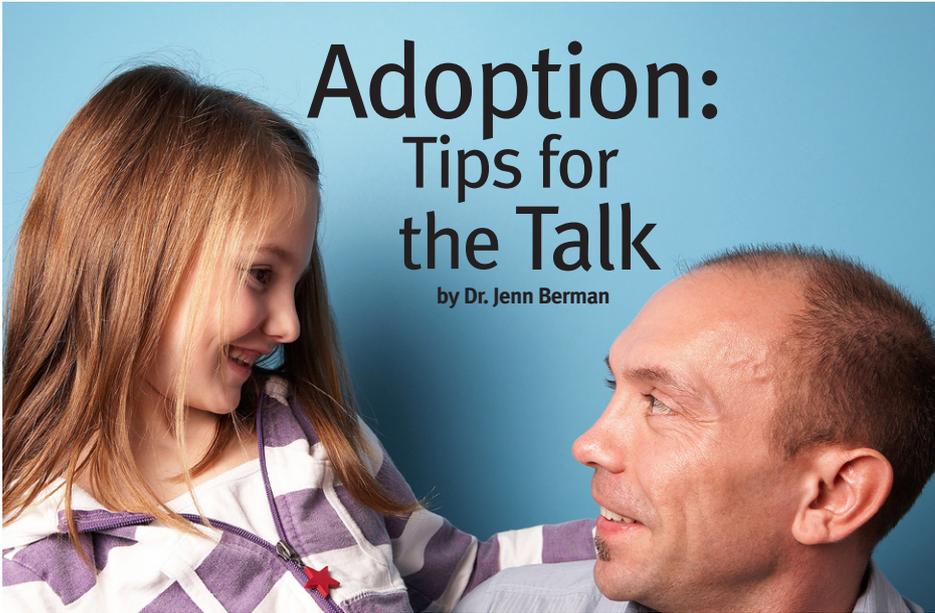


Adoption: Tips for the Talk

by Dr. Jenn Berman



“A friend of mine who is a social worker was placing an infant into the arms of her adopted parents. The new mother leaned over to the social worker and whispered, ‘When do we tell her she’s adopted?’ My friend leaned over and whispered back, ‘On the way home.’”

~ A true story told by Adam Pertman,
Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

When Should I Tell?

Many years ago the conventional wisdom was that parents should not tell their adopted children their adoption stories until they were adults, if at all. There was a shroud of secrecy and shame surrounding adoption issues. There was also tremendous denial about the unique nature of adoption.

Fortunately, times have changed and understanding of adoption, identity and family psychology has evolved. As Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher point out in *Talking to Young Children about Adoption*, “now the advice is not simply to tell the child once about his adoption but to talk with him across developmental stages throughout childhood.” Even before children understand words or the complex stories of their own adoption, they understand their parents’ level of comfort with the discussion, which sets the precedence for dialogue in the future.

In the study *In Search of Origins: The Experience of Adopted People*, researcher John Triseliotis found that adoptees who had been told about their adoption early and in a positive way had a sense of “well-being,” of being “special,” and of having something to be “proud” of. Those who were told after the age of ten reported that being told late had a profoundly adverse effect on them. They reported it did harm to their self-image leaving them feeling confused, bewildered, and

later angry. This anger was aimed at their adoptive parents but most focused on their mothers.

Because children are curious about where babies come from and how they emerge from a mother’s body, moms are usually the first adults to be faced with their child’s questions about adoption. Triseliotis’ research found that it was usually the mother who disclosed the information and, when no one did, the brunt of their anger was placed on mom for not sharing the information.

The Ever Evolving Understanding of Adoption

Ideally, parents should be talking about adoption from the start. They should not look to find an age to start talking about the issues but rather find age-appropriate ways to discuss adoption. Children’s understanding of adoption changes as their cognitive abilities develop. Their needs and concerns change over time and it is only if parents have created an atmosphere of open discussion that they will be able to help their children make sense of their thoughts and feelings.

Positive parental attitudes towards adoption have been shown to be among the most significant factors in terms of successful outcome. This is not to say that parents have to constantly talk about the benefits of adop-

tion but they should be prepared to answer questions and to help children integrate the information in new, age-appropriate ways that convey a positive feeling about adoption.

Premature or un-asked-for information can overwhelm or confuse a child. We’ve all heard the adage about the boy who asks his mom where he came from and she goes into graphic detail about the “birds and the bees” only to get the response, “I just wanted to know if it was New York or Philadelphia.” It is important to let children take the lead in the adoption questions and conversations so they can get their needs met.

Stages of Understanding Adoption

Researchers at the Rutgers Adoption Project created a six level understanding about adoption. While the age ranges used are quite wide, since the variation is so huge, understanding the stages can help parents recognize and react to them better. They are:

Level 0 (0-5 years of age) - The child has no understanding of adoption.

Level 1 (4-7 years old) - The child does not understand the difference between adoption and birth and has a tendency to fuse both concepts together.

Level 2 (4-13 years old) - They understand the difference between adoption and birth. They realize that adoption is permanent but don’t understand why.

Level 3 (6-9 year olds) - The child is unsure about the permanence of the adoptive parent-child relationship.

Level 4 (6-13 years old) - The child starts to have a legal understanding of adoption and the permanence of the situation.

Level 5 (8-13 years old) - “The adoption relationship is now characterized as permanent, involving the legal transfer of rights and/or responsibilities for the child from the biological parents to the adoptive parents”.

Many experts note that it is around the age of four that children start to realize that, along with all the positive gains of adoption, there is also loss. For teenagers the issue of identity, especially in international and cross-cultural adoption, often becomes an issue of concern.

What Parents Can Do to Support Their Adopted Kids

1 Keep the communication open. Always be ready and prepared to answer questions. Many parents report that questions usually come at unexpected or even inconvenient times. It is crucial that the ultimate message parents send is that it is safe and encouraged to talk about.

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2 Follow your child's lead. Don't volunteer too much information. Pay close attention to what your child is really asking.

3 Let young children use play to express themselves. Use play scenarios as an opportunity to enter into the child's world and open discussions.

4 Use books to give children an understanding of adoption across different ages. Early adoption books are a great way to present the concept of adoption in a non-threatening way.

5 Create a Lifebook. Make a scrapbook that chronicles your child's life before she was adopted. This can help your child understand what happened and help the child gain ownership of her story. This is especially important for older child adoptions.

6 Be aware of your own biases, fears and feelings about adoption and the birth parents. This is especially important so that parents don't collide with their child's fantasies. Children need to have the room for their own feelings and fantasies about adoption.

Dr. Jenn is a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Therapist in private practice. She is the author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids. Her "Dr. Jenn" column won the prestigious Parenting Publications of America award in parenting and child development. She has appeared as a psychological

expert on hundreds of television shows including The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Today Show, The Early Show, and The Tyra Banks Show. Dr. Jenn lives in Los Angeles with her husband and twin daughters. For more information on Dr. Jenn go to www.DoctorJenn.com.



10 Recommended books on adoption for early childhood:

A Mother for Choco by Keiko Kasza

Rosie's Family: An Adoption Story
by Lori Rosove

Tell Me Again About the Night I was Born
by Jamie Lee Curtis

Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale
by Karen Katz

The Day We Met You by Phoebe Koehler

Happy Adoption Day
by John McCutcheon (c)

Families Are Forever
by Craig Shemin (c)

I Wished for You- An Adoption Story
by Marianne Richmond

Adoption Stories for Young Children
by Randall Hicks

Welcome Home, Forever Child: A Celebration of Children Adopted as Toddlers, Preschoolers, and Beyond
by Christine Mitchell

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