

8 Ways to Help Kids Handle Questions about Adoption

by Beth Hall & Gail Steinberg

- Mother: *"When you talk about your birth mother as your "real" mother, I wonder if it's hard to figure out who your "real" mom is when you have 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, *Flight of the Stork*

1 First, last and in between: Talk About It.

It's easy to imagine that since adoption has become a comfortable part of our own reality that our children must be feeling the same. This is another reminder of how different a parent's experience often is from that of their child. Parents have finally adjusted and become comfortable with their status as an adoptive family; therefore they presume their child has too. Talking openly with your child about the questions he or she confronts and the issues underlying them is crucial. Initiating conversations with children is critical – otherwise our voices will be the ones left out of the mix. People will not stop asking your child questions and most of the time you won't be there to help them respond. Between the ages of seven and twelve, children become concerned with accuracy; in fact it is often hard at this stage to get a child to speculate about things they don't understand. They are, also capable of an accurate understanding of social relationships, so this is a time when sadness and questions regarding the permanence and meaning of family relationships may arise in adopted children. These new feelings will probably not be obvious to you. Children often stop asking questions. But they absolutely do not stop listening.

2 Handle your own feelings

Many of us secretly hope that if we love our children enough, negative questions about adoption won't come up. Learn to ask yourself; "Who am I taking care of now; my own feelings or my child's? Am I ready for this, or what else is going on for me? What if I feel nervous, frustrated, disappointed, embarrassed, guilty, concerned, happy?"

3 Confirm that adoption matters

Admit that adoption will be a factor in the way your child is seen by others in their community. Admit it not just to yourself but also to your child. Use conversations as opportunities to hear what your child is thinking and what your child knows so you can begin to address the issues and any information gaps accurately. You will be preparing your child to deal with the reality of negative attitudes about adoption in the same way you prepare him or her to confront racism or sexism. "Did you hear what that little girl said? She doesn't think it's possible for anyone to have more than one mother..." or "Why do you think she assumes that your birth mother didn't want you?" Being proactive means that you are helping your child to recognize the difference between "insiders" to the adoption experience and "outsiders." This will allow them to begin to identify who they can trust and rely on to be their ally.

4 Create some responses together

Agree that negative attitudes are unfair. Be absolute that you are a resource for helping to deal with this unchangeable reality. Talking about it, brainstorming about it sets up a sense of we vs. them. We understand this experience and share (sometimes in an incredibly silly or outrageous way, not always in serious discussions!) strategies and empathy. Even though some of these strategies may not ever be used, our children's knowledge and memory of these "good" times will become part of their protective armor next time someone approaches them. "Not another one of these questions, sometimes I get tired of it, how about you" or "let's play remember the dumb thing someone said to us recently about adoption and think of the most outrageous things we could have said" (even though we probably didn't).

5 Help your child plan ahead

Kids develop new problem-solving skills in middle childhood. When your child says she has been teased or excluded because of adoption, help her to use these skills. Help her to express her feelings and explore the short-term and long-term consequences of her possible responses. Calmly ask her to tell what happened, how she feels, what she did, what else she might have done, and if other responses would have been more or less successful.

“What would you do if it happened again? Would it be better to back off or to take a stand? What about talking to this person again to tell them how that question made you feel?”

6 Prepare your child to handle problems on their own

It's important for kids to feel capable of handling their own problems—especially as they are learning about being treated unfairly because of adoption or race. If possible, help her feel able to handle it without adult protection as this will lead to more self-confidence next time it happens. Rather than getting on your horse and charging, try to simply offer, “Do you want me to do anything?”

7 Provide information

Elementary school kids are information gatherers. This is an ideal time to provide her with opportunities to gather realistic images of triad members including adopted adults and birth parents. This information will then be part of their repertoire of responses to intrusive questions. “Remember that panel of birth parents we heard, they all said they loved their children that they placed for adoption. People really have the wrong idea about birth parents don't they?” or “How can adopted kids be stupid, Thomas Edison was adopted, and he was one of smarted Americans ever!”

8 Help your child find other adopted people to talk to

Make sure that she is able to talk with other adopted kids and adults who have had similar experiences and can provide new ideas on how to react. This promotes their sense of having allies within their world and reminds them that they are not the only ones experiencing this. In hard times this can make a big difference. Without this exposure the only role models for our children will be the same narrow, generally negative stereotypical models from television and the movies that the perpetrator or questioner is espousing. “Did you call _____, to ask her how she used to handle this when she was your age?” or “Was your friend there when it happened? What did she think?”

Remember the old adage, “if it doesn't kill you, it makes you strong.” Demonstrate every day to your child that making lemonade out of lemons makes us strong. Being part of an adopted family may sometimes introduce issues we wouldn't face otherwise, but also gives us opportunities to grow closer as we learn to rely on each other for support and laughter to get through our challenges.