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When Do You Follow, When Do You Lead? Talking With Children About Adoption

by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall

Following means being responsive to your child's lead.

Haley, at four, is fantastic. With seriousness and concentration she cooks our breakfast at her toy stove in the backyard—sand oatmeal, pebble popovers, squashed raspberries, pretend vanilla ice cream and cold water tea poured from a red flowered teapot into thimble-sized cups, serving up her feast as grandly as a queen. She licks berry juice from her fingers slowly, one by one, as I take imaginary sips with care from my "very hot" little cup. We have enough time today to do anything we choose and the sun is shining. I'm so filled with every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous inch of her it's hard to keep from scooping her up and holding her close. Than she says gravely, "Remember when I came out of daddy's tummy?" Her voice is thin, high-pitched and a little bit bossy, exactly like my mother must have sounded when she was four, uh oh—here we go.

Curiously, I am not completely panic-stricken. What do I say? How do I say it? I think. I breathe. I pay attention. I tell myself, "This is not the only chance I will have to talk about adoption." "Haley, you didn't come out of daddy's tummy. Only mommies can grow babies inside of their bodies, not daddies. I've been your mommy since you were born but you were not in my body either. Daddy and I adopted you. Your birth mommy Ellie carried you in her body and when you were ready to be born you came out of her."

"Nope, your body," Haley insisted. "If I wasn't in daddy, I was in you."

"I can see how you might have thought that," I said. "Actually, daddy and I came to get you at the hospital just when Ellie gave birth to you. You grew inside your birth mommy just like all babies do. And when it was time for you to be born, you came out of your birth mommy just like all babies do. Ellie was sad that she couldn't take you home with her and take care of you but she couldn't because she had grownup problems. She is your real mommy because she brought you into the world but she didn't think she could take care of you in all the ways she knew you would need so she picked us to be your other real mommy and daddy forever. You have two real mommies and two real daddies—your birth parents who gave you life and us, your forever parents who are able to take care of you growing up but didn't have you inside our bodies. It's okay to love two sets of parents. You don't have to choose. Parents can love all of their kids, not just one, and kids can love all their parents."

"What did you say when you first saw me?"

"We said, 'How amazing! How wonderful! You are our most important dream come true! We are so happy!' And we wrapped you in your yellow blankie and drove home very, very carefully because you were so precious and we were bringing you home for the first time, right to the place where you were going to be forever. With us your very real parents!"

"Oh," she said, relaxing against me, "Would you care for some more tea?"

"How it feels to be adopted at the age of four is different from how it feels at the age of eight, sixteen, twenty-four, forty or seventy five." Adoption is not an issue adoptees process once or twice in a lifetime and feelings do not stay static. Three- to five-year-olds tend to use words without having much of an idea about what the words mean. What they understand most is their parents' feelings when they talk with them about adoption. Your child will retain the feeling about what it was like talking with you about how he joined the family. If you can create an atmosphere of openness that says it's okay to talk about these things, finding ways to model feelings that include both happy and sad aspects invite questions, you're off to a great start. The goal even with the youngest child is to create comfort with feelings and trust in healthy intimacy. Preschoolers usually feel like the star of their own adoption story because it is presented as something important which makes their parents very happy. Don't be fooled even though they can say the right words, the research makes it clear they are mimicking more that understanding.

The best way to try to understand young children's interpretations and their feelings about adoption is through action rather than words. To know what your child is feeling, play with her. Use dolls, stuffed animals, drawing, puppets, scarves, or trucks—whatever toys your child enjoys making up stories with. Than play with him and let him be the boss and tell you what your character in the story should do. For example, if your child asks you to be a little lost puppy while she is the mother dog ask her how to do it. Ask if the puppy is scared, or worried, or hungry rather than making decisions on your own—your child will probably be delighted to have a chance to be in charge and direct your actions. Follow your child's directions and don't push to make the story have a happy ending. What you will find out if you let your child show you is how she interprets the situation. You may be surprised but try not to be distressed. Remember this is a window into your child's thinking AT THE MOMENT. You will have future opportunities to help clarify and expand understanding. If the story seems unhappy or anxiety-provoking it is important for you to know that. Over time you can help your child explore how to live with those feelings or even how to have other feelings.

When do you follow?
Whenever kids ask direct questions or make statements about adoption.
Whenever outsiders ask questions about your family in front of your kids.
When adoption comes up as a school issue or in sensitive school assignments.
When hurtful incidents occur.
How do your follow?
Ask your child what happened.
Ask how that make your child feel.
Ask what your child did when it happened.
Ask your child if she is happy with what she said or did.
Ask your child if there is anything you can do to help.

Taking the lead means initiating discussion topics you have reason to believe matter.

When I picked Jordan up from school that day I hoped he couldn't see how crummy I felt. I guess I was in shock. Someone I'd thought of as a trusted friend was spreading the word that since I'd adopted Jordan I couldn't possibly know how to be a real mother because blood is thicker than water. I'd just found out. I felt so vulnerable, so angry — sad and embarrassed. I was doing my best to hide it — afraid my little boy would pick up on it.

"What's wrong, Mom?" he asked.

"Nothing, honey. Get in the car. Don't worry about it."

We drove in silence for a while, me not trusting myself to say more, Jordan seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. When he switched on the radio I was surprised to find myself paying attention to the words of the song that came on "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me…." We had a long drive home and I had a lot on my mind but I could tell Jordan was getting more and more upset by my silence. I wondered if I could dare to share my feelings with him. Wasn't it my job to protect him from the hurtful things of life and not burden him with adult problems? On the other hand, I was the one who was always trying to find ways to help Jordan share his feelings about his adoption with his dad and me, feelings he hardly ever talked about.. Part of feeling real is that others trust you with what's important to them. My son needs a model for acknowledgement and acceptance of feelings, not for masking them.

"Are you okay, Mom?" he asked again.

"Sometimes it's hard to talk about sensitive things honey, but thank you for asking. Something I'm feeling very bad about happened to me at work today. I'll try my best to tell you about it but I'm embarrassed, hurt, angry, and sad about it, all rolled into one. Don't even think it has anything to do with you because it doesn't. Someone I thought was my friend said some stupid things about my being an adoptive parent and it really hurt my feelings. Some people just don't get it, I guess."

"Oh," he said. Then a few minutes later he said, "I wonder if its like how I feel when kids who hear I'm adopted ask me why my real mom didn't want me?" I was astonished.

"Hmm. Maybe."

"Why didn't my birth mom want me, Mom? Do you think maybe I cried too much?"

Wow, I thought, amazed to hear the question Jordan had never voiced before. All I could do was hand him back the same "Oh," he had offered me earlier. With a soft sigh I reached over to rub the back of his neck. Then we sat silently, listening to the song on the radio.

"What a terrible way to feel," I said.

"Babies are supposed to cry. Crying is how babies tell us they need something before they can talk. Sometimes when a child is born, her parents have problems that keep them from being able to take care of the child. It's not the child's fault, but all children need parents who can do all the things kids need..."

Jordan and I were quiet the rest of the way home but we held hands across the seat and we both had a feeling something important might have happened.

When we got home, as we were getting out of the car, Jordan said, "I'm glad you trusted me, Mom. I like it when you tell me how you feel even if you do feel sad."

"Me too," I said.

One way to take the lead in talking with your child about adoption is to share stories of your own experiences of how it feels to be an adoptive parent, the happy and the sad. Often disclosing challenges has more impact than sharing only joyous feelings. Kids know it's not easy to talk about the hard stuff and tend to feel honored receiving what feels like privileged information from their parents. Creating a family culture where parent's model that it's safe to talk about difficult things encourages kids to do the same. Giving our children permission to feel and express their awareness of or concerns about their birth parents who were not able to raise them without trying to fix their pain makes a difference. " Children who are hurting must sense their parents are not denying them their pain. They can do this by the silent acceptance of the feelings of the children; by an empathetic sigh or hug, by a soft sad exclamation like, 'Oh' or if they must use words by

'what a terrible way to feel." Leading, by sharing feelings about a painful personal experience, is a way to deepen family communication about sadness and loss.

Another way to lead in processing adoption issues is to bring the subject up yourself — by making casual comments and letting them resonate. Many times your child won't pick up on these offerings but by putting them out there you are creating an atmosphere that says you are comfortable and able to discuss these issues when they are ready. Do this often, simply thinking out loud about things you've read, seen on TV, your child's genetic inheritance or feelings…Here are some examples:

"You're such a talented pianist and now you're even composing your own songs. I wonder if you got that from someone in your birth family."
"You have such beautiful eyes. I bet you look like your birth mother [or father]."
"I always think about your birth mother when it's time for your birthday. It's such a happy day but sad things happen too. I wonder if you think about that too."
"What a great job you did on your test. I bet your birth parents would be really proud if they knew about it."
"I read that lots of adopted kids think it's their fault they got placed for adoption."
"Hey, I just saw a quiz show on TV and the question was what do Nelson Mandela, Mark Twain, Marilyn Monroe, and Moses have in common. I thought it was that they all had names that start with M but I was wrong, they were all adopted. Kinda cool, huh?"

A third way to take the lead in helping your child process adoption issues is to provide play activities or objects that help create understanding. The child who wonders why his birth parents were not able to take care of him might understand a little better if he had to take care of all the needs of a new puppy for twenty four hours a day, taking the puppy with him everywhere he went. To pretend an egg is her baby, taking care of the egg and not going anyplace without it can help a child understand how much work is involved. The child who needs to assimilate the message "you are an important person in this family forever" might be given a string of traditional worry beads and told that each time she touches the beads it will help her remember that you will always hold her. Thinking up metaphors or images for issues your child wonders about will provide ways to help him feel in control and manage fears, anger, or questions. Taking the lead by providing play activities or transitional objects can help kids feel in charge and let them determine outcome of events and better understand difficult choices.

When do you lead?
Look for opportunities...not guarantees.
When your intuition tells you you should.
When your child appears sad or very contemplative.
When your child has any experience of loss.
On your child's birthdays.
On Mother's Day and Father's Day.
Whenever birthparents come up in the media, books, films or conversation.
Whenever there is an opportunity.

In the end remember the goal is to create a balance between talking about adoption and living daily life. Ask yourself, when was the last time it came up? If you can't remember, it's probably time. But none of us is defined by any one single feature in our lives. We are parents first. Adoption is one of the issues that exist in our family so of course we must address it. But never forget your most important job —creating the very closeness you dreamed of in your family when you first began the journey toward becoming an adoptive parent. Life is a gift. Our children are treasures. Enjoy.