

## 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 their 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.

Adoption is a lifelong journey, and your child's feelings and understanding about adoption will change as they go 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 their birth parents made an adoption plan or were involved with systems of care that led to their adoption.
- 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 about their past may struggle with questions like "who am I?" Those who joined their family through birth or an open adoption have

some idea of what their birth family looks like, what they have in common with them, and perhaps the circumstances that led to adoption. Youth who know little about their past may struggle with the unknown.

During the teen years, feelings of loss related to adoption may appear

or intensify. As teens explore dating, they will likely enter a relationship that ends abruptly after several days, weeks, or months, as most young courtships do. For teens, this can feel like abandonment and cause them to think 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



Continued on page 2

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 their 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 frequently 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 about adoption might help reduce any feelings of shame they may be experiencing.

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 they are looking for, especially if that fact is likely to cause

your child pain. Talk about their questions and cross those unknown bridges with gentleness and honesty. Admitting that you don't know the answers they are looking for is undoubtedly hard, and your child may also have difficulty hearing that. Keep the line of dialogue open and check back with them so that you can help your child deal with and work through any feelings of frustration, hurt, or anger related to those unknowns in their history.

Keep in mind that **no** adoptive parent has the answer to **all** of the questions their child will ask about their 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 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 you worked with and ask a representative from that agency to call, speak with, or send a note to your child explaining that the information they are looking for was not provided at the time of their 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 how they perceive their story. For example, telling your child from a young age that "your birth mother chose a safe place for you" can help them 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 their birth parent(s) to make that decision,

Continued on page 3

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 essential, as are creative ways to help them 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 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 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 to 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 pictures, stories, and other mementos. Even if there are many gaps in your child's history,

### 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 more information. Do you ever have any sad or mad feelings about not knowing anything? I want you to know you are not responsible for your parents' decision."

*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 academic 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)

making a life book could help them develop a connection to their 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.

Continued on page 4

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 in the year of your child's birth. While none of this will make up for a lack of information about their 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 their 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 them to search for their birth family—they 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 they want to proceed, do your best to support them and let them know that you are on their side. (View our To Search or Not to Search tip sheet for more information on search and reunion.)

### The Importance of Connections

Getting to know other parents who have adopted may give you some additional support. Other parents may have insight to

share about how they handled a particular situation.

If your child joined your family due to 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, various support groups throughout the state might fit your family's needs, as well.

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 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 can share everyday experiences and ways they have coped with the challenges of adoption.

Throughout your adoption journey, you will likely experience many joys and 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 them to talk about their true feelings about adoption, whether they are positive, negative, or conflicting. You will be there to support them when they have 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 on page 5



## Resources

### From the [Resource 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](#)
- [Empowering Your Children to Tell Their Adoption Stories](#)
- [To Search or Not To Search](#)

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

- [From Birth Mom to Foster Parent: A Journey of Compassion](#)
- [There's Always Something Good](#)

### Additional WiFCC Resource

- [Resources for Adult Adoptees](#)

### Additional Resources

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