

# Responding to Questions About Adoption

## *Strategies for Helping Children Respond*

- ⌘ Adoption is much, much more than a means of creating or adding to your family. It is the first step of a profound emotional journey that continues life long.
- ⌘ Most of your friends and family are not insiders to adoption, so their advice is based on their experience, not experience with adoption.
- ⌘ Adoption is set up to benefit children, not their parents. That means you have to get support to navigate a system that sometimes puts your feelings underneath others. Sort through your own feelings of loss, entitlement, ambiguous feelings.
- ⌘ Families built by adoption do not match. Although families who look alike evoke fewer questions about their family status from outsiders, all families built by adoption need to focus on building strength by celebrating differences instead of building their connection on a false sense of “matching.”

### **Prioritize Your Child First**

Debrief. It is always about what you are teaching your children, other adults and certainly strangers are much less important. Awkward questions or moments need to be seen as opportunities to promote discussion with your child.

### **Privacy vs. Secrecy**

Secrets are lethal and any implication that something about them or their story is a secret is dangerous. Privacy is a value and something that must be consciously decided about and taught to children. Be discreet & set boundaries when it comes to strangers, friends and family regarding talking

about children’s information (this includes their birth parents) prior to them knowing that information themselves.

### **Strategies with Family**

- o Find allies within the family
- o Set clear boundaries if someone is toxic
- o Consider a letter

### **Strategies with Strangers**

- o Ask Questions (Why do you ask?)
- o Take care of the child over the adults who are asking (speak to your child first, touch them, act like family).

### **Strategies with other Children**

- o They are usually asking from an innocent place, use this as an opportunity to educate your child regarding possible strategies for responses (especially young children).
- o Questions tend to be very concrete, they don’t understand the pain or hurt they may cause (that can’t be your real mom).

### **Role-Play with kids.**

Particularly once they start school, your child may be asked nosy questions, too. Help him respond by role-playing a variety of answers. For example, if a child asks, “Why didn’t your real mom want you?” he can say, “Why do you want to know?” or “The way you asked that question shows that you don’t really understand adoption.” Children also have the right to keep information to themselves. Your child can say, “I don’t feel like answering that question.” or “I don’t like that question. It’s private.”

## **WISE Up** *(from CASE)*

Walk Away It's OK to just not feel like answering questions all the time. Getting away from those who probe, tease or are over curious is appropriate some of the time.

It's Private Kids need to know it is OK for them not to tell the whole truth all the time. They do not owe anyone their personal story — curious outsiders, most especially.

Share Something When we want someone to understand us better we often have to tell them how we feel or what our own experiences are.

Educate Others In order for the world to accept us and understand us, sometimes we have to educate them to the things we know and understand that they don't yet know or understand.

### **Code Words**

These are intervention tools a family can create together to help children feel in control when they are experiencing invasive questions or racial/ethnic bias. What do you do with all those supermarket strangers? A series of code words may be developed around the kitchen table. The goal is to allow members of the family a way to communicate privately in public settings, which can be a quick device to halt the escalation of unpleasant situations while minimizing embarrassment to your child in front of peers or other adults. A child armed with a repertoire of code words known by his parents and siblings is a child who feels in control and part of a unified family team. A child can use the word when his feelings become too intense while still keeping his distress private. Sometimes the parents use the word when they suspect that one of the children is having a difficult moment.

### **Cover Stories**

When children have aspects of their personal story that they don't want to talk about it can be helpful to strategize with them ahead of time about possible answers they may choose to give instead of the actual facts of their personal history. So for instance, if a child has scars from previous abuse, they might want to make up an answer to the inevitable questions they will receive about the scars in gym class etc. Answers like; "I fell down the stairs when I was little," or "I was in an (car) accident when I was a baby." While these answers may not be true in the strictest sense, children are entitled not to have to speak about painful history because of other people's idle curiosity.

### **Pebbles**

Dropping pebbles is a way of checking in with your kids if the topic hasn't come up for a while. Use a "Mom gets to choose the book night" to read a book about adoption and notice if your children have any reaction either positive or negative to gauge where something might be going on that hasn't yet been mentioned. Take advantage of situations like the neighborhood cat having kittens to query, "I wonder how they will decide who should adopt them if they can't take care of all of them right now." Each of these is an example of a pebble, like those dropped in water, notice the ripples going out from the drop spot, if your child needs to have a conversation or is dealing with related feelings that you haven't heard about you will likely see evidence in the ripples that result from your mention.