

# Adoptive Families

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

BY SUSAN SAIDMAN

**I** 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 birth parents 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 birth parents, 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 Priate

This acronym helps children remember that they can choose with whom they want to share personal information, and with whom they don't. 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 birth mother was not able to take care of me."

**IGNORE:** 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 birth parents?" and "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 birth parents.
- They begin to process the fact that their birth parents 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 birth mother 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 birth parents—and could be kidnapped back.

### AND WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

#### Help your child gather what you know about her birth parents.

- Highlight attributes she might share with them: "Your birth mother 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 OK. We all feel sad when we've lost something or someone."
- Show how to express feelings constructively: "It's OK to say you are mad. It's not OK to hit your sister."

#### Don't directly contradict your child's fantasy.

- It is playing an important role in her development.
- Say: "It's OK 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 birth mother'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 will note how we react to comments from strangers and others about adoption. Developing polite and humorous ways of fielding ridiculous comments is a powerful tool to use to manage our own feelings and to model 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 read a book or talk about adoption in your child's class.
- ◆ **donating** picture books about adoption to the school's library.
- ◆ **preparing a program** for teachers or inviting a local agency that has a post-adoption program to come in and talk about how to expand and modify assignments that might be difficult for kids who were adopted.
- ◆ **exploring the resources available at [adoptivefamilies.com](http://adoptivefamilies.com)**, including downloadable school handouts and articles on the school topic 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: "Nothing you did made your birth mother choose adoption." All babies are good, but they need to be taken care of." (Mention some babies you know in the neighborhood as examples.) "Your birth mother 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 birth parents 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 *Despicable Me 2*, *Kung Fu Panda*, or *Superman*.
- ◆ making cards for birth parents on

Mother's Day and Father's Day.

- ◆ collecting pictures of themselves they want their birth parents to see.
- ◆ talking about birth parents, their country/culture/race/background.
- ◆ imagining birth parents, 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 birth parents 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.