



pact's

point of view

serving adopted children of color

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Director's Corner

Facing Our Worst Fears

Telling the Truth to Adopted Children

by Beth Hall

Many adoptive parents struggle with having to tell their children painful truths, hoping that somehow not telling will actually be easier for adopted children (people) in the long run. But I think we have to look hard at the underpinnings of such thinking. The idea that the truth is somehow exempted from being part of someone's story if it is too "painful" or "difficult" misses the point of what it means to be honest. Most of us will tell the truth when it is easy and there are no negative consequences. Lying is only tempting when telling the truth is hard.

Children are not adopted for "un-difficult" or "un-painful" reasons. While perhaps it is true that there is a gain for all parties in adoption, the gain always generates from loss. And if we are afraid of or deny that loss, then we are denying the very basis of our relationship as family, and ultimately falling into a trap that says that unless we "lie" about the loss we can't feel positively about the non-genetic connection that is inherent to adoption. Embracing the loss means that our family connection is not threatened by either history or the bond of genetics.

Psychologists generally see lying as a strategy to address one of four issues: 1) avoiding consequences based on fears, 2) mitigating low self-esteem, 3) rebellion against authority or 4) gaining attention (albeit negative) to enhance social status. If you want to teach your children to tell the truth they must see you telling the truth yourself, especially when it is hard. If we model lying, or simply not telling the truth, because we have a "good" reason, then we need to expect our children to do the same.

The main reason adoptive parents cite for keeping a difficult truth from their child is their fear that it will have a negative impact on the child's self-esteem. The implication is that if a child knew they were a product of rape, for example, they might either become a rapist themselves or hate themselves for fear of "being like their birth parent." The problem with this

fear-based thinking is that it gives more power to the child's history than to their choices or their individuality.

Psychological research demonstrates that we are not merely the product of our genetic code nor our circumstances. Think of all the amazing people who become leaders and heroes despite great personal odds. Don't fall prey to the thinking that children are limited to their genetic and experiential history—there is so much more to each of us than that. If we remain afraid to talk with children about some of their truth, even when it is painful, we deny them the chance to see and be empowered by how much of what they do and who they are comes from within themselves rather than external factors.

If we cannot overcome our fears, how can we seriously imagine that children are going to be able to overcome them? If we are afraid, how can we possibly instill hope or strength in the face of the difficult truths that our children need to face? If we really believe that past experiences or genetic history make our children no less lovable, then truth is the ultimate inoculation against the power of their "bad" history or "bad" genes.

But even parents who are convinced that telling is the right thing to do are uncertain how to begin and what to say to children at various ages. So let's take the example of a child who is the product of rape. Start when they are young, very young, and build on the truth with factual information that expands with their ability to understand.

To a 3-year-old a parent could say:
"Your tummy Mommy and Daddy were not friends. They did not like each other and did not really know each other..."

When the same child is 6-years-old this could be more specific:
"Your birth father made your birth mother get pregnant and have a baby, without asking her if he could touch her private

baby-making parts first. It is not OK to touch people's private parts without their permission..."

And then later when the same child is 9-years-old, it can evolve to: "Sometimes bullies make people do things by forcing them. It is never right to force someone to do something they don't want to do. Boys or girls can be bullies but unfortunately it is more common for men to be bullies to women than the other way around because men are often bigger than women and stronger, so they use their size or strength to do bad things. If you ever see someone doing that to someone else, or someone tries to do something to you that is not okay with you, they are doing something wrong. That means anyone who sees them doing it should try to stop them or get help from an adult or someone they can trust to help them stop..."

Most experts agree that the full truth is best explained to a child before the age of twelve, so the child will have heard the information at least once prior to the volatility of the teen years. A parent could explain to their tween:

"Rape is when one person forces another person to have sex with them even though that person says no or doesn't want to have sex. It is much more common for women to be raped than men, because men are bigger and stronger and sometimes they are taught that what they want is more important than what a woman wants. That is never true. Sometimes men or boys are raped by other men or boys and very rarely by women. Your birth father raped your birth mother and that is how she became pregnant with you."

If a parent is worried about the child internalizing a negative self-image as a child of a rapist, they could open a conversation with an older child by saying: "Some people believe that we get to choose who we are, while others think that we are who we are because of our parents' genetics or the way we were raised. Some people are afraid to tell their children that they are a product of rape or the child of a drug addict because they are afraid that the child will be just like the parent who did a bad thing or made a bad choice. What do you think?"

Remember, understanding what children are thinking is always more about listening than talking. As you hear their thoughts, you can make sure that they have the chance to know the facts about their family history. This includes understanding that children of rapists or addicts do not automatically repeat the behavior, although they do have a vulnerability to violent or addictive tendencies. This knowledge allows your child to learn to moderate their own behavior and be cautious, if appropriate, in accordance with their history. Conversations about rape as a crime of violence and an act of power also create an opportunity to explore alternative ways to handle frustration and a sense of powerlessness. These are choices all of us must make at certain points in our life, regardless of our history or our genes. We all experience anger, get frustrated and experience hopelessness, even if briefly. Given that, all children and adults benefit from this kind of exploration, not just those who are the product of rape. Many people in the world, and many of us who are adoptive parents, have lived through hard circumstances and pain and become strong, good people. If we want to teach our children to do the same, we have to be brave enough to face our fears and tell the truth, so they can do the same.

*Beth Hall is the Director of Pact, An Adoption Alliance. She is the white adoptive mother of a Latina daughter and an African American son (both now young adults), and grew up with an adopted sister. She co-founded Pact in 1991 to combat the discrimination she witnessed against adopted children of color and their birth families. Pact is a non-profit organization whose mission is to serve adopted children of color. In every case, the child is always our primary client. In order to best serve children's needs, Pact provides not only adoptive placement but lifelong education, support, and community for adoptees and their families on issues of adoption and race. She is the co-author, with Gail Steinberg, of the book *Inside Transracial Adoption* (Perspectives Press, 2000), as well as numerous articles on adoption and race. She is a nationally known advocate for adopted children of color who regularly lectures and leads workshops on ethical, non-racist adoption practices. In 2010 she received the Outstanding Practitioner in Adoption Award from the Adoption Initiative at St. John's University. She lives in Oakland, California, with her husband, Ted, and children, when they are home from college*