

Adoption Advocate



Helping Children Understand Their Adoption Stories

BY ELISA ROSMAN

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Talking openly with children about their adoption and empowering them to do so as well is important both for the child and the relationship; keeping an adoption a secret is never a good idea. However, just knowing that it is the “right” thing to do does not necessarily make it easy. Because children and families come to adoption a myriad of ways, there are many different approaches to conversations on the topic. These conversations can range from joyful and celebratory to painful and scary. This *Adoption Advocate* aims to provide more information about and support for discussing adoption and telling adoption stories. It begins by considering why it is important to have open communication and honest discussions and then moves to the types of conversations and information-sharing that are appropriate at different developmental stages. Considerations in assisting children with narrating their own stories will also be shared, as well as specific resources that can support the entire story-sharing process.

The Ten Principles of Telling the Truth

1. Initiate conversations about the child’s life story.
2. Do not lie.
3. Tell information in a developmentally appropriate way.
4. Allow a child to express anger about the past or birth family without joining in.
5. Consider asking instead of telling.
6. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
7. Don’t try to fix the pain of loss.
8. Remember, the child knows more than you think.
9. Don’t impose value judgments.
10. The child should be in control of their own story. It is the child’s story to tell.

Jayne Schooler in NCFA’s recorded course, [How to Explain to Children Their Adoption Story at Different Ages](#)

Why Communication and Honesty Matter

Overview

Honesty and open communication provide an important foundation for any parent-child relationship, and this may be especially true for families formed through adoption. It is now widely accepted that adoption should be discussed openly and in a developmentally appropriate manner, not with a “big reveal” at some point in the child’s life. Open communication allows both the child and family to view adoption in a positive light, not seeing adoption as something shameful that needs to be hidden away. Children, when left without answers to important questions, often create their own narratives or focus exclusively on the negative aspects of their stories. A lack of ability to communicate and share information about their pasts can leave children feeling unsafe and unsupported. Not discussing adoption openly and honestly and keeping it as a type of secret can also make children feel as though they have something to be ashamed of.

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Insights from Adult Adoptees

A resource from the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) states that adult adoptees are vital educators in sharing the importance of honesty and openness when talking about adoption. Adult adoptees report considerable damage in their relationship with their adoptive parents that occurred as a result of dishonesty.¹ In NCFA’s *Adoption Advocate*, [Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Helping Your Child Come to a Strength-Based Understanding of His or Her Life Story](#), Jayne Schooler shares what can happen when an adoption story is distorted or kept a secret, even with the best of intentions:

“Jonathan and his cousin were playing video games...He sat in shock 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 ...Jonathan was angry because he was hurt knowing that his parents had kept important information from him.”

Research

A growing body of research supports the notion that communication openness in families formed through adoption is associated with more positive outcomes for

¹ Center for Adoption Support and Education. (2025, January 6). *Topical brief #4: Talking with your children about adoption: The basics*. Center for Adoption Support and Education. <https://adoptionsupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/C.A.S.E.-Topical-Brief-No.-4-Talking-with-Children-about-Adoption.pdf>

children. Brodzinsky was one of the first to explicitly study communication openness; he reviewed research which found that “Although relatively little research has been conducted on the impact of communication openness in adoption on adoption triad members, the data gathered, to date, generally support the notion that adopted individuals who experience more open, direct, and non-defensive communication about adoption with their parents show more positive adjustment, not just in the childhood years, but even into adulthood” (p. 5).² In his own study, Brodzinsky found that more communication openness was associated with higher levels of children’s self-esteem and lower levels of behavior problems reported by parents. Santona and colleagues (2022) discuss the cycle of closed communication that can occur in families formed through adoption, in which adoption is not discussed because parents are waiting for their children to ask questions, and children perceive that their parents do not wish to discuss it. In a study of 537 adopted children and families, they found that “children tended to ask more about their past lives one year after being adopted when their parents had talked about the past and their biological families since the beginning...thus breaking the cycle of closed communication.”³

As the cycle of closed communication theory suggests, just because children are not actively asking about their adoption stories does not mean they are not thinking about them. Parents can casually ask questions that may spark conversations or use “I wonder”

statements, such as, “I wonder if today is hard for you because it’s your birth mom’s birthday.” These prompts signal to children that adoption topics are not taboo and, in fact, are welcome to be discussed. Open conversations, in turn, promote connection and trust between children and parents. Children need to know that it is safe to ask questions.

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Being Respectful of Birth Parents

Another key component of sharing stories with children is being mindful not to denigrate birth parents. The National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents (NTDC) [Life Story: Birth and Adoption Story](#) training, reminds parents that “Children come from their birth parents, so whatever people say about their birth parents is essentially what children feel is being said about them.”⁴ At the same time, children do not want made-up stories about their birth parents. It is absolutely acceptable for parents to say, “I don’t know, but I can help you try to find the answer to that question.”

² Brodzinsky, D. (2006). Family structural openness and communication openness as predictors in the adjustment of adopted children. *Adoption Quarterly*, 9(4), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1300/J145v09n04_01

³ Santona, A., Tognasso, G., Miscioscia, C. L., Russo, D., & Gorla, L. (2022). Talking about the birth family since the beginning: The communicative openness in the new adoptive family. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(3), 1203. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031203>

⁴ National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Families (n.d.). *Life story: Birth and adoption story* [MOOC]. <https://adoption.talentlms.com/plus/courses/290>

Dealing with Difficult Emotions

These conversations are often not easy and can provoke strong feelings of sadness and loss for children. The agency [Expressions of Hope](#) highlights the following ways that parents can support and be there for their children during these conversations:

- Lead with empathy and understanding.
- Normalize difficult emotions, making it clear that feelings of anger and grief are not uncommon.
- Provide tools and strategies, such as drawing or journaling.
- Expect emotions to resurface over time.

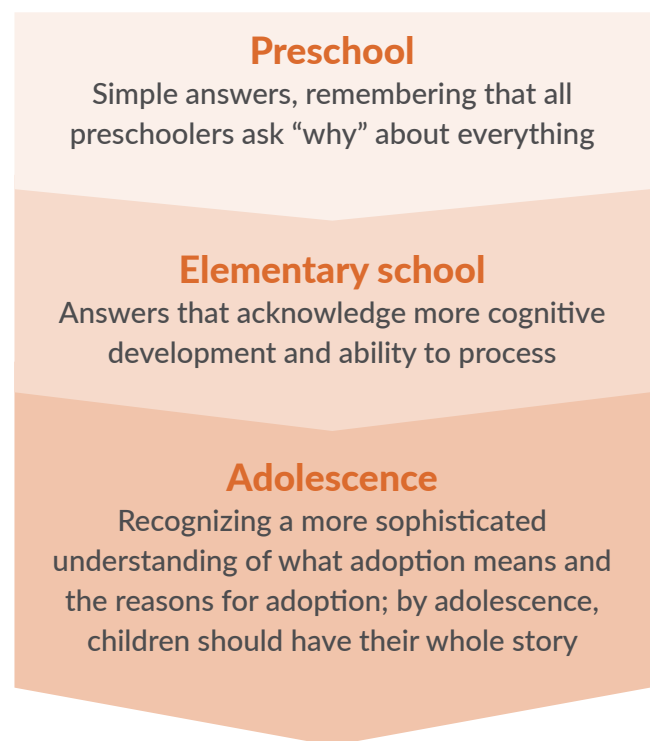
These stories and conversations are not easy, and at times, parents may also want to seek support from an adoption-competent therapist.⁵

Support for Parents

It can also be challenging for adoptive parents to share and discuss their children's sometimes painful adoption stories. Parents may feel threatened by the psychological presence of the birth parents or may worry that it could be too hard for children to process the harder pieces of their stories. Additionally, families may worry that they will “lose” their children to their biological families. There are strategies shared below that parents can use to make these conversations easier. Parents may want to practice these conversations in advance and find a trusted, confidential partner to debrief with after the more difficult conversations.

Sharing Developmentally-Appropriate Information at Different Stages

Jayne Schooler from the [Schooler Institute](#) recommends considering adoption as similar to discussing the “birds and the bees;” different amounts of information are suitable at different ages. The NTDC training shares the following developmental progression:



Preschool

In their brief on discussing adoption during the preschool years, C.A.S.E. describes these years as the time to introduce children to the basics of their adoption story. During this time, children start to become aware of other families with different family structures and may start asking

⁵ Expressions of Hope. (n.d.). *Supporting adoptive children in understanding their story.* <https://www.eohfamilies.org/blog/supporting-adoptive-children-in-understanding-their-story>

questions about how their family was formed. It is important to start sharing basic facts and using appropriate language in a matter-of-fact way. At this age, it is not yet the time to talk about details of abuse, neglect, or addiction. Parents can also share with their children why they were motivated to adopt.⁶

Parents can also add facts that pertain to the child's particular story, such as:

"You came over on an airplane from another country called Korea when you were very young."

"Your birth mother chose us to adopt you before you were born."

"We met you when you were one year old."

"We were your foster parents and we adopted you when you were 5 years old."

School-Age Children

School-age children may become more curious about the specifics of their adoption story, and it is at this age that parents can begin to share more facts and details. Many resources suggest that, as a child finishes elementary school and heads into their pre-teen years and adolescence, it is important that they know their whole story so that they are not processing that information while also processing the changes that come along with adolescence. One resource states that "Children who are adopted need to know their entire story before they are grown and before they hit full adolescence, when their story would be interpreted through an emotional and often irrational brain."⁷

Many children, especially those who do not look like their parents, may be subjected to intrusive questions from classmates and peers.

Teenagers

A resource from C.A.S.E. shares the following about parenting teens: "While parents may find the task of talking with children about adoption daunting, most find that when those children become teens, talking about anything is even more challenging." However, it is as important as ever to maintain open and accessible lines of communication about adoption. This resource shares the following principles of effective communication with teens, specifically about adoption:

1. Send a clear message that talking about adoption and your child's adoption story is okay, and you are a ready and willing communication partner.
2. Look for signals in teens' behavior; for example, a teen who suddenly starts dressing in the traditional clothing of their birth culture may be trying to send a message that it is up to the parents to decipher.
3. Remain engaged and keep trying, even in the face of adolescent angst.
4. Share all available information.

⁶ Center for Adoption Support and Education. (2025, January 9). *Topical brief #1: Children and adoption: The preschool years (3-5) wondering "Who am I?"* Center for Adoption Support and Education. https://adoptionssupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/C.A.S.E._Topical-Brief-No-1_The-Preschool-Years-3-5.pdf

⁷ Hastings, R. (2024). *Helping children understand adoption: An age-by-age guide*. North State Parent. <https://northstateparent.com/article/helping-children-understand-adoption-an-age-by-age-guide/>

5. Assist your teenager in making communications with their heritage and past, which, for some teens, includes reunions with birth family members.
6. Support your children in finding outside help and resources if they need it.⁸

Kids Need Tools to Tell Their Own Stories

Parents can play a key role in helping their children to have the tools to tell their own stories. Many children, especially those who do not look like their parents, may be subjected to intrusive questions from classmates and peers. These questions may stem from genuine curiosity or may take a tone closer to bullying; either way, kids will be better prepared to respond if parents have helped guide them. NTDC's [Life Story: Birth and Adoption Story](#) training offers the following considerations for helping prepare children to be asked about and subsequently share information about their stories:

- Help them remember that they have a right to privacy.
- Discuss the possible ramifications of where they share their stories (e.g., social media).
- Practice responding to questions with them.

Parents can also support their children by helping connect them to their racial/cultural histories. NTDC's Life Story training reminds us that "Your child's racial, ethnic and cultural heritage are important parts of their identity."

Children's literature can provide a powerful way for children who are adopted to see their experiences mirrored back at them.

The training suggests the following strategies for supporting a connection to that heritage:

- Talk about how the child's heritage has enriched your family life so the child can feel proud of that heritage.
- Research information about the child's heritage and learn about cultural customs.
- Have conversations with the child's birth family about customs, celebrations, and foods that are important parts of their heritage.
- Add new customs or make adjustments to your family's routines and traditions to incorporate elements of the child's culture into your family.
- Spend time connecting with individuals who share the child's cultural background.
- Seek out groups and events that include the child's racial, cultural or ethnic origins.
- Live in a community that offers opportunities for cultural immersion and integration to give the child role models and peers who share the same heritage.

For children and families who are interested

⁸ Center for Adoption Support and Education. (2025, January 4). *Topical brief #6: Talking about adoption: The teen years*. Center for Adoption Support and Education. <https://adoptionssupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/C.A.S.E.-Topical-Brief-No.-6-Adoption-and-the-Teen-Years.pdf>

in a more structured, curriculum-based approach to helping prepare children to share their own stories, the NTDC tip sheet, *Parent Tip Sheet: Talking About How We Describe Ourselves*,⁹ shares information about the WISE Up! Program, created by C.A.S.E. This curriculum was designed specifically to help children take control of their unique story and decide how, when, and if to share it.

Concrete Strategies and Tools

Children's Literature

In 1990, Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop first presented the concept of children's literature as being a powerful tool for providing "windows" into the lives of children and families that are different from one's own, and "mirrors" reflecting back one or more aspects of a child's own identity or lived experience.¹⁰ Children's literature can provide a powerful way for children who are adopted to see their experiences mirrored back at them. "For parents, teachers, and guardians, children's books about adoption can be incredibly useful tools when discussing adoption with children."¹¹ A blog post entitled [Why Children's Books About Adoption Are So Important](#) provides an excellent introduction to the

potential power of children's literature, as well as recommendations for books to help begin to build a family library.

Pop Culture

There is a trope that movies and TV shows used to rely on, in which a scene where a child inadvertently discovers they are adopted is played for comic effect. For many in the adoption community, this "joke" was never funny, and only painful. Thankfully, pop culture wisdom finally seems to be catching up. Television shows and movies that present adoption and communication around adoption in a positive light are another way to help children start talking about adoption in a low-pressure, informal way. An article from *Adoptive Families* shares five television shows that "get" adoption. As the article explains, "Seeing an adoption plot played out on-screen—whether a new show or one featuring characters they already know and love—can be an effective and enjoyable way to help normalize adoption for children."¹² Movies that feature adoption in storylines can also spark conversations, and *Adoptive Families* highlights several movies that can help promote meaningful discussions.¹³

Lifebooks

Adoption lifebooks, also called memory books or adoption baby books, can serve as a concrete, visual tool for describing a child's

⁹ National Training and Development Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Parents. (2021). *Handout #1: Parent tip sheet: Talking about how we describe ourselves*. <https://spauldingvolandabrownmccutchen.sharefile.com/share/view/s4d1f70cb92414397bb9e4567124a5bb7/fo556bf7-30bb-41c5-985a-7d9ff7612e5a>

¹⁰ Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books from the Classroom*, 6(3). <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

¹¹ Nebraska Children's Home Society. (2023, November 2). *Why children's books about adoption are so important*. <https://blog.nchs.org/power-of-adoption-books-literature>

¹² Cooper, A. (2017). *Television shows that "get" adoption*. *Adoptive Families*. <https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/childrens-television-shows-that-get-adoption/>

¹³ Cooper, A. (2017). *Adoption at the movies*. *Adoptive Families*. https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/using-movies-to-start-adoption-conversations-with-children/?src=embed_link

adoption story. A blog post on creating an adoption lifebook highlights the role these books can have in helping children tell their stories: “Lifebooks gather everything you know in one place. They can be used to help children understand how they came to be a part of their family and are a powerful way for them to share their adoption story with others.”¹⁴ *Adoptive Families* has compiled a question and answer session with five adoption experts to answer commonly asked questions about creating a lifebook.¹⁵ Artistic or creative abilities are not required to make a lifebook; simply collect as much

*Adoption lifebooks...
can serve as a concrete,
visual tool for describing
a child’s adoption story.*

information as possible about the child’s adoption journey so that they have as few missing pieces as possible. A quick internet search will produce a myriad of resources, including printables, organizational ideas, and clip art.

Conclusion

Overall, conventional wisdom, psychological research, and individuals’ lived experiences make it clear that talking about children’s adoption stories and empowering them to do so as they feel comfortable is a crucial component of an adopted child’s healthy development. Encouraging parents to use their knowledge, along with available tools and resources, is essential in making these stories a natural part of a family’s narrative.

¹⁴ StageWise Parenting. (2024). *How to make an adoption lifebook*. <https://stagewiseparenting.org/how-to-make-an-adoption-lifebook/>

¹⁵ Editorial Team, *Adoptive Families*. (n.d.). *Lifebook lessons*. *Adoptive Families*. <https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/lifebook-lessons/>

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Elisa has spent nearly two decades working as a consultant on issues around early care, education, and adoption. She has worked on a variety of projects, including grant writing, performing evaluation project management, advising on a replication of an Early Head Start model, and writing adoption-related articles. Elisa has a particular interest in translating research and information to make it most useful for families and practice. Elisa currently serves as the Evaluation Consultant for Formed Families Forward, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting foster, kinship, and adoptive families of children and youth with disabilities and other special needs in Northern Virginia. She earned her MA in infant and early childhood special education from George Washington University and her PhD in Community Psychology from New York University. She is mom to 4, including 3 children adopted from China.

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