

Talking with Children about Adoption/Guardianship or Aspects of their Past

1. **Create an environment of communicative openness:** give the child permission to find answers and acknowledge the difference of adoption or guardianship.
2. **Start talking about adoption early and initiate ongoing opportunities:** just because a child is not talking about adoption does not mean she is not thinking about it. For example, an adoptive father asked his 9-year old son if he ever thought about adoption, and the boy answered “not really”. He then asked if he ever thought about his birth mother, and his son replied, “All the time!” Parents should not wait for a child to bring it up but should initiate discussions about these issues and take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. They should also use positive adoption language.
3. **Be honest in a developmentally appropriate way** (never lie and share all by age 12): A great resource for parents to learn how to talk with children about complicated issues such as maltreatment and parental mental illness is *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*, by Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler. They advocate that children should be told everything that is known about their history, and that this should be shared incrementally and in a manner that they can understand. They believe that even the most negative aspects of their history should be shared with them by age 12, so that they have a chance to integrate and come to terms with this information prior to the tumultuous time of adolescence.
4. **Empathize with feelings without being judgmental or always trying to fix it:** Parents should first empathize with painful feelings that their children express or facilitate the expression of these feelings, without trying to sugar coat or negate these feelings.
5. **Help your child “grow” her adoption story and control telling it outside the family:** Children’s questions about adoption will increase in complexity as they grow up, and it is important for the preschool adoption story to grow with the child. Parents also need to prepare the child for the kinds of comments or difficult confrontations they may run into outside the family. The Center for Adoption Support and Education’s WISE-UP curriculum for children is a resource for parents in addressing these issues.

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6. **Honor the birth family:** It is important for adoptive parents to communicate respect and value of birth family members and to validate the gifts the child received from their original family whether they are physical traits and talents or evidence of caring for the child. This may involve valuing the culture that they came from as well.
7. **Use tools-story books, Lifebooks, movies, family traditions:** Parents can use a range of resources to assist them in talking about adoption with children including story books, helping children construct Lifebooks, or developing commemorative rituals or traditions such as celebrating the child's adoption day.
8. **Provide opportunities to interact with other adopted children and adults:** Adopted children often feel different from other children and may know few if any children whom they know are adopted. Finding opportunities for them to be involved with other adopted children and adults is very normalizing and facilitates their processing of feelings about adoption.
9. **Address parents' own feelings and barriers to communicating openly and positively about adoption:** Adoptive parents' own issues may pose barriers to healthy communication with their children about adoption, including their feelings about infertility, anger toward or fear of birth parents, their fear of losing their child's love if they feel too positively toward their birth family, and others. They need a resource for processing and coming to terms with these feelings in order to be able to support their child's adoption adjustment.

Center for Adoption Support and Education. *W.I.S.E. Up! powerbook* and *W.I.S.E. Up! for children in foster care*. Burtonsville, MD: <http://yhst-28828629093147.stores.yahoo.net/book.html>

Smalley, B.K., & Schooler, J. E. (2015). *Telling the truth to your adopted or foster child: Making sense of the past, Second edition*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

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