

“The Talk”- about adoption. Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao - 2009

Start Early. Even if your child does not understand, it is good practice for you to learn to talk about this difficult and complex subject. Your child may be an infant, or may not yet speak English...no matter. Start to tell the story in a gentle way. It is more about you becoming comfortable with his/her story and saying it out loud. The tone of your voice, the look in your eyes, your body posture all convey things to the child and you have the opportunity to practice talking about adoption.

Be Truthful. The truth is the central issue in adoption. There are so many reasons why all of the adults are afraid, ashamed, sad, hurt and therefore shielding the truth. If you know the answer find the most reasonable way to tell the version that suits the child’s developmental age. If the question is too complex and/or you need time and don’t want to answer quickly, simply say “I will always tell you the truth, but I can’t always tell you at the time that you ask. We will talk about this later, but I won’t forget”.

Use Positive Adoption Language. Any language the child uses is fine, we learn from their choice of words. Adults, however, need to be mindful of what they are saying and how it is understood. “Birthparent” or “First Parent” are the kinds of words that are recommended and NOT “real parent” or “natural parent”. Never say this is my own child and this is my adopted child, hopefully they are all your children, and the only time you need to ‘describe’ is if you are discussing adoption or clarifying the construction of your family, or if you are in a medical office. For general conversation, they are simply your children. To say that the birthparents ‘gave up a child...gave away a child’ is negative. To say they made an adoption plan, terminated parental rights, but not emotional, and psychological feelings, is more positive – if it is the truth. . Very few children are ‘abandoned’. In many countries they must be left in a safe, well-traveled place to be found and to live...There are also situations where the business of adoption creates a trafficking environment around adoption. The families by birth and by adoption are victims in these schemes and may only learn about this when the adopted person later searches and learns the truth.

Answer the Questions Your Child Asks. If you are not sure what the question really is, ask her/him what she/he means. Do not wait for the child to ask.... Be the initiator ...keep the lines of communication wide open. Raise the subject of adoption and or of adoption and race. Talk about something you heard or saw, talk about a memory of the past, talk about wonderings about birth mother/birth family/birth culture. It is not the job of the child to be the one to bring these things up – it is the job of the parent.

Once is Never Enough. Your child is learning and growing and must hear things over and over at different times and in different ways.

Be Positive About the Birth Family. Refer to them by name if known, and explain that they are a part of the extended family because they are a part of the child. Your positive attitude is important in building your child’s self esteem and identity.

Acknowledge and Accept Your Child’s Feelings. Listen for the feelings behind the questions, comments, and behaviors. Curiosity and sadness are normal responses. Don’t take feelings as being about your parenting, when they could be about what came before and about the mystery of the birth family – *even if the adoption is open*. Adoption includes joy and pain and loss and gain...it is a myriad of feelings for all of us and especially for the child.

Do not Make Lifebooks that are compartmentalized. The only time a life book for the child is necessary is when they are moving from orphanage to foster home or from foster home to more foster homes. While they are on their journey, a life book will help to collect what is needed and what is given to the permanent family. I have created a Whole Life Book. This shows all of the families that are a part of the child and connect his/her birth and adoptive families as one large extended family.

Always Ask the child what he/she thinks this all means. People take things in differently, and there are multiple realities. Ask the child to tell you the story that you told him/her to see where there are missing places or misconceptions.

Educate Yourself and Others. Reach out! Join support groups, read, consult a specialist for a ‘check up’ for your family once a year.