

# ADOPTION

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## ADVOCATE

# Talking to Adopted Children About Birth Parents and Families of Origin: How to Answer the “Hard Questions”

BY RHONDA JAREMA

## Introduction

Over the years, I've had a number of parents question me about what they should say to their child when that child asks about his or her biological parents. Adoptive families may have been provided with varying amounts of information, from an extensive background that includes APGAR scores to just a birthdate. Sometimes there is a vague family history, or the child might even have some memories of their birth family if placed as an older child. Most families have something in between: usually a very basic history of parental death, abandonment, voluntary placement, or removal from parental care. This leaves a hole that is often difficult for both child and parents, as they attempt to fill in the blanks from the past.

It is the responsibility of adoption professionals to try to guide the parents in this area. Adoptive parents often expect that professionals have some hidden store of information that was not provided with the referral, or that the information expanded while in the file and will provide the magical answers to their child's questions. Sometimes parents become anxious when they receive questions from their child about their past prior to adoption. It is important for parents to give information



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appropriate to the child's level of development; offering all the specifics at a young age may increase anxiety for all involved.

Just as it is important to share the information the parent has on the child's family, so it is important not to fill in blanks when the answer really isn't known. Sometimes the adoptive parent may not have any information, and the answer might be "I'm sorry, but I don't know." Another option would be to ask the child, "What do you think?" As a parent, these are not always easy discussions, but they are important to have.

## Beginning the Conversation

Although it might seem counter-intuitive, it is best to start the discussion right at the very beginning, even at the time of adoption. If it is an open, no-holds-barred discussion at the start of the relationship, it will be a conversation that is part of the family milieu, rather than a time of anxiety for both the child and adoptive parents. Parents should not always wait for the child to bring it up or brush aside questions their child does ask.

With the initiation of The Hague regulations for intercountry adoptions, some country officials are providing more information in referrals. This differs from past years, when the referral information might have little relationship to the child being referred. I remember once asking an official why they withheld information that they actually had, as we felt it was important to provide any and all information on a child. The official responded, "The parents would not want to adopt that child if they knew the full story!" I explained that, on the contrary, we could find a family for that child – with more information, we would, in fact, be able to find a family that was a *better* fit, as they would be able to identify potential needed resources for the individual child ahead of time rather than trying to find them post-adoption.

Whether the child's story is sparse or complete, it is important to share that story with the child, when he asks and at the developmental stage that child is at. Just as one would not speak about sperm and eggs with a preschooler, one would not share the hardest parts of a personal history with a very young child. Instead, the early years provide an opportunity to begin the discussion with the child and to lay a foundation built on honesty and age-appropriate transparency.

## Talking About Adoption and Birth Parents

In a closed adoption, a child under age five or six, developmentally, may not even be aware that there is any other family aside from the adoptive

family. Whether the child knows his or her birth family or is even aware of their existence, it is still important to begin the discussion about adoption at a young age. Birth parents need to be acknowledged, not just once but continually; they brought the child into the world. There may have been a time of love and nurturing when the original family was all together, or it may have been a time of stress and trauma.

It is important not to initially focus on the negative or traumatic facts, if they are known. Nor should adoptive parents make things up about the birth parents to present them in a more positive light, as this could make them appear somehow unreal or “magical” in the eyes of the child. In our own family, we explained that our children’s biological parents were not able to care for them and allowed them to come into our family and home, focusing more on “our” part of the story and keeping their past to what we knew, sharing at a level appropriate for our children’s development.

Children often learn from parents’ reactions which topics are acceptable and which are troubling to their parents. I had one little boy share at a post-adoption visit that his mother cried every time he brought up a memory or had a question about his birth parents. The message she was giving him was, “I can’t talk about this important topic with you.” Whether the mother felt threatened or was upset by what she did know about this boy’s past, she was making it difficult for him to better understand and perhaps resolve issues from his past. Her reaction was upsetting her son more than if they actually talked about what she knew about his past.

I asked this mother to consider what it was about his history upset her. Was it a feeling of being threatened by his desire to speak about his past, or was it a discomfort with his past and inability to know how to protect him from it? It was important to get to her concerns first, before we could deal with the boy’s need to discuss his past. Once she was able to identify and address her own concerns, then she could be more open and willing to talk about her son’s early family history with him.

The son was afraid of making his mother cry again, but really wanted to talk to her about his past. Working with them both -- first individually and then together — to talk about their concerns helped them to then address his history, with his mom sharing what she knew in a way he could understand at his level of development. I encouraged the little boy to share his story with me, and told him I would help him and his mother to talk about it as well.

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## When Information is Lacking

As an adoptive parent, I often wish I had more information to provide to my children. However, I've had to step back and realize it is their story, not mine. I have to remember that it is not my curiosity being satisfied or not, but my child's, and make an effort to answer her questions. It is not up to me whether we do a search that may lead to more information; that has to be my child's decision.

It is not unusual for children who have been adopted to have questions about their biological family, and even to have bouts of "magical thinking" in which they imagine life as it "should have been" rather than as it was. This type of thinking helps them to reconcile the "difficult" past with their wish for how it could have been if their birth family had remained whole and they had been raised by their biological parents. I think it helps to discuss this possibility with adopted children in an empathetic way.

## Discussing the "Hard Things"

Some adopted children have had a very difficult and possibly abusive past that they may or may not remember. I do not think it is helpful to go into detail about what is known or imagined from the little information acquired until the child is ready to talk about it. Look at where the individual child is developmentally, and keep it very simple, going into known details as the child/adolescent is ready. It is important that adoptive parents listen to their child and acknowledge their questions.

Here is an example that might help families as they consider their response to a child. "We began loving you the moment we knew of you. From the minute we learned about you, we couldn't wait until the day you were in our arms and we could be your forever parents. Sometimes people have children before they are ready or able to take care of them. When you were born, your birth mother and father made a very loving decision to place you in the baby home where you would be fed and clothed. They knew that your caregivers would try to find the best family for you. We are very sad about some of the things that you had to face as a very little baby/child. That does not change how we feel about you. You were little and had no control over what was happening. Fortunately, you also had good experiences and people who loved you and helped you to become the beautiful, loving, sweet, and sensitive little boy or girl you are today. You have had two sets of parents. One set brought you into this world, and now we are here to love and guide you from now on. You have brought so much into our lives, and we are so happy to have you as our child, forever and ever!"

The child who talks about missing their birth mother might actually be afraid that the adoptive parents too might “go away.” This fear can arise if adopted by a single parent or if one parent becomes ill. Make sure to review plans of support and guardianship if something were to happen to the parent, if the child brings up that fear. It helps to offer reassurance, acceptance and comfort. As the parent listens and encourages the child to talk about these concerns, it shows acceptance of the child and who she or he is, genetically and environmentally.

## Remembering the Birth Family and Adoption

An adopted child has two sets of parents, one biological and then adoptive. Both are important, and both are deserving of honor.

Adopted children need to feel safe voicing their feelings and curiosity about their birth families, and discussing them with their adoptive parents. In domestic open adoptions, where there is contact between birth and adoptive families, it may be easier because the child can ask questions of the birth parent(s) if there is open communication. But even in open adoptions, adopted children must be able to discuss their birth families and adoptions with their adoptive parents as well.

In closed adoptions, some children might have photos of their birth family. Others might only have photos of their friends or caregivers, and some none at all. Families can put these photos up in the child’s bedroom along with other photos of their adoptive family, or mix the photos in with family photos that are throughout the home. Others pray for the birth mother or parents, or remember them in some special way on Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, or the day of their birth mother’s birth or death.

Developing rituals to acknowledge and remember the birth parents can be helpful to adopted children. It can help them to know that their adoptive parents are comfortable talking about their past, and do not feel threatened by the biological parents or their feelings about them, whatever those feelings might be. As an adoptive parent, participating in these rituals, or getting used to seeing photos of your child’s biological relatives and former caregivers in the home, can initially be difficult. But it is important to move past that for the child’s benefit and realize it helps the child to face their past and be more accepting of the present when their history is accepted, celebrated where appropriate, and always openly discussed.

It might be helpful to refer to the child’s birth parent(s) by their first names or as the child’s “Chinese/Romanian/Ugandan/etc. mother and father.” That clarifies that you are the mom or dad who takes care of

your child when ill, answers the questions about math, hold them when they are sad, and tucks them in at night. It helps to refer to the birth parents by a different name than the ones you use as parents, while still acknowledging and honoring them as the birth parents of your child.

Many of us have a baby book from when we were born. In the adoption world, we encourage parents to make a book for their child, of photos and memories from their adoption journey. These books are commonly referred to as “life books.” They tell the story of your child and he or she came into your family. It helps to review the book often, so the child’s story becomes familiar. Children who are comfortable with their past are better able to face their future.

## Discussing Birth Families with Adolescents

Older children or teens will often bring up their birth parents as they wonder about their identity. Adolescence is a time of determining who we will be as adults. It is a time of beginning to separate from one’s parents, forming one’s own identity.

Erik Erikson, a developmental psychologist, is best known for coming up with the stages of development. He identified the period between ages 13 and 19 as a time of “identity versus role confusion.” This is when a child begins the journey into adulthood. It is a time of exploration. Adoptees might question, “Am I like my biological parents or my adoptive parents? Who am I meant to be?”

Teenagers change rapidly, physically as well as emotionally and intellectually. I’ve heard adoptees say to their adoptive parents, “You aren’t my real parents!” It is a hurtful comment, and of course at the time it is meant to be. However, it is not unusual for teens, including biological children, to be challenging and difficult with their parents. The adolescent’s role is to challenge as they transition into adulthood, but it can feel hurtful to the parent.

It is important for parents to understand that this is a normal behavior for this developmental stage. They can also help the child find more answers about their past if that is important to them, as it might help both child and parents better navigate this period together. If the parents are accessible, always making it clear that they are willing and able to discuss the child’s history and birth family in an open manner, the child will feel more comfortable sharing their concerns and fears and being supported by their adoptive parents. It can help to focus the discussion on how families are developed in different ways, and how they continue to change and evolve over time. Although the adoptee began life in another family,

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the family constellation may change over their lifetime as they go away to school, marry, and begin a family of their own.

## Looking for More Information

Some parents determine that they need to identify any information they can about the child's biological family even if the child has not shown an interest, as a child or even as a teenager or young adult. I remember sitting in an adoption conference and hearing adult adoptees sharing that the search for the biological family needs to be initiated by the adoptee, not the adoptive parents.

Often when children or youth bring up the past and questions they have about it, they want reassurance that today's family and situation will continue. I also believe that when the adoptive family accepts the child's feelings and doesn't try to confront or change them, it is best for all. You do not want to push your child into feeling defensive regarding their adoption or birth parents, but instead help them feel secure in the knowledge that you are all on the same page. Sometimes the best answer can be the simplest: "I love you for who you are and I'm so glad you are my son/daughter!"

Sometimes adult adoptees contact agencies asking for information about their birth parents. Adoptive families often receive additional information during the official in-country referral or court hearing; however, they rarely provide that same information to the placing agency. It makes it difficult when the adoptive parent or adult child calls the agency requesting information that the agency does not possess. Oftentimes, adult adoptees are legally prevented from receiving any identifying information from their placement agency. According to many State and Hague adoption regulations, identifying information cannot be provided on an adoptee's biological parents. They often express frustration that their questions cannot be answered.

I suggest adult adopted individuals ask their adoptive parents for their original adoption documents. If the adoptive parents are concerned about the security of the documents, as they are very difficult to replace, I encourage the family to arrange for a safety deposit box to ensure the security of those documents.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of adoptive parents to begin the discussion about birth parents and family relationships and make it

ongoing conversation from the beginning. Allow the child to lead with their interests and questions, rather than prioritizing the parents' feelings or curiosity. This is particularly important in adolescence, as children begin the transition from childhood to adulthood, wondering about who they are and what direction they will take in life.

When an adopted child asks a question about their past, the parents need to answer that question to the best of their ability. The birth family conversation does not need to be one of fear and anxiety for adoptive families. The conversation is an important one for adoptees to have, and they must know that they can always express their questions and feelings with their parents. In an environment of acceptance and openness, these discussions can help build and strengthen the relationship between adoptive parent and child.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhonda Jarema, MA is Executive Director California Office of Nightlight Christian Adoptions. She has worked as a social worker and advocate in the fields of international adoption and mental health for over 20 years. Since 1995, Rhonda has focused her attention on the international adoption field as a social worker, advocate and educator. She has presented at NCFA and JCICS conferences on the issues related to adopting school-aged children, and has published several articles related to internationally adopted children. Ms. Jarema is married and the mother of four adult children and one high school-aged child, all adopted internationally.



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