

# Why children may not want to talk about adoption

By Lois Melina

Parents who learned that it is normal for adopted children to be curious about their origins are sometimes concerned when their children show an apparent lack of interest in the topic.

They may wonder if their child isn't "normal" if they haven't brought up adoption the "right way" or if curiosity about adoption is not as common as they were led to believe.

Different children have varying degrees of curiosity about their adoption or their birth families, but there may be explanations other than lack of interest for why some children do not seem to want to talk about adoption.

Some children talk more than others about adoption because they are more verbal. Parents who are unsure whether their children are fully expressing their interest in their origins might want to look at how their children gather information or express themselves on other topics. Is this a child who talks through a problematic situation or is she more likely to work through issues or express herself through art, music, or movement?

A child who tends to be more intense about expressing her feelings may express more intensity about adoption than a child who is more easy-going.

While all children have some interest in adoption, they may not be interested in adoption at all times. Parents whose children do not seem interested in discussing adoption may want to consider whether they have been approaching their children at times when their children want to talk about it.

Children are more likely to be expressive about their thoughts on adoption if discussions take place at a time when they have questions or concerns or when the subject comes

up naturally, perhaps as the result of a casual comment from a stranger, a television show featuring adoption, or something happening in the family.

This means parents need to be alert for natural, appropriate times to talk about adoption. While parents might be more comfortable talking about adoption in the privacy of their own home, sometimes the natural, appropriate place to discuss adoption is while walking through the shopping mall or driving in the car.

Parents can also overdo discussions of adoption, going into more detail than children need or can handle at that time. When that happens, children may change the subject or walk away. It is one way a child says he is overwhelmed by the information and needs time to process it.

Parents sometimes report that their daughters are more interested in adoption than their sons. While there is little empirical evidence on this question, search groups often say that female adoptees are more commonly involved in searching for birth relatives than male adoptees.

While some might argue that women are simply more curious than men, the more likely explanation is that it is more acceptable for women to express their feelings and vulnerabilities.

While both male and female adoptees may feel they were rejected by their birth mothers when they were placed for adoption, the idea of being rejected by a woman has a different connotation for a male than for a female. As a result, boys may have a more difficult time admitting that they care about their birth mother or expressing an interest in her.

The more parents can do to communicate to their sons that it is all right for them to express their

feelings, to need nurturing, and to be powerless, the more able they may be to express their thoughts about adoption. However, it is important to realize that children receive powerful messages from sources other than their parents about how boys and girls "should" be.

Another reason that some children may not be talking about adoption is that they haven't put their thoughts into words. If asked, *Do you have any questions about adoption?* they are likely to answer that they don't—not because they don't, but because they haven't verbalized them even to themselves. Concrete questions such as, *Have you ever wondered if your birth mother has any other children?* help children put their thoughts into words.

Children may not immediately respond to such questions. They may need to think a while about the issues their parents have raised. In the meantime, they have learned it's okay to have those thoughts and discuss them with their parents.

Sometimes children act disinterested in adoption or their birth parents to hide the hurt they feel. Just as a child might try to act like she doesn't care that she wasn't invited to a friend's party, a child who is feeling abandoned or rejected by her birth parents may try to act as though she doesn't care about them at all.

Similarly, when information about the birth parents or contact with them is impossible, rather than express longing for what they can never have, some children may try to act as though the information or contact isn't important to them.

Some children may be reluctant to discuss adoption with their parents because they perceive the topic makes their parents



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uncomfortable. Some parents may have difficulty discussing adoption because they have unresolved issues that make it difficult to acknowledge they aren't their children's biologic parents. When that is the case, parents may want to work through those issues by discussing them with each other, an adoptive parents' support group, or a therapist.

Sometimes the anxiety that parents feel about discussing adoption is not due to unresolved issues but due to their desire to explain adoption the "right way." So much emphasis has been placed on replacing outmoded ways of talking about adoption with the current acceptable terminology and explanations that parents may be reluctant to speak about adoption spontaneously.

Parents may also be anxious because they want their children to feel good about being adopted and may not be sure how to talk about some aspects of adoption without children feeling hurt.

Language is important, but it is probably better for children to talk about adoption with parents who have true understanding and empathy for their children's adoption experience—even though they may not use all the "right" terms—than with parents who say all the "right" things, but don't understand their own issues or their children's.

Parents should also remember that children are going to sometimes feel sad, angry, and hurt about being adopted. Trying to discuss adoption in ways that only leave children feeling happy and positive about the experience is unrealistic and denies children the right to have and express their emotions. It's unlikely they'll want to discuss adoption with their parents if the message they receive is that they're always supposed to be happy and grateful that they were adopted.

Children will be more likely to enter into conversations with their

parents if they know they will be allowed to have and express their feelings about adoption.

Parents will probably find that their children's interest in adoption ebbs and peaks. During the early part of a new developmental stage, as changes in their mental ability allow children to view adoption differently than they have in the past, they may be more curious about their origins or more confused by their new awareness.

As they become more comfortable with the answers they receive to their questions, and as their ability to understand new aspects of their adoption improves, their need to work through adoption issues may decline until they reach the next stage of development, or they encounter another situation that causes them to re-evaluate what they've learned about being adopted.

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This article is based on an article that first appeared in the August 1991 issue of *Adopted Child* newsletter. Lois Melina is the author of *Raising Adopted Children, Making Sense of Adoption*, and co-author of *The Open Adoption Experience*. She has been writing *Adopted Child* newsletter since 1981.

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