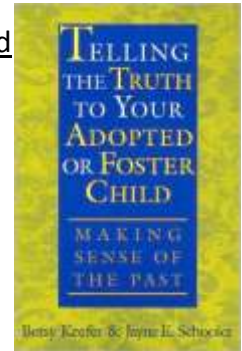


## **Preparing for Adoption**

Excerpts from the book (Chap. 3, 7, and 12) Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past, by Betsy Keefer & Jayne E. Schooler were used for the writing of this article. Permission to reprint excerpts was given by the authors of the book.



When preparing for adoption, it is critical that adoptive parents share facts with the child as they grow and develop their identity. Here are some reasons:

1. Uninformed adopted persons develop unrealistic fantasies about their histories and can hold grudges or resentment against their adoptive parents.
2. With little or no information about their history adopted persons become confused about their identities and experience long periods of experimentation, at times self-destructive behaviors.
3. All children at a certain stage of development have magical thinking. Adopted or foster children might believe themselves to be the “cause” of their separation from their birth family, negatively impacting their self-esteem.
4. Children separated from their families of origin may not feel “free” to attach to new families, they believe that they are being loyal to their birth families if they refuse to attach to another family. Separated children may refuse to have positive feelings toward the birth family, feeling disloyal in that case to their adoptive family. In some sibling groups, some children may have difficulty attaching to their adoptive parents, and some children may be loyal to their adoptive parents and harbor much anger and resentment with their birth family. When children do not have positive regard for their family of origin, the child’s self esteem suffers.
5. Children who have experienced separation from earlier foster care families, may fear a reenactment of this separation, thus impacting their ability to trust and feel safe in their new families.
6. Separated children may feel disconnected from their past and may feel that a piece of themselves is missing and incomplete.
7. Separated children may lack trust in adults who should have protected and cared for them. They may think that others are lying to them or withholding information. This lack of trust can lead to serious difficulties with power and control struggles as children enter adolescence.
8. Children with little or no information about their histories may develop anxiety about their histories, unable to be good parents, being a failure, developing serious health or mental health problems, etc.

## 10 Principles for Communicating about Adoption

1. Parents need to initiate the conversation about adoption. Parents often believe they should wait until the child initiates the conversation or asks questions. Children often continue to believe in some way that they are being disloyal to the adoptive family when they having feelings and questions about their birth family. As a result children may avoid conversations about adoption and their birth family even when they have difficult questions or troubling feelings. Adoptive parents must look for opportunities to talk about adoption and ask children questions. When adoptive parents initiate the conversation this assures the child that their feelings are normal and expected and that they do not have to feel threatened or that they believe the child is being disloyal in any way.

*Ideas of opportunities to discuss birth families and adoption:*

- During a movie or program where adoption or separation from families is in the theme of the program.
  - Key times of the year, such as birthday, Mother’s Day, holidays, anniversaries of placement, or the adoption anniversary.
  - Adoptive parents can comment on the child’s positive characteristics , strengths, and physical characteristics and wonder aloud with the child from whom the child inherited them.
  - Adoptive parents can comment on the child’s accomplishments for example: “What a great job! Your birth parents would be as proud of you today as we are!”
2. Use positive adoption language

| <u>Positive</u>          | <u>Negative</u>                             |
|--------------------------|---|
| Birth parent             | Real parent or natural parents              |
| Made an adoption plan    | Gave up for adoption or put up for adoption |
| My child                 | Adopted child (can become a label)          |
| Birth child              | Their own child or their real children      |
| To choose parenting      | Keeping                                     |
| Waiting child            | Hard-to-place child                         |
| Child with special needs |   |

Adopted person

Adoptee

Adopted adult or person

Adopted child (when speaking of an adult)

3. Never lie to a child about the past or about a birth family member. This will create mistrust between the parent and the child. Adoptive parents may intend to protect the child from hearing difficult information and in response having difficult feelings, but it will create mistrust and adoptive parents should know that children are resilient and if they have you supporting them emotionally, they will be able to work through their difficult feelings.
4. Allow a child to express their anger toward a birth family member without joining in. This can be a difficult concept for adoptive parents to grasp, as many foster and adoptive parents are angry at birth family members for harming them through various types of abuse as well as ultimately causing the children emotional pain. A good rule of thumb is to NOT add your own opinion about the child's birth family member, but just be present and offer emotional support and a person for the child to talk to and feel heard by. The following types of comments are acceptable and helpful to the child when they are feeling angry towards a birth family member:
  - I'm glad that we are able to keep you safe now"
  - I can understand why you are so angry
  - That must have been an awfully hard time for you. Is there anything I can do to help you now?

Comments like these are unacceptable and potentially harmful to the child:

- If your mother had any sense in choosing boyfriends, you never have been abused.
  - I cannot imagine how anyone could abuse a child. They must have been awful people
  - They should lock up your parents and throw away the key. What they did to you was unforgivable.
5. For younger children, omitting and not sharing some complicated and "adult" family history information is okay up to age 12. It is sometimes in the child's best interest to learn about their history in small increments as they are developmentally able to understand more complicated and complex information. In regards to children 12 and older, unless they are developmentally delayed, teens have the cognitive skills to know ALL of their family histories.

6. If information and family history is negative, use a third party, such as a therapist, to relate the most troublesome details. This allows the adoptive to not be the only messenger, but it still critical parents support the child emotionally and communicate that the child has heard the most difficult of their family history and that the adoptive parents love the child unconditionally.
7. Sometimes adoptive parents try and fix the pain of adoption. Although when adopted children now a permanent family, this does not take away adopted related grief. Grief and loss experienced when being adopted is a normal part of the process. When children are experiencing emotional pain they often do not need explanations or reasoned thoughts. They need someone to empathize and validate their feelings, such as “I know this hurts, I’m here, let me know what I can do to help.”
8. It is important not to impose judgments on the child’s family history, facts need to be presented to the child but without the adoptive parent’s opinion and judgment.
9. A child should have control of telling his or her story outside of the immediate family, within their own time and comfort level. It can be helpful for parents to develop, with their child, a short and simple version of the child’s story that they feel comfortable sharing with neighbors, school friends, teachers, relatives, and other acquaintances. This not to hide their story, but that they do not need to share all details of their story with anyone and everyone. Explain that some people don’t have a lot of experience with adoption and might not understand and could say something that might hurt their feelings. As a parent you can help troubleshoot questions with your child that someone may ask or situations which could occur and talk about what information should be shared.
10. Remember that your child probably knows more than you think they do about their birth family history. Often when children are adopted when they are young, adoptive parents decide we do not need to share that with them now, we can share the information later. It is critical for your child’s self-identity, as they grow and develop, to slowly share their birth family history, just because that child is young and has not told you what they know of their family history, does not mean they did not experience it, or remember it. Not talking about your child’s birth family history as they grow and develop can impact their self-esteem and identity in a negative way.

### **Reference**

Keefer , B., Schooler, J.E. [Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past](#) Johnson Institute-QVS, Inc. 2000

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