

# **Adopting Again**

## **Talking to the Other Children In the Home**

### **An Interview with Sharon Kaplan Roszia**

***If a family plans to adopt a second (or more) child, what do the parent or parents need to think about when trying to prepare the children already in the home for the process?***

The key issue in talking to children is honesty. As adults, we must watch our language and be sure we are saying exactly what we mean and what is true. Young children take words very concretely. We cannot talk about an adoption plan from a hoping stance... we must always stay in the present. The first step is to analyze for ourselves exactly what is happening. Then begin planning how to discuss it with your child or children. The variables will be the age of the child you are talking to and whether or not that child was adopted.

***Can you give some concrete suggestions of things parents can say to their children during the process?***

With very young children, you can only prepare them for the possibility that a baby may be sleeping here at our house. Even with six- to eight-year-old children, parents need to be very careful if discussing the possibility that this baby could be a hoped-for sibling. I recommend telling children that you are "planning to take care of a baby," because anything beyond that is often wishful thinking which children cannot distinguish from a promised reality.

Use this process as an object lesson in adoption. Parents can talk about adoption as something they began thinking about long before it happened. Explain to the child that it is something that has to be just right for everybody. A foundation can be laid in the getting-ready process. I feel it is important to emphasize getting ready for adoption rather than outlining exactly when, how and who will choose to place a baby with your family. Otherwise, there is the possibility the child will hold him- or herself accountable for a long wait or a change in placement plans.

If there is a birth parent in the picture, you can say something like, "Someone has introduced us to a lady named [birth mother's name], who is pregnant. She is trying to make a very important decision about raising this baby herself. We will be getting to know each other. After the baby is born, she will look her baby in the eyes and know what is best for her baby." Always emphasize that the decision she is making has to be best for her child, making it clear that that choice has nothing to do with you, the parents, or the child(ren) already in the family. "Everybody knows we are a good family, you and us. This is a really big decision for [birth mother's name] and she

has to be sure what is right for her baby." Children often will want to apply to themselves whatever you are talking about. With birth children, this will allow you to explain and talk about their birth and your certainty that you did want to and were able to parent them. With adopted children, it is an opportunity to talk about their birth parents, your meetings with them and their decision to place the child with you to parent.

This is also an opportunity for families to talk about helping other people simply because it is a good thing to do. Emphasize to your child that everything you are doing for the birth parent(s) is given freely, whether they place the child with your family or not. "Our job is to be nice to [birth mother's name], to help her while she is trying to decide what is best for herself." Sometimes adoptive parents have to ask birth parents not to speak with their other children about the adoption as if it is a sure thing until it is in fact completed.

***What about when the baby is actually born and comes home from the hospital with the adoptive family?***

I think that children must be prepared for the fact that many people will be feeling enormous emotions during this stage. In particular, it is important to talk about grief and explain that the birth mother has been with the baby for a long time and will feel sad if she sends the baby home with your family. It is important to convey that, even though the baby may be coming home, it is not certain that the baby will be staying with you or become a brother or sister yet. This is also a time to talk about what is the same and what is different between birth and adopted children. I believe that it is very important to convey the seriousness and importance of this decision. Even very young children can understand that it is sometimes complicated and hard to make big decisions. With older children, they can even participate in hypothesizing some of the reasons a birth parent might decide to place a child or raise a child and try some problem-solving around the issues.

I do not believe in sending out baby announcements or having baptisms and other welcoming and acknowledging rituals until we have the legal right to do so. I believe it is important for children (and adoptive parents as well) to remember that it isn't a done deed until it is done. Parents can convey to children how wonderful it is that the birth parent(s) trust them as a family to care for and love this child. This becomes an object lesson about being people who consider the well-being of a child in their attitudes and actions.

***When do we finally tell our children that this new child is their brother or sister ?***

When the birth mother or father actually terminates parental rights (or has them terminated), then you can say that this is a day when a really big decision has been made. "Now we get to be a family forever." I suggest including all the children in the family when going before the judge because it emphasizes the seriousness and thus strength and firmness of the adoption. The social worker should be presented as a professional who will be able to explain to the judge that "we are a good family."

If there are any doubts in your mind as to the permanence of the adoption plan when the relinquishment or consent is signed, then I do not recommend that parents tell their children that this new child is really their brother or sister until that doubt is gone. Instead, you can talk about what a blessing it is every day the child is with you. It must be made clear that it is different for the child already in the family than for the new child who still is not a full member forever.

***What if we are participating in a closed adoption in which we have no contact with and know very little or nothing about the new child's birth parents?***

Children still need to be prepared and we still need to be concrete and careful not to confuse actuality with a hoped-for outcome. The discussions are really the same, except we don't have the same kinds of details. We are not being honest with children if we don't talk about all the roles in adoption. The children's job is "just to be themselves." The adoptive parents' job is to be prepared to take a child when one needs to be cared for. The birth parents' job is to make a decision about what is best for their child. The judge's job is to decide where a child will be forever. If we don't address all of these roles, it can be very scary for children, who often fear that outcomes are their fault or can be changed. Children tend to take self-responsibility; parents must help them understand when this is not appropriate.

***What if we have a child in our home and the birth parent(s) change their mind and take the baby back?***

If you have been accurate with your information, then the child was at least prepared for that possibility and does not feel betrayed by or distrustful of you and your words. Grief will always be there and is appropriate. We always grieve not to see or to lose people we love. If we have not been accurate, then often adoptive parents feel angry and betrayed by the birth parents or the system. This anger can result in the child's internalizing those emotions and often results in deep concern and worry for the well-being and safety of the child who is now gone or even about their own permanence in your family. Being accurate and talking about adoption as a process will not diminish the grief of a loss, but it often allows families and children to process the grief more cleanly and truly with less fear and anger. If you open your heart, then there is pain when someone leaves. In adoption, birth parents and adoptive parents open themselves to this possibility, out of love for the child they all care for.