



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Director's Corner

Remember When I Came Out of Daddy's Tummy?

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!

Kayla is working carefully, cooking the royal breakfast on her toy stove in the backyard—sand oatmeal, pebble popovers with crushed fresh raspberries, pretend vanilla ice cream and cold-water tea. The feast is almost ready. She pours the tea from her pink flowered teapot into thimble-sized cups, as grandly as any princess would do.

Kayla has all the time she needs to lick all the berry juice off her fingers, one by one, as Kayla's mom holds her cup with care, taking imaginary sips. The princess and the queen have enough time today to do anything they choose, and the sun is shining.

Mom is thinking about Kayla—every delicious, miraculous inch of her daughter makes her want to swoop her up and give her a thousand million kisses.

But Kayla is thinking about something else. "Remember when I came out of Daddy's tummy?"

Her voice is thin, high-pitched and a little bit bossy, exactly like a princess should sound at four years old.

"Uh-oh," thought Kayla's mom. "Breathe. Pay attention. This is something important." "Kayla, you didn't come out of your daddy's tummy. Only mommies can grow babies inside of their bodies, not daddies."

"Okay," said Kayla. "Remember when I came out of your tummy?"

"I have been your mommy since you were born but you were not inside my body either. Your birth mom carried you in her body and

when you were ready to be born, you came out of her."

"Nope, that can't be right. I want to come out of your body," Kayla insisted. "If I wasn't in Daddy, I was inside you."

"I can see how you might have thought that," said Mom.

"You grew inside your birth mom just like all babies do. And when it was time for you to be born, you came out of your birth mom just like all babies do. She wanted to take care of you but she couldn't because she had grownup problems."

"What did you say when you first saw me?" asked Kayla.

We said, "How amazing! How wonderful! You are our most important dream come true! We are so happy!"

"And then, we wrapped you in your yellow blankie and put you in your car seat."

"Oh," thought Kayla, "I love my yellow blankie." Then she sat straight up, startled and wondering....should she ask, could she risk it? "Who's my real mom, Mommy?"

"You have two real moms and two real dads—your birth parents who gave you life are real and so are your daddy and I who take care of you as you grow up. But we did not have you inside our bodies."

"Your first mom, your birth mom, is your real mom because she brought you into the world but she did not think she could take care of you in all the ways that a baby

needs so she picked us to be your other real mommy and daddy... forever."

"Is it okay to love all your parents or do you have to choose?," asked Kayla.

"Parents can love all of their kids, not just one," said Mommy, "and kids can love all their parents. And mostly they do because that's what kids and their parents, all kinds of parents, do. Your first mommy said she loved you a lot. You never have to choose, we all love you and you can love all of us."

"I'll never forget that first ride home with you in the car," said Mom. "No rough stuff and no bumps!," we said, "This is our most precious princess having her first trip home. Make certain she has a smooth ride!"

"When we got home all the rest of the family was waiting in a line to welcome you with kisses and flowers. They were so excited. Thank goodness, you clever child, just then you wet your diaper!"

"You gave us a good excuse to whisk you away to your new room. Your daddy and I could not wait to be alone with you, just our own little family. After we changed your diaper all three of us snuggled into the big rocking chair and we gave you your bottle and sang you your lullaby."

"Sing it," said Kayla, "just like that time."

"Little love, little darling, little sparrow, little starling, little light, little pearl, little treasure, little girl."

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

In *Remember When I Came Out of Daddy's Tummy?*, Kayla is interested in her own beginning but also trying to understand how she is connected to her parenting mother, her mother by adoption. For every adopted person there are two stories of beginning and identity: being born and being adopted. Be careful to tell both. Some adopted people have grown up feeling as if they weren't really born, because no one talked about that part of their history. Birth is an incredibly important event—leaving it out is a huge loss for a child. Young children take great joy in learning their own stories.

All human beings are born. Keep your child's story factual and add as many specific details as you know. If you have no details, you can use general information about how babies are born. Children around the age of three are very interested in babies and where they come from. By the time their children reach this age, all adoptive parents need to be talking about adoption, because birth and adoption are linked.

If you do not talk about your kids' stories beginning with their birth, they will imply that there is something wrong with their beginnings and feel sad or mad or confused, since everyone else knows about their beginnings. Every adopted child was born before they were adopted. That means that birth parents are part of their stories—whether you know them or not. Talking about but not for your child's birth parents can be particularly challenging but it is essential.

Even in a moment like the one depicted here, when Kayla is resistant to the notion that she was born to someone else, it is critical to stay with the truth, while validating the child's underlying desire to be assured that she is deeply connected to her adoptive mother. The way to do that is not to deny the truth but rather to show your child that you are comfortable with the complexity of her connection to her first mother and to you.

Children are very good at reading unspoken messages. Look honestly at yours. As parents we must ask ourselves, "Who am I taking care of now, myself or my child?" If your child's questions make you uncomfortable or nervous, explore them in the context of support groups or even therapy, so you can become comfortable with the notion of being the second (or third or more...) mother. Find the joy in being lucky enough to be with your child each day, rather than feeling unlucky because you don't share genes or the birth experience. As you make peace with your own loss and ambiguous feelings, you will model the way your children can make peace with theirs.

Kayla's mom embraces the real-ness of Kayla's birth mother rather than falling into the sometimes competitive notion that one parent is more real than the other. What a great validation of all of Kayla's connections—because indeed all of the parents who contribute to her creation and personhood are real. And like a typical child, once Kayla gets the answers and comfort she needs, she can go back to the true business of her life—enjoying the moment as she learns to become the human being she was born to be. These conversations always happen at the "darnedest moments," so enjoy and please pass the tea!