



pact's

# point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## Director's Corner

### Did I Cry Too Much?

by Beth Hall & Gail Steinberg

*I get asked all the time about how to talk with children about adoption. Several years ago, Gail Steinberg (Pact co-founder) and I created some children's stories that we thought could give parents some models of how to interact with children to promote deeper conversations about topics related to adoption. I hope the story will be a useful example of how children think and talk about adoption and race. Enjoy!*

Daddy was late picking up Matthew after school. When the purple car pulled up to the curb Matthew was the last child left in the schoolyard. He was mad!

"Where were you? How could you? Why didn't you..." he fumed.

"I'm so sorry," Daddy interrupted, in a voice that sounded like a lonely harmonica coming from far away. Something in his voice made Matthew stop.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" asked Matthew, who suddenly realized that something was extremely not okay.

"Nothing, buddy. Get in the car. Don't worry."

"But what happened? Please tell me."

"It's okay. I'm sorry I was late," was all Daddy would say.

They drove in silence, Matthew not knowing what to do, Dad absorbed in his own thoughts.

They still had a long drive left before they would get home and Matthew was getting more and more upset. He was worried. Maybe his dad was sad because he had done something wrong... maybe he had done something he didn't even know was bad...

Dad sat stiffly, eyes on the road, deep in thought. Matthew had never seen him look that way before.

A man at work, a trusted friend, had said that Dad wasn't Matthew's real father, because he had adopted him. Dad was trying to hide his feelings, not wanting to trouble his son or make him feel bad.

"Are you okay, Daddy?" Matthew finally dared to ask again.

"Some things are hard to talk about, buddy.

Thank you for asking. I'm feeling very sad and kinda mad about something that happened at work today."

"Is it my fault?"

"Don't even think you did something wrong, buddy, because you didn't. In fact, you are the best that that has happened to me all day."

"In fact, all year."

"In fact you are the best thing that has ever happened to me."

"I love you. I'll try to tell you about it but I'm embarrassed, angry and sad all at the same time. Can you handle that?"

Matthew couldn't believe it. "Dad, I really think I can."

"My friend—or should I say someone I thought was my friend—said some stupid things about me. He said you aren't really my son and I'm not really your Dad and it really hurt my feelings."

"Oh," Matthew said, giving his Dad a long sideways look of concern.

Matthew thought about it for a while. Then he said, "I wonder if you feel like I feel when kids who hear I'm adopted ask me why my real parents didn't want me?"

Dad was quiet for a minute. They both waited. "Hmm," he said. "Maybe."

"Why didn't my birth parents want me, Daddy? Do you think maybe I cried too much?"

Amazed to hear such a big question, one Matthew had never ever asked before, Dad gave a big sigh.

All he could offer back was the same "Oh!" Matthew had offered him earlier. He reached over the seat to rub the back of his son's neck.

They sat silently listening to the sounds of the car and noise of the freeway rushing by.

"What a terrible way to feel," said Dad, after a very long while in a very soft, sweet voice.

"Did I cry too much?" Matthew asked again.

"Babies are supposed to cry. Crying is how babies tell parents they need something, before they can talk."

"Sometimes when a baby is born, his parents have their own problems that keep them from being able to take care of him."

"It's not the baby's fault, it's a grown-up problem that is kind of like when you need your shoe tied but you don't know how. You need help or somebody else to do it for you."

"Your first parents couldn't take care of you when you were born for a reason all their own... but all children need parents who can do all the things kids need right away at the exact time they are born, not when the parents are ready or have time to learn..."

Matthew and his dad were quiet the rest of the ride home but they both had a feeling they had talked about and shared something about their family and themselves that was really good and important.

When they got home, as they were getting out of the car, Matthew said, "I'm glad you trusted me, Dad. I like it when you tell me how you feel, even when you feel sad."

"Me too," said Matthew's dad and he chased him all the way to the kitchen, just like he did every afternoon, but this time Matthew won!

Often parents think that shielding children from the “blood is thicker than water” attitudes of society is a good goal, because they don’t want their children to feel second best because they are adopted. But this kind of shielding leads to the notion that adoption is something to keep secret or be ashamed of—a dangerous sentiment that can undermine a child’s self-esteem over the long haul. We urge parents not to be afraid to talk about societal attitudes about adoption. Children, even very young ones, need to see that their parents know about the negative assumptions that they themselves are inevitably hearing as well, often when their parents aren’t around. When children see that despite comments and assumptions from people outside the family, their own parents feel confident and secure about the family connection built through adoption, they, in turn, are far more likely to feel confident and secure.

This story also highlights the important point that when parents model vulnerability and pain, children often open up and share deeper issues and concerns that they might otherwise keep to themselves. Honesty breeds trust and the chance for more genuine sharing by the child. Of course it would be inappropriate for parents to burden children with their own angst or look to them for support or validation, but simply modeling openness to a multiplicity of feelings is a healthy way to open the door for children to do the same. Children don’t necessarily understand what is going on in their parent’s adult world, but they usually sense when something is wrong or when the adults around them are upset. Talking about real feelings creates closeness and lays the groundwork for children to do the same when they need to. Don’t be fooled into imagining that it is possible to “hide” stress from children. They are likely to internalize it as something that they have caused unless they are explicitly told otherwise, which makes these conversations essential.

Notice that the boy in the story internalizes his father’s feelings and assumes that they are somehow his fault. This is common in young children, making it essential for parents to be specific about their own feelings in order to insure that their children don’t assume that they are somehow the cause of their parent’s pain. It is normal for children to be very egocentric and most children don’t even begin to understand that their parents have an emotional and social life separate from them until they are well into their pre-teens and often well beyond.

Finally, appreciate the way neither Matthew nor Dad rush in with statements that try to fix or minimize their sadness or discomfort. It is in the listening, the sharing, that both children and adults find solace. Don’t deny the reality of bias, or its impact on your child. Instead validate their experience, be empathetic with their pain, and new opportunities for intimacy will be opened.