

LIFE SITUATIONS

Talking about Adoption

Perhaps the most crucial subject of all is how adoption is discussed. Whether it becomes a difficult story is largely in the hands of the adoptive parents. We bring to any subject that has strong emotional content many of our own thoughts, beliefs and feelings. These may not be consciously accessible to us and better perceived by those around us including our children than ourselves and may well also relate to fertility if this is a factor in the adoption process. Children too, will bring all their own associations to the subject at whatever age they were adopted and will be quick to pick up tone of voice in the use of words about adoption so it has been suggested that even whilst rocking an adopted baby or cuddling an infant it is worth practising using the word.

Undeniably talking about adoption brings up loss and pain at times but it also has associations for many adopted children with feeling chosen, special and cherished and adopted adults speak about this when reflecting on their homes where adoption was openly talked about. For some adopted children there is already a memory or knowledge of birth family and more frequently foster family, so the word adoption is no shock as an inbuilt awareness of not being where they started is there. For others, there may be a sensory memory of other familiar faces, voices, smells and places that somehow don't belong with their present setting.

Being open and using the term adoption with explanations when talking directly to children about their past is helpful as it validates a feeling of dislocation or a sense that something within themselves does not quite make sense. Having worked with many adopted adults who have sought reunions with birth family or the official chronicling of their lives through record reading, I have heard many accounts of their experiences as children of adoption. Some have had dramatic discoveries of birth records on tops of cupboards. This has usually evoked strong feelings of shock, anger, betrayal and marked their life narrative powerfully. The vast majority say that there was never a specific moment they learned they were

adopted because it was just a natural part of the evolution and development within the family unit. These days adoption support workers rarely hear about a child not knowing the fact of adoption, but we do hear about children feeling muddled and confused around what exactly adoption means and lacking clarity about their life story.

The tips for speaking to a child about the unique details of their life story are on this website but here are some ideas for talking to a young child about the fact of adoption. Do remember to check out the books on the book page too! The main principle is to start early and very simply. Some of the statements below will indicate how and then to build up a more textured discussion as the child indicates through their curiosity, what they are ready for and suited to their developmental age. It is unusual for a child to have a complex response when they are under five to the facts of adoption but around seven or eight their curiosity often grows and by teenage years they are thinking more about the implications of their birth family's lives compared to their own life. Do look at the Useful Books page for further references.

You did not come out of this mummy's tummy. Another mummy had you in her tummy

You were not born from my body/our bodies. You were born in our hearts/my heart.

You started off in your birth mother's tummy/life

Some children have two mummy's.

You have two families- the one you began your life with and you are part of this family. We are your every day and for ever family.

Even though a young child can't read a life story book it is worth getting it out early so they can see pictures of their birth family and hear their names. This is all vital preparatory material that answers the basic need for physical information that most children would be interested to know ; skin, eye and hair colour and name.

If you have some form of contact with birth family then do mention this at the right point as letterbox contact can be reassuring for

birth and adoptive family and keeps the link of still being held in the birth family's mind which is a grounding idea for many adopted children

This inevitably will at some point lead to questions about when a meeting might take place.

One day when you are more grown up we can think about meeting your birth family.

This is something you can do when the law says you can after you are 18 and can properly understand more about them.

Questions will often arise about why the birth family was not able to look after them and ideas for responses are within the website and the section which shows how to make a life story book models a structure to approach the difficult story.

At 7 or 8 children they may be ready to contemplate these sentences

Sometimes birth mummies and daddies are not able to give children and babies all that they need to be safe.

The child might need reminding what all children need to be safe.

All children need food, a warm peaceful place to sleep, cuddles and caring, washing and bathing, fresh air and warmth, play and toys..

Here you can go on to the reasons that these were not provided which are covered below or could not have been provided if the child left the birth parent straight after discharge from hospital.

Death

It is not unusual for adopted children to have a birth parent who is no longer alive. This will mean different things to children at different times and of course will depend if they have any

conscious memory of the parent.

Most children go through phases where they become preoccupied by the idea and fact of death and will ask their parents questions on the subject. Adopted children may respond strongly to other sorts of loss and the thought that you could die as well may make them feel particularly anxious.

It is important not to shy away from the subject or seem frightened by it as your feelings about it will be picked up by children. Illness in either parent may be very alarming to some children and reassurance that illness only rarely leads to death and that death mainly occurs when people get old may be needed.

Your own belief and system will dictate to a large extent how you respond to questions about what happens after death so it is hard to be proscriptive about what to say. Adopters have sometimes commented that it is easier to help the child with their grief if they have met the parent themselves. The child's grief will not be something that can occur within a prescribed period of time and can involve grieving for future relationships they will never experience. Talking about death through literature which often features animals is a good way of approaching the subject. The reading list at the back of this booklet recommends some books suitable for 5 to 10 year olds. The website *Winston's Wish* is particularly recommended for details of how to talk to children on the subject and also covers death by manslaughter or murder.

Ideas that would be a comfort to children would be seeing death as an end to suffering, that the person who has died lives on in their hearts, that it is natural and happens to us all, that the person

who has died would want to be remembered but want them to be happy as well.

Relinquished Children

I use the idea of 'mother' because in most cases where a decision is made it is the mother who has made this decision. The decision to agree to the idea of you being adopted was not an easy decision for your birth mother/father to make. Social workers talked to your birth mother about all the things they had done to help her. They were...[give examples from your child's CPR]. She had also been to a mother and baby home/foster carer who had tried hard to show her what a baby needs to be safe and happy. Your birth mother/father recognised that she could not manage to do this. She understood that you came first and that it was really important for you to get the best chance and start in life. She wished that this could be her but she knew herself well enough to see that the job of being a parent was something beyond her at that time. She did not have the right people or life around her and it was hard for her to see a different way of living. This made her sad/angry/frustrated/upset but she was wise enough to believe that taking advice from the social worker was the best thing to do for you. Being a good parent is a joy but it is also hard work and needs lots of mental strength. Your birth mother did not feel that she had this strength at the time that was needed.

Learning Difficulties/Disabilities

Occasionally children come into care for the reason that their mother has learning disabilities which of course on occasions can lead to neglect. The dictionary definition of a learning difficulty is 'a condition that either prevents or significantly hinders somebody from learning basic skills or information at the same rate as most

people of the same age.’

Learning disability is a term that the National Institute of Clinical Excellence favours and therefore Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services do too. They would argue that dyslexia for example is a learning difficulty.

It is important to recognise that many factors come into play when learning difficulties are perceived and labelled. These are: the role that poverty plays, parental attitude to education, conflict with the education system, cultural bias of educational testing, and any sort of abuse or traumatic event within the family. The ability of anyone to learn is enormously affected by what is going on in their internal world.

A specific learning difficulty is often not related to a person’s intelligence. IQ [Intelligence Quotient] testing is a controversial topic but when it is below 70 which covers 2.2% of the population it can be a major factor in neglect and abuse of children and one of the explanations as to why some children come into care. IQ tests aim to assess abstract verbal reasoning and a person’s ability to process information in an intelligent way. I include something about how the IQ system works [for adopters] as it is something that can appear in documentation the adopted child/adult may read. I have seen IQ results mentioned in court reports and Child Permanency Reports as a factor in the parenting assessment so it is important [whether accepted or not] that it is understood within its own terms.

Since the 1920s four ‘levels’ of learning disability have been recognised and are linked approximately to Full Scale IQ scores.

- **Mild** IQ Score between 50 - 69
- **Moderate** IQ Score between 35 - 49
- **Severe** IQ Scores between 20 - 34
- **Profound** IQ Scores below 20
(International Classification
of Diseases-10 World Health Organisation. 1992)

Your birth mummy loved you very much. Babies need lots of love but they also need their parents to remember lots of things when looking after them. Prompt the child to think about all the things a baby or child needs their parents to do. Talk to the child about how much they have learnt already at school so they are reminded that they are good at learning. Your birth mummy was not good at learning lots of things to do with looking after children. Give an example if you have one of what was not learnt e.g. She could not learn that you need to change a nappy quite soon after it is dirty otherwise the baby gets infected and sore.

Nobody could be with your birth mummy all the time every day to check that you were alright. People knew that your birth mummy was not going to learn better even as she got older so Social Workers decided it was fairest on you that your birth mummy did not keep you and your brother/sister.

Unknown Fathers

Many children do not know who their father is. Adopted children will only know what their mother has told Social Workers so if they were ever to reunite with their mother there may be a hope they

would discover this information.

It will depend on the child's personality how much the lack of knowledge impacts on them. Undoubtedly it will usually lead to some speculation. It is worth saying if an attribute is not known to be part of the maternal family;

'May be you got your talent at football/guitar/cooking from your father's side of the family', 'Maybe your beautiful eyes/strong legs come from your fathers side of the family'

The lack of knowledge does not have to equate with a negative conclusion. It is likely that the security a child will feel within the adoptive family set up with two parents will mitigate against any sense of abandonment through not knowing who one of the birth parents are.

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Anxiety Alcoholism Death Domestic Violence Drug Abuse Emotional Abuse Learning Difficulties/Disabilities Manic Depression-Bi Polar Disorder Mental Ill Health Neglect Non Accidental Injury Personality Disorder Rape Schizophrenia Suicide Sexual Abuse-context sex and sexual awareness Unknown Fathers