



ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

Talking to Your Six- to Eight-Year-Old About Adoption

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

think things that you don't know about!" my daughter, Sasha, informed me soon after she turned six. She was letting me know that she was becoming aware of herself as a person separate from me. By this age, children are starting school. Peers and teachers begin to influence their view of the world and of themselves. Children take on new roles—of pupil, classmate, friend—and they begin to question where, exactly, they fit in the world.

At this age, your child is likely to realize that most children were not adopted into their families. Remember: your child isn't the only one tuning into the world outside his home. Your child's classmates, too, are becoming more curious about the people around them. They are likely to ask your child blunt questions about himself and his family. The more prepared your child is with answers, the better.

Understanding why their birthparents were not able to raise them is an important task for children this age. They may connect being adopted by one family with being "rejected" by another. If you've been talking about adoption in a loving way, you'll be ready for this stage, but you'll have more direct questions now. Answer honestly, and be as concrete as you can in your descriptions of your child's birthparents, what their life was like, and why they weren't able to raise a child. These discussions go hand-in-hand with reassuring your child that you will always be there to take care of her—that adoption is forever. This message is more important than ever before.

T.I.P. = Tell, Ignore, Keep It Private

This acronym helps children remember that they can choose whom they do and do not want to share personal information with. For example, if a schoolmate asks, "Why did your real mother give you up?" Your child will know that he can choose among the following options:

TELL: "My birthmother was not able to take care of me."

IGNORE: and don't answer; change the subject.

KEEP IT PRIVATE: "That's a private story."

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WHAT'S GOING ON WITH MY CHILD?

Identity is more complex.

- Children at this age think more abstractly, asking,
 - "Who am I apart from my parents? How am I like my birthparents?"
 - "How am I different from my classmates?"

Associating "special" with "different."

- A preschooler may see her adoption as special, but an older child sees the other side of special: different.
- At school age, children grasp that most children live with their birthparents.
- They begin to process the fact that their birthparents chose not to raise them.

Mingling fantasy and reality.

- Changing facts is a strategy children use to protect themselves from realities they aren't ready to cope with.
- Your child might say, "My birthmother was a princess."

Emerging fears.

- Children this age understand how helpless they'd be if their parents were to die.
- Fear of kidnapping may reveal deeper fears that she was kidnapped from her birthparents—and could be kidnapped back.

AND WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Help your child gather what you know about her birthparents.

- Highlight attributes she might share with them:
 - "Your birthmother must be very beautiful and athletic."
 - Make a scrapbook.

Normalize your family by socializing with other adoptive families.

- Be open to ambivalence about having been adopted.
- You might say, "It's okay. We all feel sad when we've lost something or someone."
- Show how to express feelings constructively: "It's okay to say you are mad. It's not okay to hit your sister."

Don't directly contradict your child's fantasy.

- It is playing an important role in her development.
- Say: "It's okay to pretend. I can see why you'd want to make the story happier."

Reassure your child that no one can take him away.

- Show him his adoption certificate.
- Describe concretely why he was placed for adoption.
- Share a birthmother's letter describing why she wasn't able to raise a child.

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ILLUSTRATION BY WOOK JIN JUNG

SMILE BE GENTLE AND HUMOROUS

More and more as they mature, our children note how we react to comments from strangers and others about adoption. Developing polite and humorous responses to absurd comments is a powerful tool for managing our own feelings and setting an example for our children.

Becoming a School Advocate

Difficult questions will come up at school, when we're not around to help our children formulate a response. **You can support your child and help create a positive environment at school by:**

- ◆ **volunteering** to talk about adoption in your child's class.
- ◆ **preparing a program** for teachers or inviting a local agency that has a post-adoption program to come in and talk with teachers about how to expand and modify assignments that might be difficult for adoptive families.
- ◆ **exploring educational resources** available for children, teachers, and parents at www.adoptivefamilies.com. Click on "How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade" or one of the other Classic Clip-and-Save articles on the home page.

What if my child says...?

"I must have been a bad baby for my mom to give me away." Resist arguing with a comment such as "No, you were a wonderful baby." But correct misperceptions: "It's nothing you did that made your birthmother plan adoption. All babies are good, but they need to be taken care of." (This is a good time to make examples of the babies you know in the neighborhood.) "Your birthmother wasn't able to take care of you."

◆◆◆ Affirming Activities for Parents and Children

As kids become aware of how many different sorts of families there are, it's important to emphasize that adoption is a great way to make a family, that their birthparents are good and loving people, and that they can feel proud of themselves. You can do this by:

- ◆ reading books or renting videos with adoption themes, such as *Anne of Green Gables*, *Superman*, and *Free Willy*.
- ◆ making cards for birthparents on Mother's Day and Father's Day.
- ◆ collecting pictures of themselves they want their birthparents to see.
- ◆ talking about birthparents, their country/culture/race/background.
- ◆ imagining birthparents, if you don't know them. What must they look like? Which interests might they share with your child? Invite your child to draw a picture of what they might look like.
- ◆ showing compassion and acceptance of difficult circumstances that led birthparents to place their child for adoption.
- ◆ making connections with role models who share your child's racial or ethnic background, famous and not.
- ◆ reminding children about how much deceased people in your family loved them or would have loved them. These loving figures become inner resources.
- ◆ putting a map on the wall showing all the places your family comes from.