First published in Pact's Point of View © 2010

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Director's Corner

Evolving Conversations

Should parents initiate talk about adoption or wait for their child's questions?

By Gail Steinberg & Beth Hall

Sometimes you lead, and sometimes you follow.

How will I talk to my child about adoption?" This is a question every parent asks himself or herself. Even as your new baby takes her first steps, you wonder if you'll be ready when the questions start to come. Soon you realize that your child is simply your child, not your "adopted" child, and it becomes difficult even to imagine an adoption talk. But you'll have this conversation, not just once, but over time, offering more information as your child matures. Sometimes its coming will take you by surprise, launched by the query of a curious child. Sometimes you'll see an opening and take it, offering the chance to talk if the feelings fit. The key here is comfort, to create an atmosphere of openness and warmth in which both parent and child feel free to approach a hard topic.

What if you miss an opportunity? What if a question is asked and you deflect a thought? Relax. You have a whole childhood in which to talk. Some time between ball games and play dates, math tests, and family reunions, you'll have your conversations. In a way, talking about adoption is like dancing with your child. Sometimes he leads and you follow. Sometimes it's the reverse. And with each conversation, successfully joined, the dance will become more graceful. So go ahead, take that first step.

DIRECTED PLAY: Following a child's lead

The goal with very young children is to create a healthy intimacy. A preschooler feels like the star of his own adoption story when it is presented as something that makes his parents happy. So talk about adoption often, and happily, casually bringing up details about the day you met, or retelling a simple version of the whole tale at bedtime. But don't be fooled by their using the right words. Three- to five-year-olds often use words without having a clear idea of what they mean. Research makes it clear they are sometimes mimicking more than understanding.

Four-year-old Haley was all seriousness and concentration as she cooked breakfast for she and her Mom at her toy stove in the backyard—sand oatmeal, pebble popovers, squashed raspberries, pretend vanilla ice cream. Pouring cold-water tea from a red flowered pot into thimble-size cups, she served up her feast as grandly as a queen. Her mom took imaginary sips from her little cup. It was a summer day, the sun was shining, and they had the time to do anything they chose. Her mom was filled with every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous inch of my preschool daughter. It was hard to keep from scooping her up and holding her close.

Haley was the one who broke the silence, by asking gravely, "Do you remember when I came out of Daddy's tummy?"

Curiously, her mom was not panic-stricken. What do I say? How do I say it? shethought. She breathed. She paid attention and told herself, "This is not the only chance I will have to talk about adoption."

"Haley, you didn't come out of Daddy's tummy. Only mommies can grow babies inside of their bodies, not daddies. I've been your mommy since you were born, but you were not in my body either. Daddy and I adopted you. Your birthmommy, Ellie, carried you in her body, and when you were ready to be born, you came out of her."

"Nope, your body," Haley insisted. "If I wasn't in Daddy, I was in you."

"I can see how you might have thought that," said mom. "Actually, Daddy and I came to get you at the hospital as soon as Ellie gave birth to you. You grew inside your birthmommy, just like all babies do. And when it was time for you to be born, you came out of your birthmommy, just like all babies do. But Ellie didn't think she could take care of you and give you all the things she knew all babies need. She was sad that she couldn't take you

LET YOUR CHILD LEAD THE CONVERSATION...

Whenever kids ask direct questions or make statements about adoption

Whenever outsiders ask questions about your family in front of your kids

When adoption comes up as a school issue or in sensitive school assignments

When hurtful incidents occur.

FOLLOW HIS LEAD BY ASKING...

What happened
Did you hear what he/she said?

How it made her feel

When it happened

If he's happy with what he said or did

If there is anything you can do (or could have done) to help.

INITIATE CONVERSATION...

When your intuition tells you to

When your child appears sad or contemplative

When your child experiences loss

On your child's birthdays
On Mother's Day and Father's
Day

Whenever the subject of birthparents comes up in books, films, or casual conversation

Whenever there is an opportunity.

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home with her and care for you, but she picked us to be your other real mommy and daddy forever. We're so happy she did."

"What did you say when you first saw me?"

"We said, 'How amazing! How wonderful! You are our most important dream come true! We are so happy!' And we wrapped you in your yellow blankie and drove home very, very carefully, right to the place where you were going to be forever. With us, your very real parents!"

"Oh," she said, relaxing against her mom. "Would you care for some more tea now?"

Often, a young child's actions, rather than her words, will be the best gauge for her feelings about adoption. To get to know what your child is thinking, play with her. Use dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, building blocks, trucks—whatever toys she enjoys making up stories with. Let her be the boss and tell you what your character in the story is supposed to say and do. For example, if she asks you to be a lost puppy, while she is the mother dog, ask her how the puppy is feeling. Rather than initiating the pretend plot, ask your child if the puppy is scared, or worried, or hungry. Your child will probably be delighted to be in charge and direct your actions.

Follow your child's lead and don't push to give the story a happy ending. You want to learn how she interprets the situation. You may be surprised, but try not to seem distressed. Remember, this is a window into your child's thinking at this one moment.

If the story is unhappy or anxiety-provoking, come back to it later. Over time you will have opportunities to clarify and expand understanding.

SHARE YOUR FEELINGS: Leading by example

When your children are a little older, one way to take the lead in discussing adoption is to offer your own experiences of being an adoptive parent, both the happy and the sad. Disclosing challenges you've overcome, or difficult situations you're still sorting out, often has more impact than sharing only joyous feelings. Kids know it's not easy to talk about the hard stuff, and they feel honored to receive "privileged information."

When Jerry picked Jordan up from school that day, she hoped her son couldn't see how crummy she felt. During a visit that morning, Jerry's aunt had implied that she could never love Jordan as much as she would a child who was born into their family. She talked about blood being thicker than water. I felt hurt and angry. She was doing her best to hide it—afraid her little boy would pick up on it.

"What's wrong, Mom?" he asked as soon as he got into the car.

"Nothing, Honey," she replied. "Don't worry about it."

They drove in silence for a while, Jerry not trusting herself to say more, Jordan seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. During the long drive home, Jerry had a lot on her mind, and she could tell Jordan was concerned by her silence. She wondered whether she should share the conversation and her feelings about it with him. Wasn't it up to her to protect him from the hurtful views some people have of adoption and not to burden him with adult concerns? On the other hand, she always asked Jordan to share his feelings.

"Are you OK, Mom?" he asked again as they came to a standstill in traffic. She took a deep breath for courage and went for it.

"Sometimes it's hard to talk about things, Honey, so thank you for asking. Something upsetting happened to me today. I'll try my best to

tell you about it, but I'm embarrassed, hurt, angry, and sad all at once. It doesn't have anything to do with you. Someone I thought was close to me said some stupid things about my not being your real mother, and it really hurt my feelings. Some people just don't understand that you are my son, I guess."

"Oh," he said. A few minutes later he added, "I wonder if it's like how I feel when kids ask me why my real mom didn't want me." Jerry was astonished.

"Maybe."

"Why didn't my birthmom want me, Mom? Do you think maybe I cried too much?"

Jordan had never mentioned this before. With a sigh, Jerry reached over to rub his back.

"Babies are supposed to cry," she said. "Crying is how babies tell us they need something before they've learned how to talk. Sometimes when a baby is born, his parents have problems that keep them from being able to take care of any baby. It's not ever the child's fault."

Jordan and Jerry were quiet the rest of the way home. They held hands across the seat, and Jerry know that something important had happened. When they got home, as they were getting out of the car, Jordan said, "I'm glad you told me, Mom. I like it when you tell me how you feel, even if you feel sad."

When parents share painful, as well as joyous, experiences, children feel free to follow. It's important, too, to give your children permission to express their concerns about birthparents without denying their feelings or jumping in and trying to fix everything. Parents can show that they accept their children's emotions with an empathetic sigh or hug, a soft exclamation, or just by saying "What a way to feel."

DROP A "PEBBLE": Inviting conversation with a casual comment Another way to lead is by making casual comments and letting them resonate. Your child may pick up your cue and begin a conversation, give a one-word response, or not respond at all. Nonetheless, by putting them out there, you are saying you are ready to discuss adoption and birthparents whenever he is. Do this often, simply by thinking out loud about something you've read or seen on TV, genetic traits your child inherited, or your own feelings. Here are some examples:

"You're such a talented pianist, and now you're even composing your own songs. I wonder if someone in your birth family was a musician."

"I always think about your birthmother around your birthday. I wonder if you think about her at this time of the year, too."

"I felt so awkward when that woman at the restaurant started asking about our family. How about you?"

"I read that lots of adopted kids think it's their fault they got placed for adoption."

Adoption is but one aspect of your family's life. Remember, the goal is to create a reasonable balance between talking about adoption and just living daily life. Ask yourself, when was the last time adoption came up? If you can't remember, it's probably time to raise the subject. But none of us is defined by a single feature of our lives. We are parents first, not adoptive parents. Never forget your most important job—creating the close family you dreamed of when you began the journey toward adoption.

Life is a gift. Our children are treasures. Cherish them above all.