

Ask Pact

Talking with a Preschooler About Birth Parents

Q:

My son is almost three. He has been with me since he was two days old. I have a picture of him with his birthparents at the hospital, and I am wondering if it is time to share this with him. Although we read a lot of adoption stories, I don't think he grasps the concept. I want to begin introducing some of the more concrete aspects of his adoption, so as to integrate them into his thinking and his identity. I don't know how to show him the photo without creating confusion. Is it just too soon?

A:

When is the right time? Children your son's age typically spend a lot of time trying to figure out how they came into their family. Often this results in a lot of discussion about who belongs with or "to" whom and where babies come from. It is age-appropriate and normal to see young children wanting to "play pretend" about getting born. Often in families built by adoption this results in children creating fantasies about how they were born to their adoptive parents or even born several times to each set of caretakers they have ever had. Again, this is a normal exploration that takes on additional meaning for children who have been in foster care and/or placed for adoption.

It is essential that adoptive parents talk with their children about their adoption journey during this developmental stage. Gently reminding your son that he was in fact in his birth (first) mother's "tummy" when the topic comes up (for example, when you see another mommy at pre-school or the park who is pregnant), while also acknowledging that he belongs with you, is a way of always telling the truth while encouraging him to explore the topic.

About confusion. Two things are safe to say about confusion as it relates to adoption and children. First,

adoption is confusing for all of us, and perhaps most especially for those who were adopted; adoption was a choice made for them rather than by them. If the goal is to avoid confusion, adoptive families will certainly "fail." Instead we suggest that parents set a different goal: helping their children navigate the normal experience of adoption confusion. Being bewildered about who is the "real" mother, perplexed regarding the hows and whys of an experience as huge as being moved from one family to another: these are what Joyce Maguire Pavao calls "normative crises" in adoption. Adoptive families and adoption as an institution is often misunderstood, and there are always aspects of the situation or the facts that are not clear.

If this frightens you, then the danger is that your child could become frightened. If you approach this kind of interaction with the understanding that you and your son will grow closer the more you dive into these complex, lifelong conversations about the experience of adoption, then you will be able to build intimacy with your child because of the shared courage required when you take an honest and in-depth approach. Young children are rarely confused if the adults around them are clear and confident. In the context of adoption this means that while adoption is in fact confusing to understand in its

full complexity, young children rely on the adults around them to manage complexity. If they are given reassuring messages that the adults are confident that all is fine, then all in fact is fine for them.

Showing the photo. Show your son the photo of his birth parents unless you feel your affect will be anxious or fearful when you look at the picture with him. In this case, practice with others before talking to him, so you can see if you like how you are talking and what you are saying. Do some role-plays; respond to pretend questions he might ask. Consider what you think of as the “worst-case scenario” of how he might respond, and come up with a plan for how you might handle that. This process will help you realize when you are ready and able to have the conversation.

It is natural to be a little nervous when you bring up your child’s birthparents for this first time. But remember, practice makes perfect. Start now, while your child is young, so that you can become more comfortable over time. Maybe the first time you will stumble a little as you say the words “your birth mother” or “your first mother.” The next time will be easier. Have you ever been in a situation that scared you a little, but you acted calm and confident in order to engender the same response in your child? Projecting comfort and confidence about the topic of your child’s birth family—even if you have to pretend a bit at first—is the best way you can convince him that this a safe topic and begin a lifetime habit of open communication about all his family connections.

He is likely to adore everything that is about him at this age, so this photo is likely to result in further questions and exploration, which is exactly what you should hope for – for all the reasons stated above. Waiting to show such a photo sometimes results in children questioning why they weren’t allowed to see it earlier. Often that answer can indicate, or at least seem to them to indicate, a sense of shame or reticence on your part about their adoption. This of course can have a direct impact on self-esteem.

Promoting pride and comfort in children means feeling pride and comfort with all that they are. In the case of adopted children, that always includes—in fact begins with—finding pride and comfort in their connection to the people who brought them into this world.

1 Pavao’s book *The Family of Adoption* is available for purchase through Pact.