughtful choice. Make sure your child knows how much he/she is loved by both your families. Your child wants to know that he/she came from loving, good people. Even if you know some troubling facts about your child’s biological parents, always make sure your child knows they did their best.
- 3. Empathize with your child’s feelings.** As your child grows, he/she will start to have more complex feelings around adoption. Sadness or feelings of abandonment might arise. Let your child know that it is okay to feel sad and to talk about it. Talking about these emotions will only bring you closer.





Talking to Small Children (Age 0-8) About Adoption





Talking to Infants & Toddlers About Adoption (ages 0-3)



From the day you welcome your child home and into your arms, you can start talking about adoption. You do not have to plan the “perfect” time or place to tell your child their adoption story. You do not have to wait until your child is speaking or “mature enough” to talk about it. In fact, early infancy is the best time to start talking about adoption with your child – even though he or she does not understand adoption. It gives you time to practice this conversation.

Early talks, starting from day one, help your child become familiar with the language of adoption. It also helps you, as a parent, become more comfortable using it. Through infancy and early toddlerhood, you can practice explaining what adoption means and how it brought you and your child together. Practice while your baby still does not understand what you are saying – saying it aloud will help you get accustomed to telling your adoption story. Now is also the time to make sure you and your spouse are aligned on the story, language, and answers you will share as your child grows.

The general rule of thumb for talking about adoption with children is to “tell them early and tell them often.” You can do this as you change your child’s diaper or rock him or her to sleep. You can talk about it during car rides or bath time. Getting comfortable with the language now will benefit both you and your child long-term.

Saying “adoption” during infancy and childhood will help it become a natural part of your family’s dialogue. It is also beneficial in that, when the time comes, your child will already know and be comfortable with the concept. There will not be one single “talk” or shocking event in which your child found out he/she was adopted. Instead, adoption will have been a part of his or her life the entire time.



It is Never Too Early

It is never too early to start talking about adoption. Lay the groundwork for lifelong conversations with your child.





Talking to Young Children About Adoption (ages 3-5)



Three-to-five-year-old children – preschoolers and kindergarteners – are curious little ones. They are just starting to figure out what life is about, including everyone and everything in it. They are learning to talk in full sentences and even write their names. Despite all the colors they are learning, they still understand things as black or white. Keep this in mind when talking about adoption with younger children. Everything that you say will be taken literally; they are concrete thinkers.

Combined with their concrete thinking, young children also have short attention spans. That is why the best approach is to **keep it simple**. Speak calmly, compassionately, and matter-of-factly. For example, if your child sees a pregnant woman, you may say, “Every baby grows in a woman’s tummy,” and explain how your child has birth parents, too. You can use his or her birth parent’s name, such as, “You grew in Susie’s tummy.” Using the phrase “birth mom” can be confusing to a young child because you are their mom. You may continue to say something like, “Sometimes a woman can’t grow a baby in her tummy, so she adopts,” and segue into your adoption story.

Always let your child know that adoption is a completely normal way to complete a family and that you are always there to talk. Help your child find words to express feelings and encourage him/her to ask questions. Have simple answers ready to go, such as:

“Why wasn’t I born in your tummy?”

“Your daddy and I couldn’t make a baby, but we wanted to become parents more than anything in this world. We wanted a baby to take care of and to love with all our hearts. You were born from your birth mom’s (or use her name) tummy, and then we adopted you. We became your parent(s) forever.”

“Why didn’t my birth mother keep me?”

“Sometimes when a man and woman have a baby, they aren’t able to take care of any child right then. It’s not because they don’t love the child. It’s for grown-up reasons. So, they find another wonderful family who can take care of the child forever.”

You may also tell your adoption story at bedtime, in a warm, positive tone. Children love to hear about themselves – especially in storybook form (“Once upon a time, your child was born to a beautiful, strong woman who loved him/her very much.”) Your child will love to hear the story of how he/she came into your family.



Talking to School-Age Children About Adoption (ages 6-8)



There is a lot that happens after age six, and as your child gets older, he or she will start to develop more complex feelings about adoption and may have more direct (and difficult) questions as a result. If you have been talking about adoption lovingly from the very beginning, you will be ready for this next stage.

By age six, your child is starting school and taking on new roles in life – becoming a friend, a classmate, a student, in addition to a part of your family. As a result, your child will also be starting to explore who he/she is, as well as his or her place within the world. Developmentally, now is the time to start sharing more details about your child's history and biological parents. Share photos. Explain why his/her birth parents made an adoption plan. Answer any questions honestly, lovingly, and openly. If you have an open adoption arrangement, it can be helpful to include the birth parents in these conversations, too.

School-age is also the time when children begin to process the larger concept of adoption. Your child might start realizing that most kids at school live with their birth parents and may feel “different” from them as a result. Remember that, at this age, your child may be getting asked more prying questions about adoption from his or her peers. Prepare your child with answers, and let your child know that it is always okay to keep things private. It is his/her adoption story.

As your child grows up, keep these tips in mind:

- **Give your child more details about his/her biological family.** Share photos with your child or describe some of the birth parents' known characteristics and interests. Help your child relate to his/her biological family, as well as see what sets them apart. This is crucial for building his/her identity and sense-of-self.
- **Normalize your family make-up by socializing with other adoptive families.** Let your child know that adoption does not make him/her “different” and does not define who he/she is.
- **Allow your child to fantasize about his or her birth family.** At a young age, your child may say, “My birth mother was a princess” or “My birth dad was a rock star.” This is a normal part of development. When the opportunity arises, offer age-appropriate facts.
- **Be affectionate.** Offer hugs, love, and plenty of positive affirmations.





Talking to Older Children (Age 9 - 17) About Adoption





Talking to Preteens About Adoption (ages 9-12)

As Ellen Singer, LCSW and adoptionssupport.org author, says, “It is important for parents to share age-appropriate information, answer questions, and help children with their feelings about adoption before adolescence. Adolescence can be a difficult time to communicate about clothing and plans for the weekend, let alone birth parents, birth heritage, and complex feelings. For this reason, parents should consider the advantages to laying the foundation for adoption conversations at a younger age.”

Developmentally, the preteen years are the perfect opportunity to evolve the adoption conversation with your child. Preteens think more abstractly and start to understand “adoption” as more than just a word. They place greater meaning behind it and how it fits into their lives. That is why, between the ages of nine and 12, children develop more complex feelings and ask more difficult questions around adoption.

For the most part, however, preteens are very open to talking with their parents (once the conversation is encouraged) and sophisticated enough to have satisfying conversations about adoption – without the withdrawal you might find in an adolescent. To open the conversation, ask your son or daughter open-ended questions such as, “Do you ever think about meeting your birth parents?” and listen for “reachable” moments to keep the dialogue going. Keep reading for tips on talking to your tween.

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Preteens & Teenagers

Adolescents are often more reserved when it comes to talking about adoption. Encourage these conversations with your child.



Talking to Preteens About Adoption (cont.)

- **Casually bring up your child's birth parents throughout his or her life.** Always smile when talking about the birth parents. Even at a young age, your child will grasp onto your emotional tone and associate that with any future birth parent talk. Let them know that it does not hurt your feelings to talk about their birthparents.
- **Reassure your child that talking about his or her birth parents will not upset you.** Talking about your child's biological background is healthy and important.
- **Let your child know that it is okay to love two sets of parents.** Your preteen may feel disloyal to you by thinking about their biological family, or even asking questions about them. Assure your child that you expect him/her to love both families and that both parents love him/her, too.
- **Keep the conversation going.** When your growing tween makes a remark about adoption (e.g. "my birth parents would let me stay up late"), encourage your child to keep talking and explore his or her feelings. Say things like, "You sound sad (or angry)." Ask your child how her or she feels and what he/she thinks.
- **Accept your child's feelings as valid.** As he or she grows, your child might be angry or sad about adoption. Do not try to talk your child out of those feelings, as this will shut down any conversation. Instead, encourage your child to explore those feelings by talking openly about them. Be there.
- **Reassure your child that you are not going anywhere.** Young adolescents will often gain a newfound idea that "something must be wrong with me if my birth parents didn't keep me." Reaffirm your love for your child. Show him/her the birth certificate or any letters showing that you are always going to be his or her parent.
- **Be affectionate.** Teenagers are often less open to physical affection, so now is the time to hug and connect with your child.



The Birth Parent Talk

Your child wants to know he came from good people. Talk about your child's birth parents calmly, with respect and compassion.



Talking to Teenagers About Adoption (ages 12-17)



Adolescence is a critical period of development in which teens are learning, absorbing, and refining their knowledge more than ever. They are gaining experience, independence, and are more aware of themselves. Teenagers also have more sophisticated critical thinking skills, coping skills, and take greater responsibility for their feelings. They are beginning to define themselves and their place within the world.

This period of learning translates to teenagers wanting **facts**. The answers that once sufficed for your child now need to be expanded and matured. Your teenager wants to know the truth about his or her adoption and biological family. Even if the truth is hard, know that it will be freeing for your teen. Filling these missing puzzle pieces is vital to your teen's identity, self-confidence, and sense-of-self.

Here are a few of the many difficult questions your teen might ask, and how you can respond:

Why Was I Adopted? Why Was I Given Away?

Your teen may ask complicated questions such as, "Was there something wrong with me?" "Was it because they did drugs?" "Was it because my birth father didn't love my birth mom?" Tell your teen what you know but say it as calmly and compassionately as you can. Be respectful of the birth parents. Let your child know that they did the best they could, but the timing was not right, and they were not ready to become parents. Afterwards, you might ask, "What do you think things were like for your birth parents at that time?" to continue the conversation.

What is the Truth About My Birth Parents?

Young children are comfortable with answers such as, "Your birth mother was a courageous, beautiful woman." Teenagers, on the other hand, desire more in-depth information about their biology and birth parents' choice. They may ask about birth siblings, or the relationship between their birth parents. As hesitant as you may be to share these difficult details, be as honest as possible. Otherwise, your teen might fantasize about who his/her birth parents are, which can be more damaging than the truth.

Be mindful of your tone and the way you frame your answers. If substance abuse was at play, for example, you might explain that your teen's birth parents made poor choices a long time ago – not because they were bad people, but because they got involved with some bad things.

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Talking to Teenagers About Adoption (cont)



Why Do I Feel Different from Everyone Else?

Adolescents desperately want to fit in with their peers. Having been adopted no longer translates to being “special” in adolescence. Instead, your teen may feel “different” from everyone else, especially if he or she is of a different race or cultural background. It is important to talk to your child, empathize with his or her feelings, but also continue to celebrate your differences.

You might ask your teen, “Are classmates making you feel this way, or saying anything unkind to you? Do you feel you are being treated differently by your peers or teachers at school, because you are adopted (or not white)? You can be honest with me. You shouldn’t go through this alone.”

Who Am I?

Teenagers are starting to define themselves as individuals, and much of their identity is rooted in family. Your teen will be thinking about his or her similarities and differences to you, as well as to his/her birth parents. Your teen may ask, “Am I like my adoptive parents or my birth parents?” “How can I know who I am if I do not know my birth parents?” and “Who would I have been if my birth family kept me?”

Share with your teen what you can about his or her birth parents. Then, explain what similarities you see between yourself and your teen. Hearing these perceived similarities can help your teen feel a stronger bond to you. You may say, “We are so alike! We both love dancing (or have the same talents/qualities).” Be sure to celebrate your differences as well, by saying things like, “I wish I could be more like you, you are so much smarter (or more outgoing, musically-gifted, etc.)”

I Want to Contact My Birth Parents... I'm Old Enough!

Teens in closed adoptions, or those with less levels of contact, may express interest in finding and contacting their biological family. Use this as an opportunity to determine what your teen is looking for in a relationship with his/her birth parents. Explore his/her feelings and motivation. Ask your teen if he/she wants you to be a part of that meeting. To gauge your teen’s readiness, ask questions such as, “Can you tell me why this is important to you now? What information do you want that we don’t have?” Take this seriously and let them know that you are there to help them with this process when the time is right.





A Lifelong Conversation

You know how, when children are young, you will hear them repeat stories over and over again? For example, if a child falls off his bike and scraps his knee, and Dad comes to the rescue, he might tell everyone he encounters about the experience – his teacher, his mom, even the grocery store clerk. He is trying to make sense of the event and will keep repeating it until he becomes comfortable with it.

Now think about this concept on a larger scale, with your child's adoption story. Repetition is key to your child grasping and understanding adoption as an integrated and important – yet not definitive – part of his or her life.

The more you talk about adoption, the more your child will be comfortable with it. He or she will also be more comfortable asking questions. Adoptions With Love recommends talking about adoption often, when the opportunity arises, throughout every stage of your child's development. Many parents turn to adoption books for young children. These can help your child understand adoption, normalize your family make-up, and relate to others' adoption stories.

Again, parents cannot just tell children, "You were adopted." Not only is this shocking for children, it is also not something they can fully grasp at once. As a parent, you must lovingly repeat and evolve your child's adoption story over time, sharing more intimate details as he or she matures. You must be open to talking and answering questions to best meet your child's needs. Adoption is a lifelong conversation. It is also an incredible journey and a part of what makes your family so special.

Whether you have already adopted or are just beginning the process, know that Adoptions With Love is here for you. We can help you navigate everything from the preliminary paperwork to adoption finalization, open adoption communication with birth parents to complicated conversations with your teenager. Contact us at 617-964-4357 to learn more.



We Are Here for You

Adoptions With Love is a non-profit adoption agency helping hopeful parents in Massachusetts grow their families through adoption.