

# Adoption: How to Talk With Your Child About Being Adopted

Children who are adopted need to understand their life stories because this understanding is important to their long-term well-being. As parents of an adopted child, you may not know what to say to or what to share with your child.

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about how to talk with your child about being adopted.

## Start at the Beginning

It's never too early to talk with your child about adoption. Talking about the adoption shows your child that it is OK to bring up this topic. The longer you wait to talk about adoption with your child, the harder it will be to talk about.

## Share Memories

Just like any child delights in learning about the day he was born, a child who is adopted loves to learn the details about how he came into the family. Tell him how excited you were to bring him home!

During the adoption process, keep a scrapbook or journal. Use it to record important dates and steps of the process. Include pictures of the people and places involved in your child's earlier life. These details will help make the process easier for your child to understand. You may want to place pictures into your child's room to encourage him to ask questions about his adoption. If you have an open adoption, you may want to include pictures of his birth parents. If he is adopted internationally, you may want to display a map, pictures, or other items related to his birthplace.

## How to Talk With Your Child

What you say and how much you share will depend on the age and maturity of your child. The word *adopted* should become part of your child's vocabulary early on. Decide on other words your family would like to use. *Birth mother*, *birth father*, and *biological parents* are common terms. Let your child know that *mother* and *father* have more than one meaning. A mother is not only someone who gives birth to a child but also someone who loves, nurtures, and guides a child to adulthood. This definition describes fathers and other caregivers as well!

Adoptive parents often tell their child he is special because he was "chosen" or "given up out of love." Although parents mean well, these statements are confusing to children. Some children may feel that being chosen means they must always be the best at everything. This feeling can lead to problems when they start to realize that being perfect is not possible. Telling your child he was given up out of love may raise questions about what love is and whether others will give him up too. Phrases such as "making an adoption plan" or "placing a child for adoption" are less confusing to children. For children who were not placed voluntarily, parents can explain that "your birth parents were not able to take care of a child, so the judge made sure that you had a family who could love you and take care of you."

Here are tips on what to share during the toddler to teens years. Your child's doctor may also have suggestions.

## Toddlers

Toddlers ask a lot of "what" questions, such as "What was my name before I was adopted?" They're curious about what they observe and physically experience. At this age, you should look for chances to explain your child's story. Focus on the positive. For example,

- "Wow, look at that tiny baby! We were so happy when we first met you in China! Look how much you have grown!"
- "Your toes are brown because your birth mother has beautiful brown skin, like you do. My toes are pink, like Grandma's toes."

Children's books are also a valuable resource at this stage.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers often ask "why" questions, such as "Why did my birth mother give me away?" They're starting to understand more about themselves, and they're curious about many things. Here are some examples of what to say.

- "Your birth parents were having hard problems of their own and could not take care of a baby when you were born."
- "Sometimes people in the country where you were born have problems that make it hard to take care of a baby. They made sure that you were with people who would take care of you and find you a family."

Here are other tips if you have a preschooler.

- Preschoolers are self-centered, thinking the world is all about them. They need to know that being placed away from their birth parents was not their fault; they were not "bad."
- Preschoolers have no sense of timing or privacy. Parents and other caregivers should help them understand what to share publicly and what to talk about at home.
- Preschoolers love repetition. Be prepared to repeat stories.
- Turn telling your family's story into a cherished event.
- Create a "life book," with pictures and stories that include important phases, events, and transitions from your child's earlier life. You can keep adding to the book throughout his childhood.

## School-aged Children

School-aged children who are adopted want details, such as "How much did it cost to adopt me?" or "Do I have brothers and sisters?" They may even want to know whether their birth parents loved each other.

Children at this age can start to understand facts without these negatively affecting their own identities. This is the ideal age to begin sharing any difficult information from the past, including whether the child experienced or witnessed abuse, trauma, rape, incest, or substance use.

Children at this age may also start to be more influenced by their peers. Some peers may ask your child about his adoption. You can help your child decide when and with whom to share this information. Be prepared for peers who may tease your child about racial or physical differences. You may need to work together with schools to teach respectful language and behaviors and to address racism, bullying, and other negative behaviors.

## Teens

Even if you think your teen thinks you are out of touch, he still values your input. Be open to talking about his adoption and general teen concerns. Also, keep in mind that the teen years are a time when children are trying to figure out their identity. Family, peers, media, and popular culture may influence identity.

If your child joined your family as an older child or a teen, figuring out his identity can be more difficult, because he needs to figure out how his birth parents and adoptive parents influence his identity.

## Remember

In any parent-child relationship, love, honesty, and patience are key to building a special bond. Talking openly and truthfully with your child about his adoption, his birth parents, and his feelings is important.

## For More Information

[www.HealthyChildren.org/AdoptionFosterCare](http://www.HealthyChildren.org/AdoptionFosterCare)

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