

YOUR CHILD'S STORY: TIPS FROM AN ADOPTIVE PARENT

By Debbie Schugg

The following suggestions come from an adoptive mother of children who have experienced complex trauma. She is also an experienced trainer of both parents and professionals in the areas of adoption and permanency for children who have experienced trauma and loss.

Tips for Talking to Children About Their Story:

- Start early, tailoring what you say to the child's developmental stage.
- Make sure that whatever you say, no matter how simple, is TRUE. You want to be able to build truth upon truth upon truth as your child, your relationship, and the ongoing dialogue mature and grow. Having to retract/replace what you've said earlier undermines trust and leads to feelings of betrayal.
- Remember that if you don't provide an accurate account, to best of your ability at any given stage, the child will come up with her own version, one which usually places the blame on herself and exacerbates her sense of shame.
- Check your own feelings/biases/triggers around the topic area.
- Figure out what it's going to take to get comfortable with the topic. Does that mean talking with other folks who have discussed it with their kids? Practicing with a stuffed animal? With another trusted adult? Role playing with your partner, or social worker, or therapist?
- Give yourself an opportunity to seek out the support to grieve about what your child has endured, so that you can be genuinely present and able to offer comfort to the child.
- If you are uncomfortable saying the "real words" aloud, your body language, facial expression, and tone of voice will convey that to the child. Your discomfort with the topic or distress over what your child has endured is often interpreted by the child as shame, perpetuating his perception that he must be bad if this part of his history is so shameful that it can barely be spoken of.
- It is okay to tell the child that you are sad/angry/whatever about what happened, and that you wish you could have been there to protect her and keep her safe. Reassure her that you are here now and are committed to keeping her safe.
- Take good care of yourself, so that you are able to do the emotionally exhausting work of sitting with a child in his grief, rather than trying to "cheer him up" and rush him through the process.
- Be clear that the things that happened were the responsibility of the adults involved, not the child.



Pathways to
Permanence 2

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Session 6

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In Cases of Sexual Abuse:

- If your child has experienced sexual abuse, be willing to talk about how our bodies are physiologically designed to be aroused, so that even abuse that is scary or painful can sometimes have aspects that feel good. This does not mean it is the child's fault. Children often wrestle with this issue, and get tangled up in a lot of guilt and shame.
- People are often horrified at the idea of making statements about sexual boundaries, and can't imagine why we would need to say such things. Depending on the children's background, however, they may be "holding their breath," waiting for the day they will be abused again. They don't know how things work in your family unless you tell them. This means being explicit about things we may never usually think of saying. Some examples are:

"In this family..."

- We don't hit
- Adults don't have sex with children
- It's the parents' job to keep everyone safe