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Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child

*Helping Your Child Come to a Strength-Based
Understanding of His or Her Life Story*

BY JAYNE SCHOOLER

“Adopted or foster children will only ask their caregivers the questions they feel they have the permission to ask.”

—Jane Hoyt-Oliver, LISW-S, Ph.D.
Emerita Professor of Social Work, Malone University

Are we giving them that permission?

Jonathan, a tall, handsome adolescent with a winning smile and matching personality, always looked forward to family gatherings during the 4th of July. It was a time when his home overflowed with people, noise, and food for three days. This year was not going to be any different—or so he thought. However, by the end of the celebratory gathering, Jonathan’s realization of who he was and the circumstances surrounding his adoption would be forever changed.

Jonathan had always known he was adopted. When he was 18 months old, he had entered foster care because his mother had died from an undisclosed illness and his father, in distress, left him with a neighbor and



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never came back. He was adopted by his foster parents a year later, the youngest of three children in the family.

After the July 4th fireworks were over, Jonathan and his cousin were playing video games in the basement. He sat shell-shocked as his cousin casually told him the truth about his birth parents. His mother did not die from an undisclosed illness. She died addicted to drugs and his father did not leave, at least not voluntarily; he was in prison.

Jonathan was devastated by the words of his cousin. Why did his cousin know and he didn't? He was broken by what he felt was his parents' betrayal, though he never mentioned it to them. Before long, he began to withdraw from them and became increasingly angry and sullen. His parents were dumbfounded. What was going on? Was it a problem with school? With friends? No, Jonathan was angry because he was hurt knowing that his parents had kept important information from him. Why did they not tell him the truth about his birth parents?

The Destructive Power of Family Secrets

Family secrets probably exist within most family systems. For reasons dating clear back to the early part of the 20th century, family systems formed by adoption were, in most cases, formed on the shaky ground of secrets.

Why do we keep family secrets? Probably for a number of reasons. These are two that stand out:

First, we keep family secrets, especially in adoption, because we believe that our child (no matter the age) doesn't have the competency to handle secrecy. It would be too devastating for my child to know his birth parents were addicted to drugs, or that he was conceived as a result of rape.

Second, we keep family secrets because we believe we don't have the competence to handle our child's reaction to the truth—even if they are youth or young adults. We believe we would have no idea how to handle their anger, rage, or depression over knowing the truth.

Secrets are powerful tools often used to hide a family's potentially embarrassing or shameful event. But when discovered, family secrets can destroy the love and trust the family has fought so hard to build. What other impact can keeping secrets have?

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Secrets Alter Reality Abby was adopted as an infant, and many knew that—but not Abby. One afternoon when she was 10 years old, a friend at school asked her a casual question: “Do you know your birth mother’s name?” Abby didn’t know what to say.

“Birth mother? What are you talking about?” Her friend went on to tell her that her mother had told her that Abby was adopted and had another mother somewhere. Katie didn’t know how to answer. But she did know how she felt—shocked and scared. Her world had changed. She did not know what to do with her feelings, experiencing this new reality. Secrets not only alter reality but they can also create exclusion and division.

Why Is It Important for Our Children to Know the Truth?

Truth Creates Solid Ground to Form One’s Understanding of One’s Life Story

When children join their families through adoption and do not hear their story, they sometimes fill the vacuum with fantasy. Chris, age 11, imagined that his birth mother lived in a beautiful home near the ocean and that when he was older, he would visit her. He even drew pictures of “his story.” The problem? Jonathan’s mother was in prison and would be for a long time. Jonathan walked on the quicksand created by fantasy instead of truth. Adult adopted persons have shared that although they do not like the harsh truth of their past, knowing it gives them solid footing instead of walking on the quicksand of a fantasy they created.

Truth Builds a Connection from the Past to the Present and the Future

Whether children enter adoptive homes as infants or older children, they bring a past with them. Having little or no information about the people in their pasts and the circumstances that led to adoption can leave those who are adopted with deep and pervasive feelings of being disconnected. There can be a sense of deep and profound unexplained losses. When no one addresses those deep feelings, children may feel they don’t have the permission to ask those who have the answers. A child’s story is the bridge that connects the past to the present and beyond.

Truth Builds Trust in Parents and Other Important People

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Longtime expert in the field of adoption Dr. Randolph Severson commented that when adopted persons find out the secret(s), they often state that they have suspected it but have never admitted that. Severson explains, “There were probably subtle hints along the way, such as lack of pictures during pregnancy or coming home from the hospital. There were probably no stories unless they were fabricated. Some have resurrected memories of whispers at family gatherings. As the truth emerges, there is a rhythm of shock, anger, and relief.”

Truth Validates and Affirms the Need to Know

When adopted children grow up in an environment where no one talks of the past or mentions their birth family, they receive a message: Do not ask. Dr. Severson illustrates the subtlety of this message. “Think back to growing up. Did you have a pet that died? Did you have a pet that disappeared? Which one was more difficult to get over? The pet that died or the one that disappeared? The answer is the pet that disappeared. With death comes closure. With disappearance, one is sentenced to a lifetime of wondering.”¹

For adopted children, having no ability to know what happened to the significant people in their lives sentences them to a lifetime of wondering. One adopted teen commented, “I know I have a birth family out there somewhere. Some days I actually look into crowds hoping maybe to see someone that looks like me.”

Truth Frees the Family from the Maze of Secrecy

A phrase often spoken holds much truth. “If I tell the truth, I don’t have to remember what I said.” Lies create an unmanageable maze for a family. Adults have to remember what part of the story was told and what part was a bit fabricated or completely untrue. Adults have to worry about the “secret” getting out by remembering who was told what and when. And will those people keep the secret? When a family shares a child’s story age-appropriately, and creates an environment where openness and honesty prevail, they all live in freedom.

So how does a family create such an environment? By following these principles...

When a family shares a child’s story age-appropriately, and creates an environment where openness and honesty prevail, they all live in freedom.

¹ The following principles were adapted from the Back2Back Ministry’s nine module Trauma Competent Caregiving training series, Module 8. www.back2back.org/tcc Used with permission of the author.

Ten Principles for Telling the Truth²

1. Initiate conversation about the child's life story.

Children are not solely responsible for asking; parents and caregivers are responsible for telling. Children often believe they are being disloyal to the adoptive family when they have feelings and questions about the birth family. As a result, they may avoid conversation about the adoption and the birth family, even when they have burdensome questions or troubling feelings. Ways to initiate a conversation include things like reading an age-appropriate book, bringing up the subject of adoption on a birthday or Mother/Father's Day, or simply taking a drive together and asking good questions that allow the child to share their feelings about their adoption.

2. Do not lie! Under no circumstances should a caregiver/parent lie to a child.

Lying about a child's birth parents or history generates serious trust fissures. When the truth is revealed in the future due to a search, a slip by either the adoptive parent or extended family, or an accidental discovery of adoption-related documents, a serious rift in the parent/child relationship occurs—a rift that is difficult to repair with an apology or explanation. What began as “protection” of the relationship with the adopted child can become a “termination” of trust and intimacy in that relationship.

3. Tell information in a developmentally appropriate way.

A young child cannot possibly understand difficult information, but this information can be shared as the child grows, and asks for more information. Share all information by the time the child is 12 (developmentally). Age 12 is a good age to share all information for a number of reasons. Most children at age 12 are just beginning to think more abstractly, and can receive this information.

4. Allow a child to express anger about the past or birth family without joining in.

Many adults remember becoming enraged as children when someone outside the family criticized any family member, even a family member who drove them absolutely crazy! Caregivers/parents find themselves in a similar position. They “share” the child with another family without being an “insider” in that family. While the child should be allowed to

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² Schooler, Jayne E. and Norris, Betsie, *Journeys After Adoption: Understanding Lifelong Issues*, Santa Barbara: CA: ABC-CLIO, 18.

express both positive and negative feelings about birth family members, foster/adoptive parents cannot echo the negative sentiments because from the child's perspective, they are an outsider.

5. Consider asking good questions, instead of telling information.

When broaching the subject of adoption or birth family history, a good place to start is by asking questions rather than sharing information. Inquiries about what the child remembers, wonders, worries, or fantasizes about will give parents an opportunity to “start where the child is.” Some examples of questions for conversation starters are:

What do you remember about the time you lived with your birth family (foster family, relative)?

Do you have questions or worries about your birth parents (birth siblings)?

Do you ever wonder about your adoption and how you came to be part of our family?

Now that you are getting older, I bet you have questions about your birth family (how you joined our family). Would you like to talk about that?

6. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

A child's history is not told in “one and done” conversations. As the child matures or develops additional questions, the topic should be revisited. “In order to gain a full understanding of his story, repeated discussions should take place across time into early adolescence.”³ The child may have misunderstood information previously shared if parents used language or concepts he was not yet able to comprehend. Or the child may have been so focused on one portion of the information, particularly if the child has attention challenges, that he or she missed other, equally important, parts of the message. Your child may have developed new worries or fears that need to be addressed. Or he or she may need facts during one conversation and an opportunity to express feelings during another. While parents want to avoid obsessively insisting on adoption communication until the child feels overwhelmed by a barrage of painful discussion, it is important to remember adoption should be addressed throughout the child's maturation. As psychologist and researcher Dr. David Brodzinsky suggests, “If you can't remember the last time you talked about adoption, it's time for another conversation.”

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³ Talking to Adolescence, Page 9, Gretchen Wrobel, et.al. “The Family Adoption Communication (FAC) Model: Identifying Pathways of Adoption-Related Communication.” *Adoption Quarterly*, Vol. 7(2) (2003): 59.

7. Don't try to fix the pain of loss.

All caregivers/parents naturally try to protect their children from pain. However, adults should recognize their child must experience some pain in the normal resolution of adoption-related grief. The only way “out” is “through.” Do not impose unrealistic expectations on yourself (e.g. by saying exactly the right thing, or thinking you can erase all of the pain and sadness caused by separation from the birth family). If the child refuses or resists communication, try again another time. Young children generally love to hear their adoption stories. They are naturally self-absorbed, and they love to hear stories about themselves. However, as children mature and understand there are painful elements of grief and loss, as well as confusion over divided loyalties involved in their stories, they may become resistant to adoption communication. Caregivers/parents may wonder if they are overdoing the discussions if the child insists, “I don't want to talk about it. Can't you just drop it?” The child's wishes should be respected, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a meaningful conversation with an unwilling partner.

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8. Remember, the child knows more than you think.

It is important to know, specifically for older adopted children, what the abuse or neglect was—because it happened to them. We should talk about life experiences they lived through. They may have been pre-verbal when it happened, but that does not mean they do not remember. They have deep emotional memories, and need words to explain what happened to them. Children can also be good detectives, interviewing others (siblings or other relatives) and/or looking through parents' papers to find information. They may also remember more than parents realize. Failing to provide an atmosphere where a child can ask difficult questions is like allowing an elephant to live in the middle of the family living room. There is always a sense that something is not being talked about. Children learn early on from the open or closed communication environment just how they are to handle sensitive issues—whether to tiptoe around them or deal with them directly.

9. Don't impose value judgments.

A caregiver may think a piece of information is devastating, however, it may be the key to the child's understanding of why he or she is living in a children's home or in foster care. Information about a child's history may seem very negative, even horrific, to caregivers/parents or social workers, but may be interpreted quite differently by the child. Information about a child's history should never be changed or given to an older child with significant omissions. Facts must be presented, however, without the overlay of values and without judgment.

The realities of a child's life should not be withheld. However, some of these truths should be shared with demonstrated compassion toward the child who may have been neglected, abused, or abandoned. There are probably no parents who ever, as children, dreamed of becoming felons or addicted to drugs. Yet they did. Sometimes people become entangled in horrendous life circumstances in which they make choices that would be different if their lives had taken other paths. Poor choices do not justify wrong actions, but perhaps a truthful but compassionate perspective will lead a child to understand and maybe one day forgive her birth parents.

10. Don't forget, it is the child's story.

The history belongs to the child, not to the adoptive parents. If friends or extended family members ask about sensitive information, simply tell them the information belongs to the child. Encourage family members to wait until the child is old enough to decide what questions he wants to answer.

Parents/caregivers may want to assist the child in developing a short, simple version of his or her story that they feel comfortable sharing with neighbors, school friends and teachers, relatives, and other acquaintances. This "cover story" may be very similar to the information given to your child when he was very young. Let the child know one does not withhold information from acquaintances because it is shameful, but because one should not have to explain one's history in all its detail to anyone and everyone.

The Closing Principle

Walking in truth sets everyone free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jayne Schooler is recognized nationally and internationally as a speaker/trainer in the field of adoption and foster care, working with Back2Back Ministries. She is the author/co-author of eight books in the field of child welfare including *Wounded Children, Healing Homes: How Traumatized Children Impact Adoptive and Foster Parents*. She is also a co-author of *Trauma Competent Caregiver*, a Back2Back Ministries nine module trauma curriculum that has reached over 70 countries and translated into 8 languages. Jayne and her husband, David, are parents by birth and adoption and grandparents of four.



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