

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 and can also relate to fertility if this is a factor in the adoption process.

Scroll down for suggested conversational ideas for discussing adoption.

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. Adopted adults speak about this when reflecting on their homes where adoption has been 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 do not belong with their present setting.

Being open and using the word 'adoption' with explanations, when talking directly to children about their past is helpful as it can validate a feeling of dislocation or a subtle sense that something within themselves does not make sense.

Having worked with adopted adults who have sought reunions with birth family or if not have read the official chronicling of their lives, I have heard many accounts of their recollected experiences as children of adoption. Over 25 years I have heard of at least a dozen who have had dramatic discoveries of birth records on tops of cupboards or backs of drawers. 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 about their adoption because it was a natural part of the evolution and development within the family unit. These days adoption support social 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.

Ideas for speaking to a child about the unique details of their life story are on this website and the use of the arts. This article shares ideas for talking to a young child about the fact of adoption.

The main principle is to start early and very simply. 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 can be 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.

If talk of adoption has been left until after the age of five, parents may find the script and suggestions below helpful. Words become harder to find as the time increases without telling.

It is important for a child to understand at a simple level what conception is, to further consolidate the idea of what a birth father is as the visible evidence of a pregnancy takes the mystery away from what a birth mother is. If telling a child about how babies are made, feels too early, then you can always say:

'You are too little to know all about all the details of how babies are made now but we promise as you get older, we will help you learn more about this.'

This becomes particularly relevant where birth fathers are unknown due to non-consensual sex. You can use other parts of 'Difficult Conversations' and this free book 'Busy Bodies' on the conception may be helpful. Here is the link:

[busy-bodies-english-language.pdf \(sexualwellbeing.ie\)](https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/busy-bodies-english-language.pdf) . It covers the subject of puberty, conception, and consent.

Delaying Conversations about conception

These conversations can feel uncomfortable and may contain associations with experiences around infertility dependent on gender, life experience and route to adoption. For some there can be feelings of guilt, failure, blame and a memory of adoption feeling a second choice, to having their own child. The present is not being questioned but fear from adopters that the child with this new insight arising from how babies are made conversation, may feel that they were a second choice or that feelings of insecurity may be compounded.

Once this has been acknowledged as a cause for delaying this conversation then the path can be set to talk further.

Many children pine for their unknown fathers which is often a factor in a considerable number of adoptions. The abstract idea of a father or mother can be powerful in the absence of a physical one. This may come to the fore in single or same sex parent adoptive households as the day-to-day reality of living with a father or mother can be a grounding experience to an idealistic fantasy.

At some point there will also be the need to understand non-consensual sex and for some this goes with the story of an unknown father- see main website for downloadable pdf on sexual abuse/non-consensual sex. It is easy to flee from this, thinking that children are far too young to know about this and yet there are ways of talking about this that do not damage innocence but address the gaps in knowledge.

Scroll to page 6 onwards if your child has not learnt about adoption gradually from an incredibly early age. Suggested words to child are in purple italics throughout this section.

Words for a young child to gradually release the idea of adoption from the point they understand the words:

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.

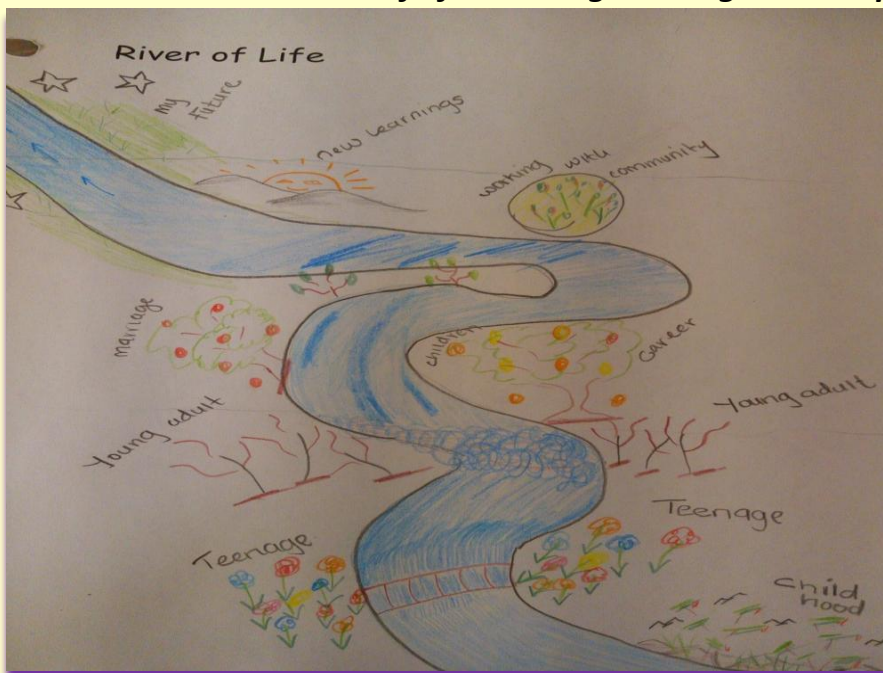
You have two families- the one you began your life with, and you are part of this family. We are your everyday family, and you are in our family for ever.

You started off in your birth mother's tummy. A seed from your birth father joined with an egg in your birth mother's body to make you at the very start of your time in her tummy!

Your birth mother and father [or mummy and daddy or whatever words feel right] made the tiny baby that then grew in your birth mother's tummy. We watered and grew you from you being a tiny baby out in the world like a plant sprouting out of the ground that needs water and sunshine to grow up to the sky and show its flowers. Its roots are the first connections to the earth that begin its growth.

A baby needs three seasons to grow until they are ready to come out.

Talk about their order of the three seasons before birth and a passage of time conversation can take place in relation to their overall life story- how many seasons lived and a river of life drawing starting at conception, perhaps.



Do find a metaphor that is not a river if this does not work for your child; a boat travelling to islands, a train journey, a long winding road etc.

Delaying Conversations about Adoption

The facts around conception are not the only reason for avoiding the subject of adoption. The reasons for coming into care are key to avoidance and are addressed in the other downloadable PDFs. The reasons range from; not wanting to upset the child, damage their sense of belonging, fear of awakening an unhealthy curiosity about their birth family [especially when there are often difficult stories to tell] and finally worry that the bond with their child that already exists may get damaged.

Sometimes the avoidance of the conversation is more about the adult protecting themselves from the imagined discomfort and upset of the child during the conversation and after.

It is not that these are easy areas to touch on but the absence of a quality conversation on such profound subjects is an abnegation of the responsibility to the child associated with the act of adoption. The child then lives with the sense of the gap and the effects of inheritance, neglect or abuse .Yet they are losing the right to know about their own life in a supported way from those closest to them.

Once adoption is on the agenda there are ideas throughout this site to begin a healthy life story chat and life enhancing tools to explore. The parents are now able to share the life story book. Even though a young child cannot read a life story book it is worth getting it out early as early as possible so they can see pictures of their birth family and hear their names.

This is all vital preparatory material for a developing sense of an integrated self that answers the basic need for physical information that most children would be interested to know: skin, eye and hair colour and name.

If there is contact with birth family, then do mention this as letterbox contact can be reassuring for birth and adoptive family and for the child it keeps the idea of memory and love existing in the birth family's mind. This is a visible acknowledgement for adopted children. Inevitably it could one day lead to questions about when a meeting might take place.

One day when you are older, we can think about meeting your birth family. This is something you can do when the law says you can after you are eighteen 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 life story examples and life story pack model offers a structure to approach the 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 and reminding it was not about them personally but that any child would not have been safe at that time with the birth parents.

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 the parents could not provide this at the time or could not have been provided if the birth parent left the child straight after discharge from hospital. See other PDFs on this page of the website for deeper exploration of the reasons for adoption.

Ideas for conversation starters for when children do not learn about adoption from the start:

Adopters who have delayed this have said it is helpful to have suggestions of ways to begin what has become something of a block for them with the right time to tell never appearing.

Meet with child when undisturbed in a protected space- this is an important conversation- make sure that both you and the child have not had anything distressing or upsetting happen and that everyone's wellbeing is steady in the immediate time before this conversation.

These are ideas of sentences but ideally it will be a conversation not a monologue. Give your child plenty of time to absorb what you are saying and have feelings or questions in response.

The conversation is just a start and give them opportunities and permission to come back to it. It is a natural reaction for this conversation to bring up feelings of insecurity and usually a temporary questioning of their trust in you.

It is important for a child to understand what conception is at a simple level to further consolidate the idea of what a birth father is.

The visible evidence of a pregnancy takes the mystery away from what a birth mother is. If telling your child the facts of life, feels too early, then you can always say; *'You are too little to know all about all the details of how babies are made now but we promise as you get older, we will help you learn more about this.'*

This becomes particularly relevant where birth fathers are unknown due to non-consensual sex. You can use other parts of 'Difficult Conversations' and this free book 'Busy Bodies' on conception may also be helpful. Here is the link:

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An example script talking to a child of primary age who has never heard the word 'Adoption' before:

- To be edited when there is no sibling or when there is an adopted sibling and will need to be adapted to the age and stage of development a child is at:

There is something important we need to talk about today.

This is about how our family was made.

There are so many different sorts of families.

Some have only three people in a house with one of them being a child. Some have just two grown-ups as they do not have children though the grownups may have brothers and sisters. The grown-ups will come from a mum and dad too which is also their first family before the one that they make.

Some families have four or even six children! Some have one mum, two mums, two dads or the children are bought up by other people in their family or by new parents. When social workers find new parents for children this is the start of adoption.

We feel incredibly happy about both our children; you and Giovanni, being part of our family and we need to tell you that you came to us in a different way. Giovanni came out of mummy's tummy, and you came from another woman's tummy and were created by another man.

These people are your birth parents. Your birth mother and father. You started off in your birth mother's tummy. A seed from your birth father joined with an egg in your birth mother's body to make you at the very start of your time in her tummy! Your birth mother and father [or mummy and daddy or whatever words feel right] made the tiny baby that then grew in your birth mother's tummy. We watered and grew you from you being a tiny baby out in the world like a plant sprouting out of the ground that needs water and sunshine to grow up to the sky and show its flowers. Its roots are the first connections to the ground that begin its growth.

Adoption is when a baby is born to one mother and father but joins another man and woman who are then the mummy and daddy. They might also join two mummies or daddies or one mummy or one daddy. Your birth mother and father loved you, but they could not look after you, so a judge [who is a wise man or woman] said that you needed new parents. The judge who later met us after you had come to live with us said that you could become part of us our family for ever.

We were so happy to have you join mummy, daddy, and Giovanni when you were such a little baby, and you became our daughter/son.

You do have another family and Sandra who is a social worker who visits children who are adopted and knows all about adoption, will help us and you to talk about them [if you have asked for help with this conversation from your local adoption support service]. She knows it is important for you to understand the reasons your birth parents could not keep you even though they loved you.

Giovanni knows that you came to us when you were a baby as he was already 9 years old. He was so excited and pleased when you joined us. You were so little and sweet, and we all loved to kiss, cuddle, and hug you and it has always made us so happy to have you as part of our family.

How are you feeling? We love you so much.

It is natural to feel upset and angry and we are sorry we have not told you before. We did not do this as we were so frightened you would feel upset and now, we understand that feeling upset and surprised about this is natural.

Many children who are adopted can feel muddled about this and have lots of questions. This is ok.

We want to help you when you have questions and feel like this. We also want you to know how much we love you and want you to understand all about having two families. Until today you only had one and that was all you knew about, and this must feel a big new thing to understand.

We can ask Sandra whose job it is to talk with children and families about adoption more when we all meet her together. She also plays games with them and gets to know you and hear your feelings and thoughts. [relevant if you choose to involve your adoption support team]

It is from here that motivation comes to share the life story book adopters receive at the time of the adoption. Later still when the child reaches their teen years there should be a teen sensitive later life letter, which tells the story of their early lives and their beginnings without jargon, for sharing with them. The idea of this is to further consolidate their understanding and in turn protect them from making themselves vulnerable doing their own searching via social media without background information to protect them should their parents be living a life that could put them at risk.

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