

Ask Pact

Keeping it "Real," How to Talk About All Your Child's Parents

The question and answers in this month's Ask Pact come from the Pact Campers online discussion group, a forum where adoptive parents who have attended Pact Camp can share advice and information.

Q: *I am still trying to sort out feelings and appropriate responses to questions and comments about adoption. I have a good friend with two biological children who has talked with me about adoption to some extent, who yesterday made reference to my daughter's birthmother as "mom" and birthfather as "dad," repeating it again even after I used my preferred term in my reply. I am still sensitive about calling her mom in any regard—my daughter is five and just beginning to use the term "birth mother," has not had much contact with her that she remembers, and it's not clear how much she really understands. I don't want the sensitivity to come through in a way that would create tension in our relationship, but would still like my friend to be aware that I prefer that my daughter doesn't hear her described as "the mom" from friends and family just yet (since I haven't worked through my feelings yet). What would you say to the friend? And any suggestions as to what to say to my daughter if she overhears similar comments?*

A: **Response One:** I've been there! My daughter is ten years old. I think it's probably better that your daughter does hear that terminology, and have the chance to talk about it with you, while she is still little. Because the minute she steps out the door, someone is going to ask her about her "real mom and dad." It will happen often and we cannot prevent it. So the more she can talk through it with you at home, the better. You can stick to the terminology you are comfortable with, but what your friend says is just a precursor to what she will hear over and over. Our adopted children do have other parents, who they will think about, talk about and grieve for in their own way, and whatever we call them doesn't change that fact. Working through our feelings as adoptive parents is a lifelong process, but it's important to get squared away enough to be able to address it in a healthy way sooner rather than later. I say "first mom," my daughter calls her mom or first mom, birth mom, or by her first name, but what we call her is not as important as the conversations in which my daughter feels free to talk about her thoughts, feelings and questions about her birth parents. That's why it's more important to be squared away with our own feelings so

we can be there for our kids to help them process their feelings.

Response Two: I have run into the same situation in my years of being an adoptive mom. Our daughter is now 18 years old and seems to have a good idea how to handle different situations that have come her way. She could not understand why people would ask her about her "real" mom when she was younger. I usually had to talk to the adult who brought it up and explain what adoption is. I had to constantly have a teacher hat on for these situations, to explain adoption terminology and that we are her "real" parents. When she was older she would explain adoption herself but feel frustrated that people were so "stupid." We talked quite a bit about this and read book after book about adoption when she was young and attended Pact camps and gatherings. We had an open adoption through Pact. We didn't have contact with her birth mom for years. The birth mom left no forwarding address for us to contact her and never contacted us about the move so we had no choice. Eventually I found her on Facebook and they have had contact in recent years. Our daughter calls her birth

mom by her first name and since she now has contact with the birth dad, calls him by his first name. She and her birth dad text each other at least once a week. Both birth parents live across the country from us so their relationship isn't that close yet. I don't feel threatened in any way. I just wish that her birth mother and father could have been a part of her life from the beginning but it just didn't work out that way for us. I think just being honest and open with people who come into my daughter's life helped her.

Response Three: My six-year-old is currently enamored with the book *You're Not My Real Mother!* It has opened up many conversations about being "real" as well as about her not wanting to be the only brown person in our family, etc. The most helpful thing for me is to remember that it's okay for her to have these feelings and that I want to continue to be open and honest with her in order to encourage her honesty with me. And the reassuring part for me is that she always ends the conversation by telling me how much she loves me!

Adoptive parents who have attended Pact Camp are welcome to join the Pact Campers discussion group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pactcampers>.