Your Child's Adoption Story

Talking to your child about their adoption story may be one of the most difficult conversations you will have with your child. Your child's story may bring up unpleasant details and feelings, and you may be worried that it will traumatize your child further. However difficult your child's history may be, it is always important to tell the truth. Your child may be creating their own version in their head which may be even worse than what actually happened, and may put the blame on themselves. You can tailor your child's adoption story to their developmental age, and start off slowly. Below are some suggestions for having those tough conversations with your child.

Criminal Behavior/Substance Abuse

It is common for adoptive parents to not want to talk about a birth parent's criminal behavior or substance abuse issues out of fear the child may believe that they are bad, too and will fall victim to the same issues. However, this is not the case. Use this opportunity to talk about good decisions vs. bad decisions. Put it in a context that the child will understand. For example, when a child breaks a house rule they are disciplined accordingly. Emphasize that because someone makes a bad decision, this does not make them a bad person.

Other Tough Topics

Please refer to *Adoptive Families*' article The Whole Truth for information and conversation starters on the following topics:

- Abandonment
- Poverty
- Rape

Talking About Adoption

For tips on talking about adoption with your three to five-year-old, click here.

For tips on talking about adoption with your six to eight-year-old, please click here.

For tips on talking about adoption with your nine to twelve-year-old, please click here.

Life Book

Depending on your child's age, he/she may be learning about drugs and alcohol in school, and may know peers who are involved in drinking and using drugs. When talking with your child, ask them to recall what they learned in class about drugs and alcohol, and the negative ramifications of using drugs or drinking before they are 21. Again, frame your conversation around good decisions vs. bad decisions.

In both conversations, you will want to counteract their birth parent's bad decision with a good one. For example, you could tell your child that while their parent made the bad decision to use drugs, they/a judge made a good decision in recognizing they could not care for them and found a safer place for them to live. Your child may still be very attached to his/her birth parent(s), so framing their parent's choices this way will avoid making your child feel like their parent is being judged or looked down on.

For conversation starters, please click here.

Other Birth Siblings

You just found out your child's birth mom had another baby that she is now raising. You don't want to tell your child out of concern that he/she will feel rejected and unwanted. However, this is a conversation you must have with your child. If your child is younger, he/she may not grasp the idea of "other children" and that these children are his/her siblings. As they get older, provide more details to the story, specifically surrounding the birth mom's circumstances when your child was born. Maybe she was a single mother with other children to raise, and she could not handle the needs of a baby all by herself. Or perhaps she was using drugs at the time, and has since entered rehab and is clean. By talking about a child's other birth siblings as soon as you are made aware of them, this may help your child form a connection with them later in life if they choose.

A Life Book is a great way to help explain your child's story and how they became part of your family. The Life Book can help your child make sense of their past, discover who they are, and give them self-understanding. If possible, work with the child's foster parent and/or caseworker to obtain photos of your child before they became part of your family. For free Life Book pages, visit the IFAPA Life Book Pages site.

Additional Information & Resources

ATTACh - Your Child's Life Story: Tips From an Adoptive Parent by Debbie Schugg

Before You Were Mine: Discovering Your Adopted Child's Lifestory by Susan TeBos and Carissa Woodwyk

Chicago Now - Portrait of an Adoption: What Would Have Happened to Me If you Didn't Adopt Me? by Carrie Goldman

Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child by Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler

For conversation starters, please click here.

Abuse & Neglect

The most common reason a child comes into foster care is due to neglect, followed by physical and then sexual abuse. Regardless of how old your child was when they were abused or neglected, you need to talk about it with your child. Babies have what is called "implicit memory' which allows their bodies to remember what their brain cannot. As such, just because your child was an infant when he/she was neglected and/or abused, they will still remember it in some way. This is also an important conversation to have with your child to help them avoid placing the blame on themselves. They may believe that they were "bad" and deserved punishment. Emphasize that it was a grown-up problem. For example, you can tell your child that when his/her parent hit them when they were angry, it was because they never learned how to handle their temper and emotions. As a result, a good decision was made by the parent or a judge to place them with a family that would make them feel safe.

For conversation starters, please click here.

Wounded Children, Healing Homes by Jayne Schooler, Betsy Keefer Smalley, and Timothy Callahan

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