



TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF

ROBYN GOBBEL

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TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF

Being separated from biological parents is always a trauma.

It's hard. When things are hard, we often want to back away. We get quiet. Sometimes we pretend the hard things don't even exist.

I've tried this tactic too! But unfortunately, it never works.

**OWNING OUR STORY AND
LOVING OURSELVES
THROUGH THAT PROCESS
IS THE BRAVEST THING
WE'LL EVER DO.**

BRENE BROWN

Here's the thing. The hard thing has already happened. Giving language to the hard thing doesn't make it harder.

Our children's story belongs to them. We are so fortunate to be offered the opportunity to help our children come into relationship with *their* story.

Fortunate or not, it's really hard to talk with kids about some of these things. It's hard to talk about drug abuse. It's hard to talk about poverty. It's hard to talk about parents who didn't want to be parents. It's hard to talk about parents who parented OTHER children but didn't parent your child.

It's also really hard to talk about stories that don't seem that hard. In my work with hundreds of adopted children and their families, it's not the stories of abuse that are hardest to navigate. It's the stories where it doesn't seem quite clear why their family couldn't keep them that are often the hardest to navigate.



TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF



I've spent a LOT of time with families helping them come up with the words to give their children their story. It can feel overwhelmingly hard to find the words to talk about some of these things- especially with children.

In this short e-book (that accompanies a two-hour webinar of the same name) I'm going to help you find the words.

First, we are going to clear up the WHY. I get those questions a lot.

"Do we really need to tell him this?"

"He doesn't even remember."

"She never talks about it- why should we bring it up?"

I love to study the brain- but I especially love to study memory. Memory science helps us understand the why.

I also love to listen to adopted people tell their stories. So many adopted children and adults have told me their story. Adopted adults are unequivocally clear.

Its their story.

As parents and adults, we have no right to their story. It didn't happen to us. We aren't the gatekeepers. Adopted people have already lost so much. We have been entrusted with their care. We owe them their story. Even the hard parts. Even the really really hard parts.

Brain science, memory science, attachment theory all lead me to one conclusion. There is only one way to tell a child their story.

With honesty, transparency,
and authenticity.



TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF

Then, we will look at the HOW.

How do we talk about these things?

This is a tricky one, because it involves focusing on ourselves.

To be in attunement with our children, we have to be in attunement with ourselves.

WHEN WE ARE BRAVE AND WE TALK WITH OUR KIDS ABOUT THEIR TRUTH, THEY LEARN THEY AREN'T SCARY OR BAD. THEY LEARN THEIR IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THEM.

Let's be honest! These questions, and the answers to these questions, can really knock us off our feet. They always seem to come at unexpected times. We haven't thought through the answer. And we aren't sure what they are really even asking!

We ache and grieve for our children's pain and loss. These stories are often overflowing with pain and loss.

You deserve to care for your own grief, too.

When we take time to care for ourselves, we can be more present, open, and confident when we connect with our kids to talk about the hard truths.

We do all of this before they turn 12. All the hard stuff is told. Before 12 (according to Betsy Keefer-Smalley and Jayne Schooler- and I agree).

Then we figure out what do we actually say. How do we talk about abuse? Drug addiction? Rape? With a child? (I promise!! I'll help!!)

You are so brave. I'm grateful you are willing to wade into topics no one wants to talk about. It's your kid's story. when we are brave and we talk with our kids about their truth, they learn they aren't scary or bad. they learn their is nothing wrong with them.



A quick note...

The rest of this e-book is intended to accompany the one-hour workshop *Talking with Kids about Tough Stuff*. There are intentional blank spaces for you to take notes, as well as a blank page at the end.

I'm Robyn...

After being a therapist for children with a history of complex trauma (and their families) I've moved into a new role that allows me to connect with and impact more families than I ever could in the office! Thank you for joining me and supporting the kids in your life.



LET'S CONNECT!



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WHY IS HONESTY IMPORTANT?

"What's shareable is bearable" Dr. Dan Siegel

NARRATIVES SUPPORT BRAIN INTEGRATION



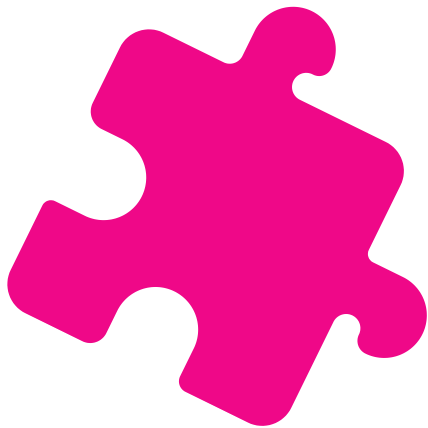
Integration - Reciprocal energy & information flow between differentiated and linked systems

Integration is an indication of both mental wellness & secure attachment. We can use story telling to promote left & right mode integration in the brain.

THE BRAIN LIKES PATTERNS

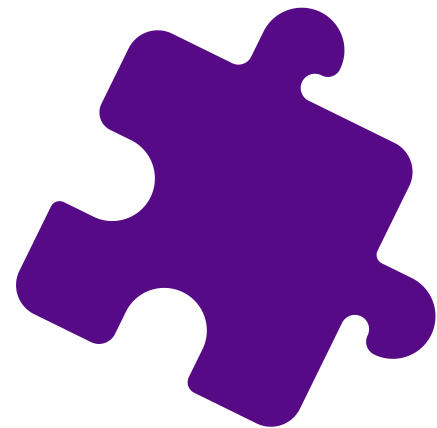
Without our help, our child's brain will work to make sense of an experience without the story necessarily being true or accurate.

WE CAN HELP BY LINKING UP THE PUZZLE PIECES IN THE STORY



Use the left mode of
processing to put
the event in order &
correct the facts

Use the right mode
of processing to
revisit emotions and
to connection to
sensations.





TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF

BUT...WHAT IF THEY DON'T REMEMBER?

Preverbal experiences are remembered, not recalled.

Without the narrative to make sense of preverbal experiences, children are left feeling confused and mixed-up because they don't know WHY they feel that way



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MEMORY

Watch my FREE three-part video series:
[Trauma, Memory, & Behaviors](#)

ASK YOURSELF- DID THIS EXPERIENCE:

Happen when my child was present? Even in another room? Even in utero?

Help my child understand why their parents weren't able to care for them?

DO OTHER PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT IT?

WILL MY CHILD DISCOVER IT ON GOOGLE?

If the answer to any of the above questions is YES, your child needs this information.

ATTACHMENT & COHERENT LIFE NARRATIVES

Research using the Adult Attachment Interview indicates that one of the best predictors of developing a secure state of mind is having a 'coherent life narrative.'

WHAT IS COHERENT?

1. In order with a beginning, middle, and end
2. The feelings and sensations accurately match the experience
3. The intensity of the feelings and sensations aren't overwhelming or ignored. We can connect with the feeling and stay present.



OUR LIFE STORIES CAN EVOLVE

CO-CREATION OF NARRATIVES

Co-creating the narrative with our children helps us learn about erroneous beliefs, including mental models and embodied anticipations.

REMEMBER!!!

It's not uncommon for children to believe they are responsible for the things that have happened to them. We have to help them understand the truth!

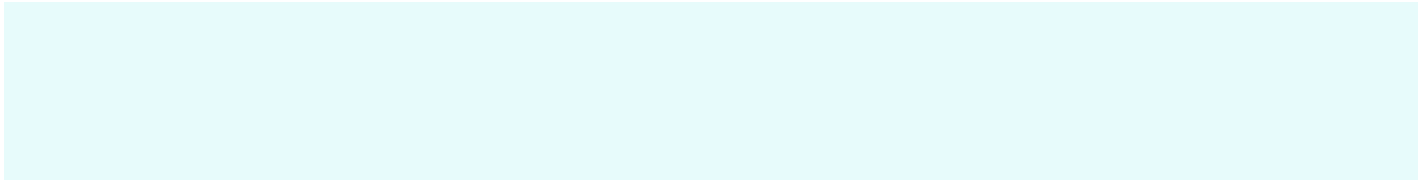
Co-creating the narrative supports our children in 'feeling-felt'- which is an attachment need. It helps to develop trust that adults will help them through hard things.

Confusion & chaos leave whispers in the nervous system that trick kids into believing there is something wrong with them.

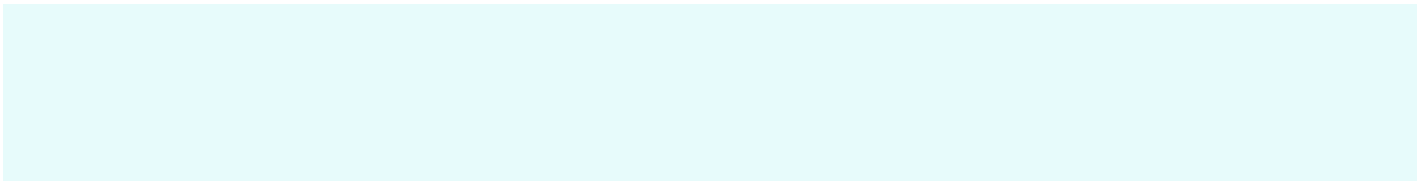
It's their story. It belongs to them.

HOW DO WE DO THIS??

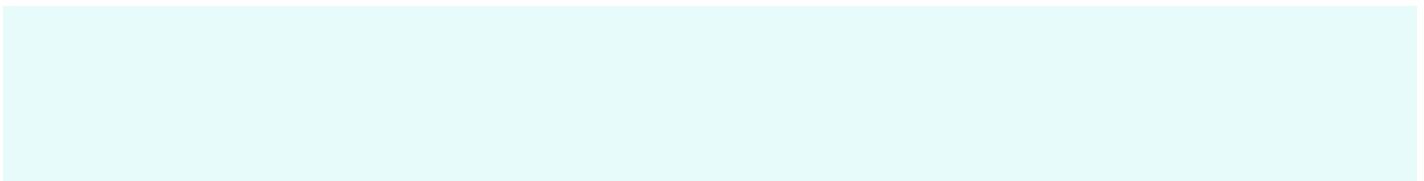
OPEN & RECEPTIVE



WITH CONFIDENCE



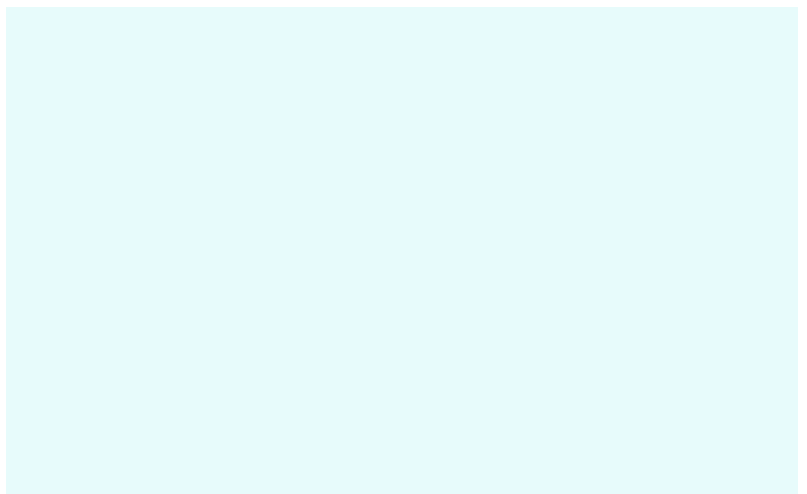
WITH ATTUNEMENT



If needed- call a pause

SPENT TIME WITH YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT:

- Why your child is asking
- YOUR beliefs and feelings
- Other feelings that are coming up





TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF

DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

0-3

Adoption is abstract. They may not yet understand adoption but their preverbal memory holds the loss of their parents and the abuse/neglect they experienced. Begin by talking about your child's adoption story right away, staying focused on things like "You were born to a different mom/dad and then you came to live with us." Make a story book. Read story books. Keep pictures of their family up in your home. Practice it being a normal part of conversation.

4-7

Children at this age have more ability to understand adoption as being first a loss. Begin talking about why their mother/father couldn't care for them. At the early years of this stage, words like "She didn't know how to take care of babies" or "He couldn't take care of you the way you needed." Eventually, this isn't sufficient and children need more information. Focus on the concrete reasons.

Children in this stage often believe they are to blame. Be on the lookout for those types of beliefs. Empathize, validate, and then provide the accurate information.

8-12

Children are now able to understand more complex and abstract topics. You can use plain and accurate language. Be aware that it's common for kids at this age to stop asking questions- they are worried about their adoptive parent's feelings or they don't like bringing attention to the fact that they are different. Stay attuned! Look for ways to be clear that you know they can love all their parents, that talking about their parents (even parents that hurt them) is welcome in your family and it doesn't hurt your feelings or overwhelm you. Honor their desire to focus less on adoption, if that's expressed.

SHARE THE HARD STUFF BEFORE AGE 12

KEEFER-SMALLEY & SCHOOLER, 2015



TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT TOUGH STUFF

EVERYONE IS ALWAYS DOING THE BEST THEY CAN

....even you (and your kids).

Write down your reactions to that statement below

SO...IF WE CAN:

1. Regulate ourselves first
2. Be in attunement with our child
3. Know that the answer always has to land on the (age appropriate) truth (even if the truth is that you need to call a pause)
4. Hold on to the belief that people are always doing the best they can...

Everything becomes a lot more clear

WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY SAY?

The below language suggestions are a combination of information learned from Daniel Siegel's "The Whole Brain Child," Keefer-Smalley & Schooler's "Telling the Truth to your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past," and from the children and families who trust me with their stories.

Substance Abuse: Be specific and concrete about the impact of the drugs/alcohol on your child's mother/family's inability to care for them. "Your mother used drugs" isn't enough and doesn't mean anything, especially to a young child. "Your mother used drugs/alcohol and they made her brain very confused. Because of this confused brain, she could not make the choices she needed to take care of you and keep you safe."

Examples of concrete issues that prevent a mother from being able to take care of her children are: Exposed you to unsafe people; Slept too much; Did not have enough money to have food/have a safe place to live."

When children ask why their parent(s) didn't quit using drugs/alcohol: "Drugs/alcohol trick the brain into thinking you NEED them. The same way you need food."

Older children can plainly discuss the facts of addiction.

Mental Illness: You can use words like "Sickness and illness can impact all parts of the body- even the brain. When sickness or illness impacts the brain, it can (not always) lead to confusing and unsafe thoughts and behaviors. There is medicine for brain/mental illness/sickness but sometimes it is hard to get that medicine and sometimes it is hard to keep taking it- because the brain is confused!"

"When the brain is confused, or has hard, big feelings like mad or sad ALL the time instead of just some of the time, it makes it very hard for grown ups to take care of kids and ask for help."

Similar to substance abuse, you can focus on the concrete issues.

Older children can plainly discuss mental illness.

WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY SAY?

Incarceration: This can start with "Your mommy/daddy broke a really big rule. Sometimes when people break a big rule, they have to take a time out. Your mommy/daddy is taking a time out right now." This can progress to "When people in our country break the law, they sometimes go to jail."

It's helpful to talk to children about the social issues involved, including the types of things that contribute to illegal behavior.

"Your mom/dad will be in jail for a long time and the judge decided it was important that you live in a family."

Prostitution: Similar to mental illness and drug use, it's not the actual act of prostitution that causes a parent to be unable to care for their child. Be concrete. Frequently, prostitution and drug use are intertwined. Prostitution exposes children to unsafe people and places them in unsafe situations. Prostitution can lead to children seeing things that only grown-ups should see and this makes children feel bad, scared, and confused. Be clear in your language. Prostitution means earning money by having sex. This by itself is neutral.

It's OK to respond to children's reactions with reflections such as "It's very confusing isn't it." "It is hard to understand why people do some of the things they do. I trust your mom was doing the very best she could. Unfortunately, it wasn't a safe way for a child to live so the judge/case workers wanted you to live in a safe family."

By now you are noticing a theme! It is crucial the adults stay anchored in their belief that people are always doing the best they can. When we believe this, the words come more easily. We can be honest about what happened without shame. We can also be honest without shame while expressing appropriate feelings of anger and sadness that these things happened to our children.

WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY SAY?

Physical Abuse: For young children, a statement such as "You're mom/dad sometimes had mad feelings that were so big that it was dangerous." This can progress to "Your mom/dad had a very hard time with mad and angry feelings. You know how it's important for people to use their words when they have mad and angry feelings? No one taught your mom/dad to use their words. Their mad feelings would get so big so fast that they would use their hands and fists when they had mad feelings."

As children get older, you can begin to discuss what kinds of things lead to physical abuse- including being a victim of abuse, not knowing how to regulate emotions, substance use, mental illness, family cycles of abuse, control, etc.

Sexual Abuse: This is a complex topic that likely requires the assistance of a therapist to navigate. You can start with "Your parents did not know how to take care of babies/children. They did not know what babies/children need." As children get older, lay the groundwork for discussions about sex by talking about and learning about sex openly. As children learn about safe and unsafe touches, behaviors can be framed in that context. "Your mother/father did not know about safe and unsafe touches, and she/he used unsafe touches with you (or your siblings)." Use accurate language for all body parts (penis, vulva, vagina) and avoid euphemisms.

As children get older, you can begin to discuss the kinds of things that lead to sexual abuse, including being a victim of sexual abuse. These are topics that must be handled with attunement and curiosity as explaining the cycle of abuse raises worries in children that they could become an abuser.

Learn accurate information about mental illness, domestic violence, abuse, substance abuse, etc. Remember...all behavior makes sense. Sometimes it's not safe and behavior needs a boundary. Understanding what leads to difficult behaviors can help us stay out of judgement while also maintaining a boundary (it's never OK to hurt kids).

WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY SAY?

Rape: The time-frame depends on when children begin to think about or being curious about having a father. This conversation can start with "Your mother did not know your father." As children begin to understand sex and how babies are made (don't delay!) you can add "Your mother did not want to have sex with your father." This will eventually unfold into conversations about consent and ultimately introducing the word 'rape' (in preadolescence, though some children may learn that word earlier at school or from peers. My son learned the word rape watching documentaries about World War 2!)

Birth Siblings: When siblings are raised by a child's bio-family, adopted children may experience grief, anger, confusion, and even jealousy. Expect and normalize these feelings- understand we cannot fix or change these feelings. "Before/after you were born, your mom had another child. That's your brother/sister. Your brother/sister and your mom live together."

Unknown History: When a child's history is unknown, we can sometimes piece together information based on what we do know or about issues common to where that child was born. Be sure to be honest about this. "We aren't sure the answers to those questions, but what we do know about a lot of other babies born in China and adopted by parents in the US is...."

There is great power in acknowledging "I don't know. I wish we did." It may be appropriate to discuss ways you can work together to find out.

If children are adopted from countries where there is known trafficking or other illegal activities common in international adoption, discuss this with your child before they understand how to Google. You want your child to learn these things from you. This is a devastating but very real truth for some adopted children.

WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY SAY?

Abandonment: When children were found abandoned in a safe place, be sure to be clear about that piece of the information. "Your mother seems to have been very brave and chose a very safe place where she knew you would be found right away and taken care of." This could be daycare, school, hospital, or an orphanage. In most circumstances, it is illegal to abandon a baby and your child's mother took great risks to place them in a safe location. This can be included in the narrative.

When children are abandoned/found in unsafe places, there are other social issues involved, including homelessness, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, or poverty. Talk with children age appropriately about these circumstances.

When a child moves placements due to their foster/adoptive parents being unable to manage their behavior: Always be clear that it is never a child's fault when adults cannot provide for their needs.

"All children deserve parents who know how to take care of them or can learn how to take care of them. Your foster parents didn't know how to take care of you in the way you needed, and they couldn't learn fast enough."

"When kids had bad, scary, and confusing things happen to them, their brain and heart and feelings can sometimes feel very mixed up. Children need parents who can help them with those mixed up feelings. Sometimes mixed up feelings are so big and confusing that they can lead to scary or unsafe behaviors. It's always the grown-up's job to know how to take care of kids and get them what they need."

"We are working with (therapist name) so you can get help with your big feelings and so that we can know how to best help you at home."

WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY SAY?

They seem happy without me! All families have lots of different feelings. Sometimes your mom/dad/brother/sister do seem happy and I'll bet that is super confusing and feels very sad.

When you were born/little/younger, your mom/dad weren't happy at all. They had so many struggles- the biggest struggles ever! That's why it wasn't safe for you to live with them.

Sometimes what we see in pictures or at visits isn't always what it's like all the time. I'm glad when you have visits with your mom/dad they seem happy so you can have happy times with them, but I'm sure it's confusing why you live with us instead of them if they seem so happy.

Why does my brother/sister get to live with my mom/dad? Or- similar: If my mom/dad are doing well now, why can't I go live with them?:

When you were a baby/little/younger, your mom/dad couldn't take care of you the way you needed and keep you safe (see above scripts for specific reasons if needed). The grown-ups decided you needed to live in a safe place right away and couldn't wait for them to learn how to be safe parents. I'm so glad you came to live with us so we could help you be safe and I know it was so hard for you to lose your mom/dad.

Your mom/dad have worked hard and now they have a safe place to live. We didn't know how long that would take and when you came to live with us, the judge decided it would be best if you lived with us forever. I know it's confusing. Sometimes I'm confused, too.

OR- the grown-ups decided that since you've had such a long life in our family, its best for you to stay here. What kinds of visits/calls/ways to be connected can we plan with your mom/dad?

****Sometimes kids ask really good questions. Maybe it is possible to explore if they can live with their parents now?****

NOTES

REFERENCES

Keefer-Smalley, Betsy & Schooler, Jayne (2015). *Telling the Truth to your Adopted and Foster Child 2nd ed.*

Siegel, Daniel (2012). *The Developing Mind 3rd Edition*

Siegel, Daniel & Bryson, Tina (2011). *The Whole Brain Child*

Siegel, Daniel & Hartsell, Mary (2003). *Parenting from the Inside Out*

Brown, Brene (2015). *Rising Strong.*

RESOURCES (FREE)

Trauma, Memory, & Behaviors (video series)

What Behavior Really Is...and How to Change Is (video series)

Dear Adoptive Parents, How I Needed You (video)

No Behavior is Maladaptive (blog/podcast)

Adoption Grief (blog/podcast)