

# Book Review

## Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew

By Sherrie Eldridge



In this book Sherrie Eldridge does an excellent job of encapsulating thought provoking and very real issues that adopted children deal with through the years. This is a unique and perceptive treatment of the core issues of adoption from a child's view and gives a clear voice to feelings not easily articulated. *Twenty Things* will convince you that because there is no closure, the adopted child's loss is a lifelong issue that is a normal part of his or her life journey and that parents can and should be proactive in validating their child's concerns and experiences as they occur over time. Eldridge says that "buried feelings caused by the loss of birth family must be identified and grieved or the child's ability to receive and give love will be diminished. The parental challenge is to learn the 20 unspoken feelings, create a nonjudgmental atmosphere for the child to grieve and cheer the child on." The following are the chapter titles of the book to which a short synopsis of the main concept has been added.

**1. I Suffered A Profound Loss Before I Was Adopted. You Are Not Responsible.** Adoptees are likely to go through life noticing this difference between themselves and most other people and wondering, fantasizing and grieving all the "what might have been's" if they'd been raised in their birth family. In the same way that infertile parents' sadness over their loss does not mean they don't love their adopted children, an adoptee's sadness or grief is not a reflection of his or her love for adoptive parents.

**2. I Need To Be Taught That I Have Special Needs Arising From Adoption Loss, Of Which I Need Not Be Ashamed.** There is relief in learning that others who share our experiences also share certain sensitivities

that may be related to being adopted. For instance, people who are adopted are often sensitive to transition and change, which makes sense since they to make a significant transition from one family to another which they didn't choose or have control of.

**3. If I Don't Grieve My Loss, My Ability To Receive Love From You & Others Will Be Hindered.** All losses must be grieved in order to heal. The stages of grief include anger, denial, bargaining, sorrow and acceptance. Healing is not a linear process – life events can trigger these emotions many times over. By showing our children that we are comfortable with their grief process we will help them to feel understood and to experience the riches of the relationships and closeness that are part of family life.

**4. Unresolved Grief May Surface In Anger Toward You.** Most of us don't like losing control over things that deeply and profoundly affect our lives. We want to make important choices for ourselves. It is natural that adopted people will need to process anger about the loss of control they have suffered over their own lives and, that anger will be acted out in the safest and most comfortable place they know, which likely means you!

**5. I Need Your Help In Grieving My Loss. Teach Me How To Get In Touch With My Feelings About My Adoption & Then Validate Them.** Children receive messages from the world that they ought to be grateful for being adopted, which can raise feelings of guilt or uncertainty when they feel sad about it. Parents can help by being proactive in discussions about feelings that include a full range of responses.

**6. Just Because I Don't Talk About My Birth Family Doesn't Mean I Don't Think About Them.** When groups of adopted tweens and adolescents are asked if they think about their birth parents, many confess almost sheepishly that they think of them often, usually as they are falling asleep or when they are by themselves. They admit to worrying that it might make their adoptive parents feel bad to know that they wonder and worry.

**7. I Want You To Take The Initiative In Opening Conversations About My Birth Family.** As parents you won't have a choice about whether or not your children think of their birth parents. The only choices open to you are whether or not to be part of your child's thinking by initiating conversations about them. Don't wait for your children to talk about their birth parents. Begin today with "I was thinking about your birth parents today and wondering if they do that same thing you always do when you get worried. Do you ever think about them..."

**8. I Need To Know The Truth About My Conception, Birth And Family History No Matter How Painful The Details May Be.** Everybody deserves his or her own truth. The truth should be given to your children in developmentally appropriate language, but stay with the truth even when it is hard.

**9. I Am Afraid I Was 'Given Away' By My Birth Mother Because I Was A Bad Baby. I Need You To Help Me Dump My Toxic Shame.** All kids assume that they somehow cause everything that happens to them. Parents must help them understand that babies cannot be "bad," but sometimes parents are having a hard time so that they can't or won't do the things that all babies need and deserve.

**10. I Am Afraid You Will Abandon Me.** Every adopted child has already had at least one really important experience where they have been left by someone really important (their birth parent.) If it can happen once, it can happen again. Don't avoid the conversation and your chance to help them know you will be there for them forever, NO MATTER WHAT.

**11. I May Appear More 'Whole' Than I Actually Am. I Need Your Help To Uncover The Parts Of Myself That I Keep Hidden So I Can Integrate All The Elements In My Identity.** Children need to be taught how to process their feelings. In order to feel safe talking about them, they need to know adults can handle even the most difficult emotions. Kids need this reassurance because they often are aware that they themselves don't know how to handle their own feelings.

**12. I Need To Gain A Sense Of Personal Power.** Anyone who has experienced a loss of personal power over their life path – and every adopted child has – must have opportunities to learn that although they weren't in

control of that loss they can and do have control at other times.

**13. Please Don't Say I Look Or Act Just Like You. I Need You To Acknowledge And Celebrate Our Differences.** Families who acknowledge and celebrate difference support their child's sense of belonging in their adoptive family. The strength of adoptive families is in caring for one another by celebrating each person's individuality rather than sameness.

**14. Let Me Be My Own Person But Don't Let Me Cut Myself Off From You.** Sometimes adopted children respond to loss by shying away from intimacy so they will never be hurt by another loss again. It is critical to all human beings to learn to be loved so they can learn to love and find happiness. Keep on working towards intimacy and relationship, even when it is hard to accomplish.

**15. Please Respect My Privacy Regarding My Adoption. Don't Tell Other People Without My Consent.** Don't risk outsiders having more information about your child's personal history than your child has herself. For everyone who asks for "all the details", learn to tell them in polite but firm ways.

**16. Birthdays May Be Difficult For Me.** Birthdays mean birth-days, and birth means I was born to someone other than you. Ambivalent feelings are likely to surface for kids and parents. Don't be afraid to acknowledge them.

**17. Not Knowing My Full Medical History Can Be Distressing At Times.** Some adopted people find themselves bordering on hypochondria for fear of unknown medical issues that may surface without warning. Sympathetic and understanding loved ones can help make this more tolerable.

**18. I Am Afraid I Will Be Too Much For You To Handle.** "Maybe my birth parents would have kept me if I hadn't had so many issues or problems, how do I know I can count on you to be different?"

**19. When I Act Out My Fears In Obnoxious Ways, Please Hang In There With Me, And Respond Wisely.** Behavior is the language of children. Practice asking the deeper questions of why children are doing what they do — don't assume they are just bad or angry with you. Look at self-esteem and their feelings of angst in the context of their adoption experience and sensitivity.

**20. Even If I Decide To Search For My Birth Family, I Will Always Want You To Be My Parents.** Don't make the mistake of seeing your child's possible search as a competition between birth and adoptive parents. Being supportive (even if you are nervous) will deliver the message to your child that you want them to be whole and you love them more than your own comfort.