First published in Pact's Point of View © 1995 Do not reprint without permission.

## Talking to Children about Sex and Adoption An Interview with Anne Bernstein

## Interviewed by Beth Hall

A mother who had angered her adopted seven-year-old recalls the following conversation:

**Child:** You won't get a birthday card from my birth mother. Only I will.

**Mother:** Yes, you are the only one in the family who gets card from her.

Child: Ellen is my real mother.

In talking to children about sensitive issues such as adoption, the key is to understand first of all what you think and how you feel about what your child knows and hears. Second, you need to consider how much your children already understand and how they have interpreted it. Third, you need to understand their developmental capacity in order to give them just enough information to stretch their thinking without exceeding their interest or attention.

It's through my work and research over the last 20 years about how children understand sex and birth that I have come to understand how and when children understand adoption. After studying adoption, especially the work of David Brodzinsky and his colleagues, and talking to children about their own experience of it, I have come to feel certain that children's comprehension of adoption not only parallels their understanding of sex and birth but that it is intimately tied to it. This association makes intuitive sense, because of course the first demonstration of children's interest in sexuality appears in the preschool years when they talk about where babies come from. And since young children are egocentric and concrete, of course they want to hear the story of themselves as babies and where they came from... which is where adoption enters as an element of this exploration of origins.

Let's go back to what I first suggested. Most of us have strong feelings, emotional and ethical, regarding sexuality and adoption; these feelings may involve conflicting and contradictory aspects. To offer our children the best possible

understanding of adoption, we must first examine these feelings and be clear about our goals for our children. Children, even and perhaps especially very young ones, will intuit the feelings associated any subject long before they can clearly understand the details of a conversation about it. Children will pick up on mixed messages, so parents will do well to try to resolve their own conflicts. Therefore, while talking to your child it is important to distinguish clearly between discussing feelings and discussing facts. Sometimes parents have suggested to me that, since they have ambivalent feelings on the subject, perhaps it would be better not to talk about the matter at all with their child. If they choose this path, though, these parents run the risk that the child may not view them as dependable resources and guides in time of need.

Early discussions can be excellent practice ground. The first goal is to create an atmosphere of trust and openness. It is not necessary to convey every bit detailed information. Children will understand and misunderstand information, but the feelings leave a lasting impression. It is also okay for adults to acknowledge the difficulty they have in talking about certain things, as long as they also say they are glad the child asked and that they will try their best to answer. Remember to label your own feelings rather than let your child infer them. You will offer your child a great model of how to cope with their own ambivalent feelings.

Now that you've explored your own feelings (and don't forget — that work never ends), you are ready to explore the feelings and concepts your child already possesses. In my research with families, I've found that the single biggest mistake parents made was to assume that their children understood something accurately, simply because they used the "right" words. Children draw vastly different conclusions from information than do adults, and even children of the same age or developmental stage will think differently. Here's an example: Two children came to the conclusion that, because the baby grows in the mommy's belly, the food she ate must go directly to a baby in her stomach. One little boy concluded that this was the way the mommy was taking care of and

feeding the baby. He was delighted to think that the baby got to eat some wonderful confection whenever mom did. A little girl, with the same assumption about the connection between eating and prenatal nourishment, stopped eating, out of fear that she would harm her future baby, which she thought of as already in her belly. She was that this imagined baby might get hurt or dirty or somehow not be okay. Both child had the same mental picture but derived two vastly different meanings. We cannot predict what meaning our children will attribute to the information we give them. We must ask them, so that we can understand their assumptions and conclusions before we can help to further their knowledge.

At the same time, we need to understand our children's stage on the continuum of developmental abilities. Piaget's theories about child development are useful in understanding the characteristics of children's thinking, both generally and in specific regard to these topics.

To outline these ideas briefly as they pertain to adoption: When it comes to thinking about adoption, young children (preschoolers) use words without having much of an idea about what they mean. They do understand the feelings underlying the story, and that's really all that will be retained. This means that the goal for early conversations should be to create an open and non-defensive atmosphere for discussion. As development progresses, children have some ideas about adoption but tend to talk about birth and adoption as almost interchangeable ideas. Because their perspective is egocentric, they often come to the conclusion that their own experience is universal.

Children between ages 4 and 8 exhibit a great deal of curiosity and will be interested in understanding details of all sorts. They still understand things in concrete terms and will often create elaborate schemes to explain the circumstances described to them. Magical thinking is typical for this stage, even if they use realistic scenarios and accurate words to describe their conclusions. As they move into the next stage, children are often aware that their understanding may contain some conflicting pieces of information. They are still not able to build the story into a coherent whole, nor are they overly disturbed Between the ages of seven and twelve, by that reality. children become much more concerned with accuracy; in fact it is often hard to get this stage child to speculate about things they don't understand. They are capable of a more accurate understanding of social relationships at this age, so this is a time when sadness and questions regarding permanence may arise in children who are adopted. It is not until children are ten to twelve or older that they are able to come up with theories to explain and account for all of the given information. It takes many of us well into adulthood, if ever, to weave the social, physical and ethical aspects of our understanding regarding sexuality or adoption into a cohesive whole.

Those are the theories. But most parents want to know: What do I say? How do I do it? First, don't worry about giving the definitive, perfect story the first time the occasion arises. You'll get many opportunities to go over this material. Be reassured that, if you don't like how you handled something the first time, you will get a chance to do it again. Second, remember that the most important thing your child will retain is the feeling about what it was like talking with you. Be responsive; be empathetic. The more you validate their thinking process in the face of misunderstanding or misconception, the more

they will be able to incorporate the new information you will eventually impart. Affirming statements like "I can see how you might have thought that" are always helpful. Ask questions first, answer them later. Ask them what they think happens or happened about the specific issues you are discussing. Encourage them to problem-solve. Don't be compelled to tell the whole story; answer what they actually asked. You can then inquire if they want to know anything else. Often, children want only one bit of information at a time, enabling them to chew on it for a while before coming back for more. You can also ask them what they remember from the last time you talked about the same subject, as a way to hear the conclusions they have drawn. Through this process of questions and reconsiderations, you will likely have had time to feel more comfortable and confident — first, about what it is they want to know, and second, about what it is you want to say.

Remember, this is a lifetime dialogue, one that you and your child will remember with love and laughter as well. This is the breeding ground for healthy intimacy and comfort with our own feelings, both happy and sad.

**Mother:** When you talk about your birth mother as your "real" mother, I wonder if it's hard to figure out how to think about having two mothers, a birth mother and a mommy?

**Child:** Yeah, most kids just have one. And when I say I'm adopted, kids ask me about my real mother.

**Mother:** It is sort of confusing, when things are different for you than for some of your friends. But let's think of all the things that "real" mothers do. Can you think of some?

**Child:** They grow babies that come out of their bodies.

**Mother**: Yes, so one way of being a real mother is to be pregnant and give birth. And let's think of other things that "real" mothers do. Can you think of some?

**Child**: Well, take care of babies, and make their lunches and their Halloween costumes, and work for money to buy them things.

**Mother**: Yes, so your birth mother is a real mother because she gave birth to you, and I'm your real mother because I do all the other things real mothers do.

Child: Can I have two real mothers?

**Mother**: You can have a birth mother and a mommy, and both can be real. Neither one of us is a doll or a puppet or a storybook character or something that's not real.

Anne Bernstein, Ph.D., is a practicing family psychologist in Berkeley, California, where she is a professor at the Wright Institute. She is author of Yours, Mine and Ours: How Families Change When Remarried Parents Have a Child Together (W.W. Norton, 1990), and Flight of the Stork: What Children Think (and When) About Sex and Family Building (Perspectives Press, 1994).