

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

NO.
135

Chuck Johnson, *editor*
Ryan Hanlon, *editor*
Melinda Clemmons, *editor*

Did They Really Just Ask That Question?

Five Questions to Ask Yourself Before Responding to Intrusive Questions and Comments about Adoption

BY CYNTHIA CUBBAGE, LICSW, LCSW-C AND
SUE HOLLAR, LICSW, LCSW-C

- *Why were you adopted?*
- *What do you know about his real mom?*
- *Why did his real mom and dad give him up for adoption?*
- *Is he from another country?*
- *Was she abandoned?*
- *Do you have any kids of your own?*
- *Why are you brown and your mom is white?*
- *How much did you pay for the adoption?*
- *Did you find your child on the internet?*
- *Why do you have two moms? Where is your dad?*
- *Do you feel lucky to have been adopted?*
- *Do you wish that you had a mom and a dad instead of having two dads?*

If you have a connection to adoption, chances are high that you or someone you know has been asked intrusive questions about adoption. These questions can feel extremely off putting, inappropriate, and hurtful. Adoptees and adoptive parents will



National Council
For Adoption

225 N. Washington Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 299-6633
www.adoptioncouncil.org

likely face a lifetime of these questions, and it is important that they feel empowered to know how to respond. Equally important is to know that an appropriate response may be no response at all. It is vital for adoptees and adoptive parents to remember that just because someone asks you one of these questions it is not your responsibility to share beyond what you're comfortable with. And it's perfectly okay to let the person asking the question know that their question and/or comments make you uncomfortable or are inappropriate.

Numerous resources exist to equip adoptees and adoptive parents to be prepared to manage intrusive questions and comments, and these resources have undoubtedly given many the words and courage to respond. You and your child can give an educational response, a humorous response, a response that declines to answer the question, a response that refers the question to someone else, or a response that gives the person asking some personal information. Our goal in writing this article is twofold. First, to offer a framework that will guide the reader to better understand the intent of these comments and questions and decide how to respond to them; and second, to provide the reader with additional resources.

When thinking about how to respond to intrusive questions or comments, ask yourself the following five questions before responding:

Question 1. Why is this person asking this question or making this comment?

If you are part of the adoption world, you likely understand what questions or comments overstep confidentiality or privacy (and you would never dream of asking such questions). However, others who are not immersed in adoption may not know and may genuinely seek to be better informed—their questions and comments may just be out of curiosity or an attempt to show interest. And in this day and age of “oversharing” on social media, others may feel that it is perfectly acceptable to ask anything and everything. Also, messages and myths about adoption surround us in society. For example, the next time you watch a Marvel Hero movie or kids' movie, pay attention to the adoption themes. Many adoption themes in movies are often based on myths and assumptions. Often the story of someone not knowing his or her birth family or not growing up with his or her birth family is presented, and to the viewer it can be perceived as odd, unique, mysterious, and interesting. The viewer may even perceive you as the “expert” to educate them about adoption. How will you respond? In addition, your family may have many layers to its identity. Maybe you are part of a single parent family, LGBTQ family, or a family

It is vital for adoptees and adoptive parents to remember that just because someone asks you one of these questions it is not your responsibility to share beyond what you're comfortable with.

in which the parents are a different race than their child. There can be all kinds of layers to your family identity that can lead to questions and comments based on inaccurate assumptions about your child's story or how you became a family.

Question 2. How do you want your child to feel about adoption?

The way in which you choose to respond to questions and comments will demonstrate to your child how you genuinely feel about adoption in general—and more specifically, about *their* adoption. It is important that you are clear in your own mind what you think and feel and what you want others to feel and know about adoption. Responding may be appropriate, however it is critical that adoptive parents not use these opportunities to share *every* detail about their child's background and adoption story. You want your child to know that you value their privacy. The details belong to your child, and it will be up to them to decide with whom and what they choose to share. Also, if you completely refuse to respond to anyone who asks, act defensive, or combative, your child may think adoption is something to be ashamed of or something is wrong with it. Furthermore, your child's age and adoption story will greatly influence what kind of responses you might come up with.

Question 3. Who is asking the questions and what is your relationship to them?

If and how you respond may and should vary depending on who is asking and how invested you are in the relationship. Others' curiosity or interest doesn't make it okay for them to ask intrusive questions, but it can affect how you choose to respond. Responding to a stranger in the grocery store or at the park is different than responding to a grandparent. Giving thought to the nature of the relationship and what you wish to accomplish through the dialogue will help you decide how to respond. If the question is posed by a stranger, you may choose a response that deflects the question and highlights that it may not have been appropriate to ask. You might say, "Hmmm...why do you ask that question?" This response puts the onus of the dialogue back onto the stranger or person to discuss with you their intent in asking. If the question is asked by someone with whom you or your child has an ongoing relationship, you might say, "It sounds like you are curious about adoption and may want to know more." This response allows you to educate the person about adoption and even give them some resources to refer to. Then, of course, there are the malicious comments and questions—the ones posed to deliberately hurt your child and put them in a position of having to

Others' curiosity or interest doesn't make it okay for them to ask intrusive questions, but it can affect how you choose to respond.

defend their family. These scenarios typically happen at school and cross the line into bullying. If your child were in this situation, they could say, “I don’t have time for this!” and walk away to seek assistance from a trusted adult.

Question 4. What is the intent or assumption behind the question or comment?

While comments and questions can be hurtful or inappropriate, they are not always intended to be. Most often the comments come from a place of ignorance or misinformation. For example, a comment adoptive parents frequently receive is “Wow, your child is so lucky you adopted them.” This statement likely derives from common myths and misconceptions about adoption and an assumption that adoptive parents are “saving children from an otherwise horrible life.” That type of comment, however, completely erases the fact that your child experienced significant loss to become a part of your family. You could simply respond, “We are the lucky ones,” or you could add some additional content such as “Hey, sounds like you are misinformed and might want to read some more facts about adoption.” Adoptees and adoptive parents should always feel free *not* to respond or to respond with a question seeking clarification about the intent of the question or comment. A simple response such as “What makes you ask that question?” or “I think you may want to think more and learn more before you ask those kinds of questions” or “I am not comfortable responding to that.” There are so many different and creative responses that adoptees and adoptive parents can utilize in those moments. Therefore, you want to discuss options with your child and practice, practice, practice.

Question 5. What kind of impression or feeling are you trying to leave with the person who is asking or commenting?

Before thinking about the kind of response that you want to give to others or the responses you want to teach your child to give to others, ask yourself, “What kind of impression do I want my response to leave with the person I’m talking to and will the responses I choose be empowering for me or my child?” Some choose to always take an educational approach while others choose the approach based on the question or comment or the person delivering the question or comment. Many adoptive families say they simply respond to intrusive questions and comments by changing the subject, glazing over it, giving a curt answer, or using humor or sarcasm. It is important to allow for all types of responses. Others feel compelled to answer either because they feel it is important to educate others or because they feel so off guard and end up responding before

While comments and questions can be hurtful or inappropriate, they are not always intended to be. Most often the comments come from a place of ignorance or misinformation.

even thinking about it. Often what you want to say is different from what you end up saying. Kristen Reighard¹ describes many adoptees as people pleasers prone to sacrificing their level of comfort for the sake of pleasing others, which can be damaging to adoptees' well-being. Whether you are an adoptive parent or an adoptee, it is important to feel empowered not to answer at all or to take time to think about how you want to respond. For example, it would be perfectly reasonable to respond to a friend who has asked an intrusive question or made an insensitive statement by saying "I will need to think about that question (or comment) before I respond. Let's have coffee soon to talk more about that." When intentional or unintentional questions are asked, or comments are made toward your child, your child will be reminded that she is "different," that your family "draws attention," and she may find herself feeling as if she needs to defend how her family was formed.

One of the jobs of an adoptive parent is to be prepared and to feel competent and ready to respond to questions. In addition, parents must help to develop this skill set for their children so they will be able to decide how to, or how not to, respond themselves. You want your child to feel empowered. So, what do you as a parent need to do first to be prepared? Talk to your child. Spend time role playing with them how you and they might respond when others ask intrusive questions. Discuss the possible scenarios that might occur. For example, will you respond differently to the stranger in the grocery store, the elderly person at church, a colleague at work, family member, or close friend? It is important that you discuss with your child who will respond. Your child may want to be the one to respond, and sometimes your child may want you to respond. Some families come up with codes with their child, so the parent knows whether they should let their child respond. For example, one family developed a system where their child would tap his parents' hand if they wanted the parent to answer. Another family took a more vocal approach with their child willingly and confidently responding, "Oh boy, ok Mom I'll take this one." It is most important that your child feels that they have control over their story and their response. With this approach they are more likely to feel empowered as individuals and completely supported by their parents when presented with these difficult situations. The most difficult anticipated situation for adoptive parents is the time they will not be with their children to assist them with answering questions and comments. Therefore, as adoptive parents you need to practice with your child how they will respond so that they have choices in their toolbox when faced with the situation alone or as an adult.

Parents must help to develop this skill set for their children so they will be able to decide how to, or how not to, respond themselves. You want your child to feel empowered.

¹ Licensed Professional Counselor, adoptee, and facilitator of The Barker Adoption Foundation's Adult Adoptee Discussion Group

If your child is present when you get an intrusive question or comment, consider debriefing with your child afterwards. How did your child feel? Does your child want you to handle it differently next time? Does your child have questions for you?

There are numerous books, articles, and blogs about how to respond to intrusive questions and comments about adoption. We suggest starting with the resources we have listed below and practice saying to yourself some of the suggested responses. There is no one perfect or correct response to intrusive adoption questions or comments. It is more important that you as the parent(s) pre-plan and have a discussion with your child about comments they might encounter, present options, ask your child about their ideas, and let them choose who will respond. All members of an adoptive family can be proud of how their family is created through adoption. You can use questions and comments to teach others about adoption, and you have the right to choose *not* to disclose any information about your adoptive family's journey to others. No matter how much one prepares to respond, sometimes what you plan to say is not actually what you end up saying. This is okay, and no one should carry guilt or shame about a response. It is more important to reflect on the experience and feel free to go back later and correct or change what you said. No one expects you to be perfect and you should not expect that of yourself either. Don't beat yourself up—relax and move on.

Remember, whether you are an adoptive parent or an adopted person, to look at these intrusive questions and comments through the lens of “We are a unique and beautiful family.” You decide how you want to voice your family identity to others. Adoption is only one piece, but *a big piece and an important piece*, of what makes you and your family amazing!

Resources

While there are many resources available, the following represent those that we most often refer to and that are inclusive of all family constellations.

- *Adoption Awareness: Handling Awkward Adoption Questions and Comments* by Christine Mitchell. Published by Tapestry Books
- *Adoptive Parenting: Creating A Toolbox, Building Connections* edited by Jean MacLeod and Sheena Macrae, PhD.
- *In on It: What Adoptive Parents Would Like You to Know about Adoption* by Elisabeth O'Toole.

There is no one perfect or correct response to intrusive adoption questions or comments.

- *Friends, Bullies, and Staying Safe: The Adoption Club Therapeutic Workbook* by Regina Kupecky.
- *Inside Transracial Adoption* by Beth Hall and Gail Steinburg
- <http://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/challenging-questions/>
- <https://www.rainbowkids.com/adoption-stories/bullying-helping-your-adopted-child-through-the-tough-times-2057>

Adoptive parents and adoptees might consider keeping a printed list of resources in their wallet or purse so that they can share them when asked intrusive questions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sue Hollar, LCSW-C, LICSW heads The Barker Adoption Foundation, one of the nation's leading and oldest comprehensive adoption organizations. Her experience includes nearly three decades of social work practice focused exclusively on child welfare and adoption work locally, nationally, and internationally.

Cynthia Cabbage, LCSW-C, LICSW heads the Family and Post-Adoption Services Department at The Barker Adoption Foundation. Her area of expertise is in providing pre- and post-adoption services in a variety of local, national, and international agencies to anyone touched by adoption. She is a parent by adoption of two wonderful children.

For more information about The Barker Adoption Foundation, please visit barkeradoptionfoundation.org.



National Council
For Adoption

SUPPORT NCFADONATE ONLINE ►
www.adoptioncouncil.org