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point of view

serving adopted children of color

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# Ask Pact

## Talking About Birth Parents

by Martha Rynberg

**Q:** Although I met my son when he was five days old, it took us five years to find Pact. It was really great to come to Spring Training this year, and the topic of "telling" our kids stories couldn't have been more perfect for us. I walked away with lots of notes and ideas and a bag full of books (thanks, Mollie!), but also a couple of questions. Since we don't know much about our son's "first family" (we have a closed adoption) we haven't talked about them much. When talking with other families I heard a parent referring to his child's birth mother as "our birth mother"—this surprised me. I also heard another parent refer to birth family members by name. We do have the first names of immediate birth family members—but how private should we keep that information? Hearing how other families manage these issues is really inspiring and as I work to craft my son's story, until he makes it his own, I really want to get it right. Thanks for your suggestions!

**A:** A: I am so glad you came to Spring Training. Indeed, there are lots of ways we can talk about our children's birth families and I appreciate your desire to "get it right."

The two examples you witnessed at Spring Training are important. First, it is not uncommon for adoptive parents to refer their children's birth mother as "our birth mother," but that does not mean it is not problematic. Adoptive parents are in a relationship with their child's birth mother. It is because of the child that adoptive parents and birth parents know one another, and the relationship to the child is always the primary one, no matter how strong the relationship between adoptive and birth parents may become. I suspect referring to their child's birth mother as "our birth mother" is an attempt to describe the direct connection that adoptive parents may well feel.

But "our" implies ownership, a dynamic that can be particularly sensitive when the birth mother is of a different race. Birth parents do not belong to the

adoptive parents; they belong to their children. And as adoptive parents—every-day parents—it is our role to essentially to "hold" the birth parent relationship for our child, not to "have" the relationship for ourselves. Secondly, every family finds their own way to refer to all sorts of extended family. Sometimes we use relationship titles alone (Grandma), other times we use titles with first name (Aunt Regina), or call family members by their first name regardless of the relationship (Sarah, rather than Sister Sarah). What are the traditions in your own family? How can they be adapted/expanded to include your son's birth family?

As you talk more about birth family, listen to how he refers to them. Pay attention to his language and try following his lead. As you experiment with language, you can also tell your son, "I am trying out some new words I learned. What words do you like to use when we talk about this part of your family?"

This is also a great time to introduce the names of his birth family, if you haven't already. Learning the

names of people make them more real, more three-dimensional. Knowing and discussing the first names of his birth relatives will benefit your son and does no harm to his birth family. When we talk about things that other people try to keep secret, we send our kids the message that we are not afraid of the truth, or the feelings that come with talking about it.

Sometimes adoptive parents are very sensitive to the use of the term "real parents." When outsiders to the adoption experience use this language it is appropriate to remind them that adoptive and birth parents are both equally real. However, if we hear our kids use this term we might want to give them space to do so. Yes, this might push our buttons and trigger a sense of insecurity, and we can be flexible enough to meet our kids where they are, in their own language. Because after all, taking about it with any words is better than not talking about it at all.

If you are feeling unsure, remember that all parents make mistakes, and we adoptive parents have the extra challenge of handling issues that are unfamiliar to us and to most of the parents around us. How we respond after making a mistake is perhaps more important than the mistake itself. We perform powerful modeling for our kids when we follow-up with them and make amends, both by acknowledging how we could have done it differently, and by actually doing it differently the next time.

As we work toward having open conversations with our kids about potentially hard topics, we can learn a lot by talking with other families like ours, as well as seeking out trainings, articles and books. At the end of the day it all comes down to being willing to experiment, practice a lot, and risk making mistakes on our way to "getting it right."

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