

Talking with Children about Difficult History

by Holly van Gulden

"How do we tell our daughter she has an older brother living with their birth mother?"

"The records state our son's birth mother was raped. Should we tell him his birth father raped his birth mother?"

"We wrote to the agency requesting more information about our son's genetic family. The agency contacted his birth mother for an update and learned David's birth father is currently in prison serving time for felonious assault. David, age 9, keeps asking if we have heard from the adoption agency. What should we do?"

Parents who have potentially painful information about their child's history and/or birth family face a number of complex and difficult decisions. These decisions include: Should we share this information with our child? If so, when, at what age or developmental stage? How do we share this information? How much should we share? Who should tell her?

I believe that children need their heritage - the good, the not so good, the fun, the painful, the easy, the difficult. In my experience as a parent and an adoption counselor, there has never yet been a single case where I supported a decision not to share. My focus has always been how to share: when, how much, and with whom if anybody besides the child. Whenever I approach this issue with a family, I emphasize the need to gather a variety of 'other' facts about the child's heritage - their birth parents as individuals and/or their racial and cultural heritage. "Negative" information needs to be presented as a part of the picture, not the whole image. This is the age of the information highway. Children shielded from difficult information could discover the "facts" about their history or their ancestry during childhood or adulthood - even in international adoption. Discovering these carefully-kept secrets can and often does lead to a sense of betrayal by adoptive parents, shame, and/or identity confusion.

Though difficult, perhaps painful, these "facts" are crucial pieces of our children's history and heritage. Frequently, the information parents wish to withhold to protect their children from pain or from internalizing a negative self-image (my birth parents were 'bad' I'm bad) are key pieces to the puzzling question every adopted person faces: Why didn't my birth mother and father raise me? Every human being has a need and a right to the facts about heritage, ancestry and personal life journey. Withholding information because it may be painful or shameful denies our children the opportunity to develop over time (a lifetime) a clear picture of the players and the forces at work in their history, and the chance to develop coping skills to process and externalize difficult information and feelings. Keeping secrets especially between generations within a family system, implies the material withheld is shameful.

I think it's important for adoption professionals and parents to remember that there are children still living with their birth relatives who face these difficult situations successfully. Not all women who conceived during an act of rape place their children for adoption. Some birth mothers who were raped and conceived are raising their children. Professionals need to consider, "Would I, in my best professional evaluation, recommend that a mother hide the facts of conception from her child - for rape? for incest? Would I recommend that a man or woman whose spouse or partner is in prison for felonious assault or murder and has been since the children were too young to know, keep this secret? Would I recommend that a grandmother or aunt raising their daughter's or sister's or brother's child keep the secret that Mom is raising this child's siblings?" The answer to these questions is usually No! Secrets are harmful, even for children. Most professionals develop a careful plan for dealing with the negative issue which usually involves sharing the information before adulthood and usually before adolescence.

There are several critical steps in approaching How, What, and When to share difficult information.

Check the facts. Where did this information come from? Who reported it? It is vitally important that adoptive parents check out not only the facts but who reported them. The goal is to be clear: what's factual, what's speculation, who reported/recorded, how did the recorder/reporter value the information? Did they use judgmental, critical language? Sometimes vital information appears to be supposition, innuendo, or interpretation. If you have the information, how did you get it? Your child will eventually have access by the same means you have - adoption records, finding birth relatives, locating social workers. Suppositions and interpretations not clearly based on fact need to be shared - as such. "The social worker believes that your birth mother was a prostitute because.... She recorded the information without factual proof. It may or may not be true."

After checking the information for accuracy, parents need to spend time evaluating as openly and honestly as possible their own values about these situations. Locate and challenge your judgments. You can value abstinence or virginity until marriage and learn not to pass judgment on those who don't achieve your value. Please pursue this step carefully and honestly - ideally, with professional assistance. Your unidentified judgments about your child's birth family will be passed on to your child through verbal cues: your tone, choice of words, nonverbal cues-body position, facial expressions, etc. Children pick up on these cues, interpreting the information, their birth heritage, and ultimately themselves as shamed. Parents need assistance discussing and dealing with loaded information to monitor the cues they send and to become

comfortable with the material. Comfortable is a goal towards which parents progress, thereby learning how to identify, own, and share their area of discomfort. For example, "Linda, I know I get tense whenever we discuss your birth father's prison record. My tension comes from my concern for you and my desire not to see you blame or shame yourself for the poor choices your birth dad made."

Completing open-ended sentences can help parents identify their values and judgments about the people (your child's genetic family, or foster family) involved in these difficult situations. Try completing open ended sentences like these:

- A person who commits rape is...
- A person who is in prison is...
- A victim of rape is...
- A woman who places a child for adoption is...
- A woman who parents two children, gets pregnant a third time and places her third child for adoption is...

Remember that the goal of this exercise is to identify your reactions to the people involved and to clarify if and how you want to pass those reactions on to your child. Rape is not okay. It is not acceptable behavior. If your child was conceived during an act of rape, you need to challenge yourself to separate the unacceptable act of aggression from the person, your son or daughter's birth father. If you cannot begin to separate their behavior from the person - no matter how appalled and angry you feel - your child will have no modeling to separate his/her sense of birth or genetic heritage from the inappropriate or unacceptable behaviors.

Your child will need guidance and modeling to separate the situation of conception from his or her sense of value and self image. Lately I've heard professionals in adoption describe this situation using the phrase, "Your child is a product of rape (or incest)." I strongly disagree. No human being, no valuable human life is a product. Your child was conceived during an act of rape or incest. The valuable, unique human being conceived is not predetermined to repeat the behavior.

Evaluate the child's readiness to process the information. Addressing these situations would:

- help the parent evaluate the child's self image, current functioning, ability to manage feelings and to process difficult information cognitively and emotionally.
- aid the parent in exploring his/her own reaction to the situation, both cognitive and emotional.

Look at general developmental stages. The instinct of parents who plan to share difficult information is to wait until the child is older, perhaps in their teens. In my experience, this is not the optimum developmental time to share difficult information. Adolescents face two tasks which make processing and externalizing difficult information potentially problematic: individuation and separation. Teens are re-evaluating the question "Who am I?" based in part on their sense of their history to date. Teens are also preparing to leave the family nest. Adopted teens can answer "Who am I and how am I uniquely different from my (adoptive) parents?" by believing they are just like their perceptions (accurate or not) of their birth parents. This is a critical and complex stage during which to offer new, different and negative information about the young person's heritage.

Though they appear more vulnerable, younger children in middle childhood generally process negative information more easily

- not without pain, confusion and some self-blame, but with less potential for internalizing self blame/shame for the actions/choices of others. Children ages 8-10 have more time to work and rework material and come to a positive sense of self before they begin to emotionally leave the family nest.

Evaluate your individual child's current functioning. Timing of the telling or sharing depends on your child's individual functioning. If you believe your child's self image is too negative or shame-based to process difficult information without internalizing shame, then you need a plan to a) address the child's negative self-image; b) help the child strengthen attachments; c) help the child identify feelings and express them appropriately, especially feelings of rage, anger, frustration, sadness, despair, and helplessness; and d) share the information when you feel enough progress has occurred.

Remember that children often sense when secrets are being kept and conclude there is something wrong with them. Withholding details of a child's history and heritage can reinforce a sense of shame. In evaluating the child's readiness or preparing for sharing, identify coping skills and cognitive and emotional processing. A decision to wait until the child demonstrates positive self-image may entrap the child in "shameful" innuendo and vague perceptions, denying the child the opportunity to understand and process the realities of his/her heritage and life. Handled professionally over time, sharing difficult information, validating the child's feeling reactions and reinforcing that these were behaviors and/or choices of other people, not the child, can assist a child in overcoming a shame based or negative self image.

Plan carefully what words to use in the telling or sharing. Remember that your goal is to be open, honest, and caring; to communicate the situation with as few biases as possible, to help your child process difficult information. Plan who will be present. Write down the facts, the suppositions and effective word choices. If possible, have a professional helper present who can assist you and the child in the initial sharing and over time. Remember that processing takes time. Your child needs access to people who can validate feelings and correct misinterpretations.

In conclusion: if as parents you are struggling with the question of whether to share some piece of your child's heritage or history, I encourage you to seek professional consultation to consider how and when to share. Contact your placement agency and local parent support groups for recommendations of local counselors, social workers, family therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and/or religious leaders. If and when you locate an adoption worker you trust who does not have experience in dealing with the potential effect of race, incest, incarceration, placement of one child while parenting a sibling (etc.), I recommend you consult a psychologist who does. I frequently consult with and am consulted by psychologists who deal with these issues in intact families. Together, our combined experience and knowledge offers families valuable input in this difficult process.

Finally, seek ongoing support if you feel overwhelmed. Sharing difficult information and guiding your child's process of these pieces of his/her heritage can bring you closer together.

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