

What Children Understand About Adoption at Different Ages

Lois Melina



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Children cannot understand adoption until they can understand reproduction—usually around the age of 6. Nevertheless, many experts believe children should hear about their adoption before this age.

Early discussions ensure that children will hear about their adoptions from their parents in a loving, positive way, rather than as a taunt from a neighbor's child. Furthermore, children often sense that there is a secret about them and conclude it must be bad if no one will talk about it.

Parents can introduce the subject by paying attention to natural, appropriate opportunities to do so.

Natural, appropriate opportunities are those times when adoption is relevant. For example, introducing a child as *my adopted daughter Bianca* is no more appropriate than introducing a child as *my prematurely born daughter Bianca*. However, it is appropriate for parents to say, as they tuck a child in bed at night and get a warm feeling about haying that child, *I'm so glad we adopted you*.

Preschoolers

When a child is old enough to listen to brief, simple stories, one of those stories can be the story of her adoption.

The story will probably sound something like this:

Mommy and daddy wanted a baby very much, but couldn't make one that would grow inside mommy. You grew inside another woman.

But she and your birth father couldn't take care of any baby born to them at that time in their lives, so you came to live with us. I'm sure they were sad, and you may have

been sad, too. I was sad that you weren't born to us, but now we're happy that we're a family, and I think your birth parents are happy to know you're being taken care of.

Simple as it is, that narrative provides the framework for future discussions of adoption. As children get older, parents can add more details about their infertility, the birth mother and birth father, the process they went through to adopt, and why the birth parents were unable to care for any baby at that time.

Parents shouldn't be fooled into thinking their young child understands adoption because he is able to repeat the story. He is probably just parroting what he's been told. He must first understand time and space in new ways before he can truly understand how he joined his family. That ability begins around the age of four.

Around that age, children begin to understand that some things happened in the past even though they have no memory of them, and that some things will happen in the future.

Similarly, they can understand that places exist outside of their immediate environment.

Out of this new cognitive ability comes an awareness that they were not always as they are now. They were once babies, and someday they might be mommies or daddies. Eventually this leads children to ask, "Did I grow inside you, mommy?"

It's important for adoptive parents to realize that the child probably is not asking whether she was adopted, but whether she grew inside her mother, as she's been hearing that babies do. She

naturally asks the only mother she knows—her adoptive mother.

Parents need to respond to the question the child is asking by reassuring the child that she did indeed grow inside a woman and that she was born the way all children are born.

Then, parents can add that after the child was born, because her birth parents couldn't take care of any child born to them at that time, she came to live with her adoptive parents.

Middle childhood

Children tend to become more curious about adoption during the middle childhood years, approximately ages 7 to 11. During the information-gathering years of elementary school, children are interested in many details about themselves, such as whether their birth parents were married, whether they have any biologic brothers or sisters, how old their birth parents are and where they live.

This is also a time when they realize that most other children are living with at least one biologic relative, and they come to understand that the way they joined their families is somewhat unusual. It isn't uncommon for them to experience hurt, anger, or sadness at what may feel like abandonment or rejection to them. They may grieve for the loss of connections to their birth relatives—even though they are happy to be in their adoptive families. Because they don't fully understand why they couldn't remain with their birth parents, they may feel that their security in their adoptive family is shaky.



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Not all this may be immediately apparent, however. Children in the middle childhood years may not initiate discussions about adoption with their parents. Their new problem-solving capabilities may lead them to erroneous conclusions about how and why they were placed for adoption, and they may not see any need to discuss them. They may find the topic too painful to bring up. And because around this time they develop the ability to think without using words, they may not even know that the sometimes confusing, sometimes uncomfortable feelings they occasionally have are related to being adopted.

For this reason, parents need to continue to bring up the topic whenever it seems appropriate. By being alert to cues that a child is dealing with an adoption issue, parents can bring the subject out into the open. For example, after strolling through the mall with their child, a parent who adopted a child locally might say, *Do you ever wonder if you're walking past birth relatives without even knowing it?* When a child shows a particular aptitude or ability, a parent could say, *I wonder if your birth father was tall like you and a good basketball player—have you ever thought about that?*

This is a good time to take advantage of contact with the birth parents that may be possible directly or through the adoption facilitator. By contacting the birth parents, children can get information as well as an answer to the important question of *why* they were placed for adoption from the most credible source.

Parents shouldn't get caught up in always providing their child with the answers to her questions. There is value in discovering truth on one's own. By helping a child work through questions herself or allowing her to write to the birth parents directly, yet remaining

available to correct misconceptions or get faulty reasoning back on track, parents can serve their child better than they could even by handing her a file folder thick with information about her origins.

Adolescence

During adolescence, children firm up their sense of personal identity and begin to assert their independence. Adolescents who are adopted are interested in information about who they are and how they are unique individuals. They reflect on their parents and siblings to determine how they are alike and different from them. They are interested in details about their birth families, including the physical appearance of their birth parents and their ethnic background.

Teenagers may not be sharing their questions about their origins with their parents, and may deny any interest in their birth parents if asked. Teenagers tend to guard their thoughts about themselves, especially from their parents.

Furthermore, adolescence is such a tumultuous time that many teenagers look for simple solutions to their problems. Some may think they would feel more content if they had information about their birth parents, but others may not realize they have concerns about adoption, thinking their life would be perfect if only they had a date for Saturday night, lost 10 pounds, or owned a car.

Parents may find it more effective to discuss adoption with their adolescents if they try to do so impersonally, discussing a hypothetical situation or a character in a movie or book.

They may also find their teenagers more willing to discuss adoption with other adopted teenagers, such as in a support group for adopted teens.

Children's interest in adoption ebbs and peaks within developmental stages. During the early part of a new developmental stage, as their mental ability changes to allow them to view adoption differently, they often have more concerns or questions about adoption.

As they progress through a developmental stage, their ability to understand new aspects of adoption improves, and their need to work through adoption issues may decline until they reach the next stage of development.

This article is based on material in the book *Making Sense of Adoption*. **Lois Melina** is also the author of *Raising Adopted Children* and coauthor of *The Open Adoption Experience*. She has been writing *Adopted Child* newsletter since 1981.

For a free catalog of her materials, write:

Adopted Child Library
Dept. HO
P.O. Box 9362
Moscow ID 83843

(208) 882-1794
FAX (208) 883-8035

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