

# WHY ADOPTED CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW THEIR STORY

By Angie Johnston, Adult Adoptee and Mother

There is good information available about how and when to talk with your kids about their adoption, and I highly encourage you to read it. But before you do that, let's grapple with the issue of *why* it is important to talk to our children about their adoption in the first place.

The purpose of having open dialogue (appropriate to their age) about adoption is to connect our children with their existence so that they can freely become themselves. To become secretive or afraid or even passive about their adoption dishonors their very being and creates more doubts about the significance of their existence.

Every human being needs to know that he/she matters. There needs to be an experiential knowledge that one's existence on this earth is real and that it is good. From that internal sense and knowledge a child can form the virtue of self-acceptance and develop the all-important ability to give and receive love. For our adopted children, that internal sense about their existence is harder to find. You are probably thinking, "What in the world does all that mean?" Let's break it down:

**A SENSE OF BEING.** This is a sense that most of us take for granted. If we had a mother and father who nurtured us, loved us well, met our needs for affection, and so forth, we probably have a strong sense that: "I am here. I exist. I am alive, and being here is good."

Any number of things can hinder a child from developing a sense of being. Being separated from one's birthmother is just one of many. The degree to which a child has had to escape his/her existence in order to survive is the degree to which that child will need healing of his/her sense of being.

In the movie *The Color Purple*, the main character, Celie, lives a life of being oppressed and abused. The one person she knew loved her, her sister Nettie, was forced away from her life. It took the discovery of the letters her sister had written her during the previous 20 years for Celie to start to heal. She was finally able to realize that her sister still loved her and had not abandoned her. Celie was eventually able to break away from the man who had kept her under his thumb in shame and abuse.

As Celie was driving away from him, he yelled at her, saying that she will never amount to anything. She emphatically yells back in freedom, "I may be all those things you say but I'M HERE and I'M ALIVE!" Celie had lived her entire life with no sense of being and no voice. Her declaration of existence set the stage for her healing and for her to live her story.

When we openly talk with our children about their story—however good or bad—it is because it connects them with their EXISTENCE. When we parents are unafraid of their story—even more, when we are grateful for the way and the person God used to bring



them to life—we honor our children's EXISTENCE. We say to them, "You are real. You are here. You exist." Honoring their story consistently and courageously is one of the primary ways we heal the question of existence that came into their souls when they were separated from their birthparents.

**A SENSE OF WELL-BEING.** This is not to be confused with the former, although one cannot have well-being without having a self to feel well about. A sense of well-being is not only the sense in our self that "I am here," but it is also the sense in our core that being here is good. It is a sense that "I enjoy being alive, and I matter."

## KEY POINTS

Parents who speak with their children in age-appropriate ways give their children the all-important gifts of:

- A Sense of Being
- A Sense of Well-Being
- Self-Acceptance
- The Ability to Give and to Receive Love



Again, the circumstances of one's life and birth speak "life" or "doubt" to our sense of well-being. Every child asks this question about well-being, but our adopted children ask it with more doubt. An adopted child begins to question the goodness of his/her existence when that child discovers that he or she was separated from the one who made space in her womb for the first nine months of the child's existence.

We do not need to be afraid of creating a wound in our children. In fact, when we embrace their story, explore it with them, and speak openly about it, we are bringing healing to our children's doubts about their existence. With time, our children will become less afraid of their wound and freer to grow. If we accept our place in our children's lives as well as the people who gave them life, our children will be more likely to embrace their unique journey.

**SELF-ACCEPTANCE.** It is very difficult, if not impossible, to accept one's self if we do not have a sense of being or well-being. Self-acceptance is being able to freely accept who we are—our strengths and our struggles.

As a mom, I used to think that openly praising my children for anything and everything they did would nurture their self-acceptance. I wish I had learned sooner that children who have a sense of self-acceptance are not overly praised. If anything, over-praising brings a sense of insecurity by creating in our children the need to be constantly affirmed in order to feel okay.

Self-acceptance stems from being rooted in foundational truth: *I do exist on this earth. It is good that I am here. I matter.* Self-acceptance comes from love, nurturing, patience, etc., but it also comes from connecting our children with their story.

**"WHAT I DID NEED  
WAS...TO LOOK AT MY  
PARENTS AND KNOW  
THEY WERE NOT AFRAID  
OF MY STORY"**

Connecting adopted children with their story in appropriate ways from day one is a powerful way to create the kind of soil in the soul in which self-acceptance can grow.

**THE ABILITY TO GIVE AND TO RECEIVE LOVE.** Isn't this skill the foundation of being able to have healthy relationships? (Note: I did not say *perfect* relationships). Isn't this what we ultimately hope for our children?

Two mothers in the last six months have shared with me that the reason they chose to adopt from another

country was that it scared them to have to deal with the biological family. To adopt internationally gave them the security they needed to become a mother to a child who was not physically from them.

Later, those same two women shared with me how they have surprisingly come around to actually grieving, literally crying, over the fact that their little girls will never have the chance to know the women who gave them birth or the stories of how they came to be. I was moved to tears hearing them, knowing the wonderful gift they are now giving to their daughters by not living in fear of their daughters' roots. They never could have imagined that love could have moved them enough to actually want their daughters to know the mothers who gave them life.

We do not need to be afraid of our child's story, no matter how painful it is. We do not need to be afraid of our child's birthmother or birthfather because we fear that we will somehow mean less to our children because we did not give birth to them. We can courageously embrace and connect our child to his/her story knowing this is an act of love and knowing that ultimately it will bring greater security to our relationship with them.

What a gift of love our child's story of adoption is. Enjoy your role as mother or father in giving your child a sense of being, a sense of well-being, a safe place to accept him- or herself, and the ability to give and receive love. This is why we talk with children about their adoption.