

## Missing Pieces: Talking to Your Child About Adoption When Information Is Limited

How much do you know about your child? Parents who adopted internationally, those who experienced a closed adoption, or whose child was relinquished through the Safe Haven law in Wisconsin may find that they know very little about their child's medical, social, or birth family history. So, why is this important? Most children and youth who were adopted will someday ask to find out about their birth family members or will have questions about their pasts. This tip sheet looks at what you can do to support your children when you have little or no information about their birth family.

### Adoption, Loss, and Its Implications

Adoption cannot happen without loss, and most adoptees experience some amount of grief over the loss of their relationships with birth family and culture. When information about the child's birth family is lacking, those feelings of loss may be even more intense and might surface at various points in the child's life. If the adoption was preceded by an abandonment, children may experience self-esteem issues as they try to understand how and why their birth parent would desert them.

Adoption is a lifelong journey, and your child's feelings and understanding about adoption will change as she goes through various developmental stages and life events. Preschool-aged children often view adoption

in a positive light and may ask a lot of questions about the subject. By the time children who were adopted reach school age, most realize that, in order to be adopted, their birth parents had to make a difficult decision to make an adoption plan.

### The Teen Years and Beyond

Adolescence can be a trying period for any young person, and adoption adds another layer of complexity. Identity becomes a big focus during the teen years. Part of a person's identity includes where they came from and how that affects who they are. Adolescents who do not know much information about their past may struggle with questions like "who am I?"

Those who joined their family through birth or through an open adoption, have some idea of what their birth family looks like, what they have in common with them, and/or why their birth family made an adoption plan. Youth who know little about their past may struggle with the unknown. In general, most teens try to fit in with their peers and don't like to stand out. Since most teenagers have information about their family history, a teen who was adopted can feel "different."

During the teen years, feelings of loss related to adoption may appear or intensify. As teens start exploring the dating world, they are likely to enter a relationship that ends abruptly after several days, weeks, or



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months, as most young courtships do. For the teen, this can feel like abandonment and cause them to feel that they are (again) unworthy of love. Adolescents who were abandoned as infants may also find it challenging to deal with the transition to adulthood, especially if it means moving away from their adoptive family for college or other endeavors. For some, this is a reenactment of an earlier loss of their birth family and, when that loss occurred, it lasted forever. Abandonment issues can resurface when you least expect them; some adoptees may re-experience loss issues when they become parents themselves.

### Lack of Medical History and Information

Not having access to medical or genetic information can affect a child and her adoptive family in many ways.

Adoptive mom Karianne Osowski admits that her daughter's medical and genetic history are always in the back of her mind, because there is so much that is unknown. A doctor's appointment may lead to questions about family history that cannot be answered, which may lead to sadness or embarrassment for the adoptee. Here are some situations that may be triggers for some children who were adopted:

- *Medical exams*—often occur at times of change, such as before school starts, when adoptees are often already emotionally vulnerable
- *Illness or medical crises*—the adoptee may wonder if having family medical information could have prevented or changed the outcome of the situation
- *Medical related school assignments*—blood typing and other science-related

assignments that ask children to compare a physical feature to that of their parents

### Tips for Talking to Your Child

Most adoptees will have questions about their birth family at some point during their childhood or adolescence. Having open and honest talks with your child about adoption might help reduce any feelings of shame she may be experiencing, as well as help her understand that her past does not fully define who she is or who she hopes to become.

So, what happens when questions come up for which you don't have an answer? It is never easy to have to tell your child that you don't have the answers that she is looking for, especially if that fact is likely to cause

your child pain. Talk together about her questions and cross those unknown bridges with gentleness and honesty. Admitting that you don't know the answers she is looking for is certainly hard, and your child may have a hard time hearing that, as well. Keep the line of dialogue open and check back with her so that you can help your child deal with and work through any feelings of frustration, hurt,

or anger related to those unknowns in her history.

Keep in mind that **no** adoptive parent has the answer to **all** of the questions their child will ask about her birth family. As children develop, they may even go through a time of thinking that their adoptive parent, who claims to have little or no information about their birth family, is actually withholding information from them. Sometimes it's helpful for youth to hear from more than one "source." If possible, reach out to the adoption agency that you worked with and



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ask a representative from that agency to call, come speak with, or send a note to your child explaining that the information she is looking for, was not provided at the time of her adoption. Sometimes you may simply have to deliver the same message many times and help your child deal with the disappointment of not knowing.

How you frame the information you share with your child can make a difference in the way she perceives her story. For example, telling your child from a young age that, “your birth mother chose a safe place for you,” can help her focus on the positive aspects of adoption. Telling your child that, “your birth mother abandoned you,” has a much more negative feel. As is the case with all conversations about adoption, be mindful of your child’s age and developmental level. If the child was abandoned, you might talk together about some possible situations that might have led her birth parent(s) to make that decision, such as unsafe circumstances, limited parenting knowledge, or a lack of resources or support. The box to the right illustrates how some ways of talking to your child about abandonment may look.

### **Creative Ideas**

Talking to your child about her feelings is important, as are creative ways that might help her work through those feelings and emotions. For example, books are a great way to introduce the subject of adoption and help children understand that they are not alone. You might keep some of the numerous adoption-related books available in your home collection so that your child can read and re-read them, if needed.

Young children often respond well to being asked to draw a picture of their adoption story. Adoptive parent Tricia Burkett encourages her six-year-old daughter to write letters and draw pictures for her birth family, and then place them in a special folder. Tricia has told her daughter that, if

### **Talking about Abandonment**

*Preschool Years:* “Your mother couldn’t take care of you and wanted you to be safe. So she found a safe place to put you where safe adults would come and take care of you.”

*Early Elementary:* “We feel sad sometimes, and even mad sometimes, that we cannot give you any more information. Do you ever have any sad or mad feelings about not knowing anything? It is important that you understand that you are not responsible for the decision your parents made.”

*Middle School Years:* “Although we do not have information directly about your birth parents, we can explore all about your country and learn to understand why birth parents had to make such difficult decisions. When you think about your birth parents, what do you think about? Are you ever sad or angry that you don’t know anything about them? What would you like us to do to help you?”

*Preteen:* Continue using educational resources to fill in a child’s cultural and educational background. Continue to ask the questions mentioned above in greater depth. Consider locating a peer support group of other adopted preteens and teens that deals with open discussion regarding adoption issues.

—From the book *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past* (page 99)

she ever gets to meet her birth family, she can give them the folder so that they know that she has been thinking about them. Tricia has noticed that this activity has been therapeutic for her daughter, and has allowed her to develop a connection with her birth family, even though they have never met. Older children or teens may benefit from being given a private journal in order to

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write about and process their emotions. Resources like the art therapy book *Adopted and Wondering: Drawing Out Feelings* can help your child get started on this process.

Hold on to any significant artifacts or pieces of information about your child's birth family. This could be anything from a piece of paperwork with the birth mother's handwriting or a photo of the child's birth parent. You may have heard about life books, which document a child's life using photos, stories, and other mementos. Even if there are many gaps in your child's history, making a life book could help her develop a connection to her past.



One adoptive mom had little information regarding the birth family of the child she adopted from out of state. However, she did know which hospital the child was born at, and, when she was in town, she stopped by the hospital to take a picture to add to the child's life book. You may also be able to use the Internet and resources like Google to get images of places or maps, such as streets, hospitals, or significant places people were born or lived. Consider other creative ways by which you could add information that may be meaningful for your child, even if it is not directly related to their family history. If you know your child's birthdate, you could use a website like [My Birthday Facts](#) to find facts such as how many hours/days/seconds old they are, or who was President when they were born. Websites like [Info Please](#) can provide information about U.S. and world events, movies, music, sports, and other newsworthy events that happened the year of your child's birth. While none of this will make up for a lack of information about her birth family, it can help your child develop a sense of individuality.

### Searching for Answers

At some point, your child may wish to search for more information about her birth family, a decision that could bring up conflicting emotions. They may fear finding their birth family and then being rejected by them a second time. Or, they may worry that searching for their birth family will upset their adoptive family. It can help to let your child know that it is okay for her to search for her birth family – she may even appreciate your help with this process. Even children who have good relationships with their adoptive parents and are happy and well-adjusted can long to know more about their birth families. On the other hand, some adoptees may not have an interest in their birth family history. Your child's feelings about wanting to know

more or not may change over time; regardless of how she wants to proceed, do your best to support her and let her know that you are on her side. For more information on search and reunion, view our [To Search or Not to Search tip sheet](#).

### The Importance of Connections

Getting to know other parents who have adopted may not only give you some additional support, but those other parents may have insight to share about how they handled a particular situation. If your child joined your family as a result of Wisconsin's Safe Haven law, you may be interested in Safe Place for Newborns. This nonprofit organization hosts a [Facebook page](#) where adoptive parents can network, and also organizes social events, during which adults and children from safe haven families can get together. If you adopted through international or domestic infant adoption, there are [various support groups](#) throughout the state that might fit your family's needs, as well.

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For children and teens who were adopted, being around other adoptees can help them feel “normal.” Adoptees may establish meaningful connections with other adoptees at a workshop, camp, or in a support group setting. It may also be beneficial to find an adoptee who is older than your child to act as a mentor. These relationships are particularly helpful when adoptees are able to share common experiences and ways they have coped with the challenges associated with being adopted. These days, the Internet and social media can help children make connections with other adoptees. Even connecting your child to a blog written by another adoptee many help her see that her feelings are “normal” and show her that she is not alone.

Throughout your adoption journey, you will likely experience many joys, as well as many challenges. Adoptive families with little or no information about their child’s birth family can expect that their child will have many unanswered questions. As your child’s guide through this journey, you have the opportunity to encourage her to talk about her true feelings about adoption, whether they are positive, negative, or conflicting. You will be there to support her when she has questions that cannot be answered. Remember that you are not alone in this journey and that the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is also here to support and guide you.



## Resources

### From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*, by Betsy Keefer & Jayne Schooler
- *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew*, by Sherrie Eldridge
- *The Primal Wound*, by Nancy Newton
- *Making Room in Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties Through Open Adoption*, by Micky Duxbury
- *The Sounds of Hope: A True Story of an Adoptee’s Quest for her Origin*, by Anne Bauer
- *Connecting with Kids Through Stories: Using Narratives to Facilitate Attachment in Adopted Children*, by Denise Lacher

### Tip Sheets

- [Talking to Your Children about Their Birth Parents](#)
- [The Journey of Forgiveness: How to Teach Your Children](#)
- [Empowering Your Children to Tell Their Adoption Stories](#)

### Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Compassion for Birth Families](#)
- [There’s Always Something Good](#)

### Other Resources

- [Lavender Luz Blog](#)
- [Wisconsin Adoption Records Search Program](#)