

## Talking to Your Children About Their Birth Parents

Most children who have been adopted wonder about their birth parents—at least to some extent.

For parents, the challenge comes in knowing when to bring up birth parents and how to answer tough questions. Should you bring it up? Should you wait for your child to come to you?

If you wait for your child to bring it up, it might not happen. They might be afraid of hurting your feelings or they might not know it's okay to talk about birth families.

While the subject can seem scary, talking about birth parents with your child can actually reinforce the bond you share and strengthen your relationship. Often parents fear that the conversation will lead to their child becoming more interested in the birth parent and less interested in their family. Ultimately, it can be a way for your child to fully understand how they came to be yours.

- **Be prepared** for questions about your child's birth parents. We've all been uncomfortable when we're caught off guard by sensitive questions. Decide what information you would like to share ahead of time, so you are able to think it through and not simply react to questions.
- **Speak to parents** of other children who were adopted. Ask them what questions took them by surprise.



- **Read books.** There are great children's books for all ages that will likely help you. Books are a particularly great resource because they refer to someone else's story, and it's a non-threatening chance for both of you to make comments or ask questions.
- **Consider your child's story.** What questions can you anticipate? Practice by having a discussion out loud with a partner or trusted friend who will give you feedback.
  - **Be consistent.** Your child should hear the same story from both parents. Talk to your partner before hand, so that you give your child a similar message.

### Knowing Where Your Child Is Along the Journey

Be honest when it comes to information about your child's past, but it doesn't mean you have to divulge everything all at once. Sharing what your child can handle is more important than sharing every single detail in one sitting.

- Allow your child to leave the conversation. Let them process the information. They will return when they have additional questions.
- Let your children set the tone. The conversation can be informal, brief and informative. Answer questions and wait for a response. Your children will guide you to what they want to know.
- The questions that your children ask provide wonderful insight about their level of understanding.

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- Preschoolers need to hear things more than once. Tell the story of their own adoption, including the birth parents, repeatedly. Read books about birth parents. This is laying the foundation for openness later.
- School-aged children understand their adoption on a deeper level and are recognizing that their story is different from peers. Normalize their experience and help them explore possible solutions.

*It must be hard being the only kid in your class who has been adopted. Tell me about the times when it is especially hard.*

- Adolescents may present you with a roller coaster of emotions. One minute they want to talk about it, the next they don't. Allow the topic to come up naturally.
- Your children may have questions about their birth parents and you don't know the answer. This can be hard to accept, but it can be helpful to discuss the possibilities.

*Child: Why didn't my birth mom want me?*

*Parent: I don't know why your birth mother chose to make an adoption plan, but I do know that she was really young when she had you. Do you think that may have made a difference?*

### **Keep Emotions in Perspective**

Children of all ages can sense when an emotional response has been triggered. Rather than focusing on your emotional

response, consider what emotion caused your child to ask a certain question or act a certain way.

*You're not my real mom, so I don't have to listen to you.*

There are few other statements that could evoke such an intense emotional reaction. But consider the emotional state of your child. Your child could simply be looking for reassurance that they belong. Don't take this personally! Let your child know that you are in fact their parent. For example:

*I am really your mom when I am doing your laundry, making dinner, and snuggling you at night.*

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### **Respect Your Child's Response**

Some children who have been adopted feel it's disloyal to discuss birth parents. They may avoid the conversation or not ask questions to spare hurt feelings. Reassure your

child that it's possible to think about or miss birth families while still loving you at the same time.

Be honest about your own response. You might tell your children that you may, in fact, have conflicting feelings yourself. But that's okay. Above all, you and your children will get through any tough times together as a family, just like you enjoy the good times together as a family.

Wisconsin adoptive parent Tracy McLeod recalls talking to her son Jon about his birth dad. His birth mom had told him that his dad was dead. In reality, the dad didn't even know he had a child until someone in the family saw a published legal notice.

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“We were driving in the car,” she says. “And we asked him, ‘How would you feel if you had a biological dad and that your [birth] mom hadn’t been truthful about who he is?’ Then Jon didn’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“But I told him, ‘Jon if you ever want to talk about it, we can. I have pictures if you want to see them.’”

One week later, Jon decided he wanted to see pictures. “He thought it was cool that Juan [the birth father] and he looked so much alike.”

### Teach Adoption-Friendly Language

It’s okay to gently or humorously correct someone who asks about “your adopted child.” You can laugh and reference their “birth child” or you can simply correct them and say, “my child.” You are setting the tone for future conversations. Some other examples include:

- “Her birth mother made an adoption plan” is more affirming than “The birth mother gave up her child for adoption,” because it implies that the adoption was planned—that the child was important but couldn’t be parented by the birth parents. Whereas “given up” implies that the child wasn’t wanted and was therefore given up.
- “Her son, who was adopted from Korea...” uses people-first language, rather than “her adopted Korean son,” which emphasizes Korea and adoption over her son.
- When you use positive adoption language, you validate your child’s experience.
- You are a role model. The words you use and the ease of the conversation will be replicated in interactions between your child and others when you aren’t there.

Getting ready to have birth parent conversations may seem overwhelming, but

there are wonderful benefits to doing so. It will establish a pattern of communication that will remain helpful as your child grows up. Most importantly, it will help you strengthen your relationship with your child.



### Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *All About Adoption: How to Deal with the Questions of Your Past*, by Anne Lanchon
- *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past*, by Betsy Keefer
- *Never Never Never Will She Stop Loving You*, by Jolene Durrant
- *We See the Moon*, by Carrie Kitze
- *I’m Brown and My Sister Isn’t*, by Robbie O’Shea
- *You Grew in Our Hearts*, by Vachelle Johnston