

## Family Matters: Talking to Children in Care About Their Parents

Children who are separated from family, whether temporarily or permanently, may feel disconnected from their own history. They will have questions that, often, only the birth parents can answer. Despite the loving and nurturing care we provide as caregivers or adoptive parents, it is natural for kids to wonder about and miss their parents. It falls on us to be prepared to answer children's questions and help fill in the missing chapters of their stories.

### Preparing: Understanding Our Own Feelings

First, we need to come to terms with our own feelings toward the parent or things the parent may have done. The more understanding and empathy caregivers can bring to conversations with the child, minus shame and blame, the better.

Remember, children see themselves as an extension of their parents. The child's best interest has to be at the heart of all conversations.

### Be a Safe Listener & Responder

Children and youth need a safe space to ask questions, express their feelings, and receive support. Sometimes caregivers are hesitant to entertain talking about parents due to:

- A fear that the information may hurt more than help
- Their own feelings about the parent(s)

- Lack of information
- Concerns about the impact on attachment

Likewise, children and youth may hesitate to ask caregivers about family for fear of hurting the caregiver's feelings, appearing disloyal, or fearing the answers they might get.

Here are tips for being a safe space for kids:

- Encourage kids to let you or the parent know if they have questions or concerns.
  - Commit to honoring the family by working through your own feelings about the parents.
  - Stay focused on what's best for the child.
  - Normalize looking for and talking about the positives in parents.



"I love that you're so smart, just like your mom."

- Let kids know you're happy to answer questions—but you may not always have answers.
- Avoid saying or doing anything that will make the child feel disloyal in missing or wanting to talk about their family.
- Watch for cues when the child wants to end the conversation.

### Get to Know the Parent(s)

Imagine someone who doesn't know you

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answering your child's questions about you. Worse yet, what if their source of information was reports written about your worst moments or biggest mistakes?

The best source of information about parents is, of course, parents themselves. This is even more reason to start building collaborative relationships as early as possible. The better we get to know them, the more comfortable we are in working together to answer kids' sensitive questions.

One Wisconsin foster parent shared how she handled questions. "I pledged to Mom on day one to work with her to get her kids home as soon as possible. When an issue would come up, we'd talk through it together and decide who would respond and how. The exception was if the child asked something in confidence. If it were out of my depth, I would encourage her to talk with Mom."

### Be Open and Honest

Avoiding conversations or being dishonest with answers has never spared a child's feelings or protected them from hurt—but it can damage your relationship. Children know more than we think. Remember, often, they've lived the reality we are trying to protect them from *hearing* about. Providing true, accurate information, at an age or developmentally appropriate level, is the greatest gift you can give the child or youth and their family.

What if the truth is hard?

We can be truthful while still being sensitive

and compassionate. Consider the difference between "your parents are heroin addicts" versus "your parents have the illness of addiction."

### Pair Honesty with Support

Even though honesty is the best approach, children and youth will still have big feelings about the reasons for family separation. We need to validate those feelings and provide reassurance. We can do this by:

- Telling them they are loved (e.g., "Not being able to take care of you doesn't mean they don't love you")
- Empathizing with how they are feeling
  - Reenforcing that their feelings are important
  - Reaffirming it is not their fault
  - Validating how difficult it must be for them
  - Reassuring them they are safe and you will be there for them

*After working on forgiveness the whole time his dad was in prison, fourteen-year-old David was ready to get to know him. When he called his grandfather for the new phone number, he was told his dad had passed away 3 months earlier.*

*"I didn't call you because I figured it would just upset you."*

### When Information Isn't Available

There are those situations, such as a Safe Haven or other

anonymous surrender, where information about the parents simply is not available. Then what? If left to the imagination, we tend to imagine the worst scenarios—that we were simply unloved or unwanted. If you listen to enough parents who have surrendered a child, you'll learn this is rarely true. The vast majority of the time a child is surrendered because the parents believe they are giving their child a better life in doing so. Getting the child connected with a skilled therapist they talk with and/or a support group can be immensely helpful.

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## For Relative Caregivers

Although the same strategies apply, talking about parents may be a greater challenge for the relative caregiver. Yes, you may have more information than a non-relative caregiver—but you also may be working through your own grief, loss, hurt, or anger. This is understandable. It's not so easy to put those feelings aside when the parent is a loved one.

A grandmother in Sheboygan offers this: “Getting involved in therapy, a support group, or another place where you can talk through your feelings—preferably with people in the same boat—really helps. It's okay to let the kids know that you are hurting, too. It's not okay to talk negatively about the parents to the kids. That doesn't help anyone.”

## Conclusion

Family and cultural history shape our identities and help us understand how we move in the world. It is not only normal but healthy for children to have questions, want to stay connected to family, and want all the pages to their stories. This is an ongoing process, not a one-time conversation. As parents and caregivers, honoring the child's connection with family and helping a child discover the whole of themselves can only strengthen our relationships—with both the child and their family.



## Resources

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Healing-Centered Engagement: The Power of Community and Connection](#)

Additional WiFCC Resource

- [Connection Is Crucial for Healing Conversations](#)

Additional Resources

- [Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Helping Your Child Come to a Strength-Based Understanding of His or Her Life Story](#)
- [Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence](#)