

A WALK IN THE PARC

WINTER 2015



The Whole Truth by Rebecca Klein

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Our children's adoption stories aren't always easy. Here are tips for telling the tough stuff to your kids.

One of the toughest problems adoptive parents face is that of talking to our children about the reasons they were placed for adoption. Our families are so happy and loving that we hate to bring up any unpleasant information. So we've pulled together a team of experts to help you talk about the tough stuff with your kids — including how to get the conversation started.

Talking Tips

While you may wish you could protect your children from hard truths, the fact is, they think about their birth families and adoption stories more than you know — and they may imagine scenarios worse than the reality. “Parents think that talking about sad things will make a child sad, but they need to know that home is a safe place where sad feelings

can be talked through,” says Joni Mantell, LCSW, director of the Infertility and Adoption Counseling Center in New Jersey and New York.

The conversation starters below will help you find the words to begin this serious conversation with an elementary-school-age child — when he begins to understand the concepts of adoption and birth parents. You can have your talk anywhere: in the car on an outing together, during story and snuggle time, or whenever your child asks about his adoption.

Experts agree that it's best to reveal details slowly, to tell an age-appropriate story and build on it as your child matures. “Think of it as a pencil sketch to be filled in later,” says Ronny Diamond, MSW, in private practice in New York City, and a consultant for Spence-Chapin. By the time the child is in his early teens, he should know the full story.

“Your child may say, ‘This isn't fair,’ or ‘Why did this happen to me?’” says MaryAnn Curran, vice president of social services and U.S. adoption for the World Association for Children and Parents (WACAP). It's a big deal for a child to know that his birth parents didn't choose to parent him, and he will need time to get used to the idea. Reassure him that you will always take care of him. “One talk is not enough,” says Curran.

Jayne Schooler, coauthor of *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child and Wounded Children, Healing Homes*, adds, “Children are more resilient than we give them credit for.”

Tough Topic: Abandonment

In international adoptions, many documents mention “abandonment” — the legal term for one of the reasons a child would be allowed to leave the country and be adopted, says Diamond.



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But that doesn't make it any easier to explain it to your child.

Whatever the situation, your goal is to tell your child the truth, without painting a negative picture of the birth parents. Steer clear of the word "abandonment" — while it is the legal term used in these situations, infants who are truly abandoned (as opposed to left where they were intended to be found) usually don't survive. Tell your child that she was left in a public place, so that she would be found right away, and, in her country of birth, that is the way a woman must make an adoption plan.

And don't be afraid to talk about feelings. "Children don't just want to know the facts of what happened, they want to know how their birth parents felt," says Mantell. "Using a calm tone, say that the decision was probably heartbreaking for the birth mother, but 'she left you where she knew someone would take care of you and find you a forever family.'

Conversation starter: "Your birth mother was probably very sad because she couldn't raise you, but she knew that the best place for you to be found and taken care of was the marketplace [or hospital, or wherever the child was found]. You were taken right away to the children's home, where adults fed and changed you and helped bring you to us."

Tough Topic: Criminal Behavior

Parents don't like to talk about criminal behavior by a birth parent because they don't want to give a negative impression. They fear the child will think that, if his birth parents were bad, he is bad, too.

"Always talk about good decisions versus bad decisions," says Curran. A birth parent may have made bad choices that put her in prison, but she made a good choice to find a safe home for her child. Children know about breaking rules and getting punished, and will understand their birth parents' story if it's told in this way.

Put the birth parents in the context of their families, if you have family information. For instance, you might explain that the birth mother didn't have parents to help her learn right from wrong, says Diamond. But don't embellish details or make up a story. If you don't know the reason for bad actions, say so: "We don't know why she made these bad choices. But we're so happy she made a good choice to find a safe home for you."

Conversation starter: "When you were a baby, your birth mother had to go to jail. She made a very bad decision and broke a law, so she had to be punished. Do you remember when you broke your sister's doll and had to go to your room? When you're a child and you break a rule, that's how you are punished. But when you're

an adult and you break a law, sometimes you have to go to jail. Your birth mother knew that she couldn't take care of a child in jail, so she made a good decision to have you live in a safe place [or the judge decided you needed to live in a safe place]."

Tough Topic: Poverty

Though poverty seems a simple explanation — the birth parents couldn't afford to provide for the child — it's rarely the only reason for adoption, and it can be scary if it's overemphasized, says Mantell. Poverty can be frightening to children, especially given the images they encounter (in animated movies, people aren't just poor, they're tattered and starving).

"Rather than saying that the parents are living in a mud hut and scrounging for meals, it is better to talk about the things that are free here in the U.S., but which cost so much overseas — things that the birth parents couldn't supply, such as education or health care," says Curran. You can also explain that, in some countries, single mothers and their children don't have many opportunities — like going to school or even getting a government ID card — and the child's birth mother wanted to give him better opportunities than she could provide. For a domestic adoption, explain that the birth mother felt she wasn't able to care for a baby at that time — she didn't have help



The Whole Truth (continued)

from her family or the birth father, or she wasn't working and couldn't provide the things a child would need.

In addition, "Kids may need to talk through the survivor guilt they feel," says Mantell. Children may feel compelled to give to every charity they hear about, or feel guilty about having so many toys. Get them involved in donating to a charity — they may choose one that benefits their birth country — to help them feel proactive.

Conversation starter: "Your birth mother did the best she could, but she didn't have the resources to take care of you. She didn't have anyone to watch you while she worked, and she knew she couldn't provide the things you'd need as you grew up, like going to school or seeing a doctor when you got sick. So she made an adoption plan for you to live with a family who could

provide those things for you."

Child's response: "But why couldn't you just give her money?"

Your response: "That sounds like a very good idea, and it's good thinking on your part, but it doesn't work that way. We didn't know your birth mother, and she made this decision to have someone else raise you, because she felt it would give you a better life. We wanted to adopt a baby, and we were told about you. But we do give money to help people in Guatemala, and we hope that we can help many families that way."

Tough Topic: Birth Siblings

How can you tell your child that his birth mother had another child whom she's raising? Surprisingly, most kids take this news very well. "Parents are afraid that the child will feel rejected because another sibling was 'kept' or came afterward," says Mantell. "But when

the idea is put out there early, rather than as a surprise, it gives them time to process it as part of the big picture." The earlier you bring up the issue of birth siblings, the more easily kids accept the information. And later on, they will probably be more at ease connecting with birth siblings than with birth parents.

When you tell your preschooler his adoption story, mention that there are other children. He won't understand that these children are his birth siblings until at least age five or six. When you retell the story when he's that age, add more details. Focus on the circumstances in the birth mother's life at that time — maybe the other children's birth fathers were involved, or the other children were older and more independent. Be clear that the birth mother couldn't care for any new child at that time.

Let It
SNOW



The Whole Truth (continued)

Conversation starter: “When you were born, your birth mother had two older boys. Those boys were in school and could take care of some things for themselves, but a baby needs much more care. Your birth mom knew she couldn’t care for a baby at that time in her life. So she made a plan to find a family who would be able to take care of you forever.”

Tough Topic: Drug or Alcohol Abuse

Kids usually learn about drugs and alcohol in elementary school, so it’s not too early to talk about addiction. In fact, you can use their school lessons to guide the conversation. Again, you want to frame your talk in terms of bad decisions and good decisions — not bad people and good people, says Schooler.

Before your child enters middle school, have this conversation again, and this time let him know that addictions are often genetic. Trying drugs or alcohol may be more dangerous for him than for other kids. Giving your child this information before he has to deal with the peer pressure of the tween and teen years will help him make good choices.

Conversation starter: “Your birth mother made some bad choices in her life that stopped her from creating a safe home for you. Do you remember learning about drugs in school? Your birth mother thought that

taking drugs would make her feel better, but it actually made it impossible for her to take care of you. So then she made a good choice to find a safe place for you to live.”

Tough Topic: Physical Abuse or Neglect

When a child has a visible scar or remembers being hurt, parents must talk about abuse. Even if your child was abused as a baby, it’s still important that you talk about it with him. Many children have a strong pre-verbal memory of abuse or neglect — a child may be afraid to be alone, or afraid of small spaces, and not know why. “Kids have unfocused memories of fear or anger, and you must anchor those memories in something concrete. Parents do a huge service for their child when they help him make sense of his life,” says Curran.

Children — even older kids who remember abuse — may fear that they did something wrong that triggered the birth parent’s anger. “Tell them that it’s always a grown-up problem, and never because something was wrong with the child,” says Mantell.

Conversation starter: “Your birth mom never learned to be a good parent. Sometimes she hit you when she got angry — not because you did anything wrong, but because she didn’t know how to control her temper. You were just a little baby, and you got hurt. I know this

sounds terrible, but your birth mom made a really good decision [or a judge made a really good decision] to make you part of a forever family, where you would be safe.”

Resources to Learn More About This Topic

Websites:

www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/sharing-difficult-adoption-stories/

http://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/documents/nca_adoption_advocate_no42.pdf

<https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/talking-about-adoption-with-children/>

PARC Adoption Library

Books

[Questions Adoptees Are Asking](#) by Sherri Eldridge

[All About Adoption: How to Deal with Questions of Your Past](#) by Anne Lanchon

[Why Didn’t She Keep Me](#) by Barbara Burlingham-Brown

DVDs

Adopted

Closure

Approved for Adoption: An Animated Memoir
Somewhere Between



SPOTLIGHT on PARC Families

Knutson Family

An elementary/middle school teacher with a degree in school counseling, Sara Knutson had much to offer children beyond the classroom. Her awareness of the need for safe homes led her to become a foster mother. And fostering led her to adoption.

Sara's well-adjusted, healthy children are son DeJon, now age 6, whom she adopted after caring for him since he was 6 months old, and daughter Alicia, now age 2, who came at age 7 weeks. DeJon is "an amazing athlete with a personality that lights up a room." An active toddler, Alicia is fascinated with animals, especially the neighborhood pet dogs. The close bond between this sweet brother and sister pair is obvious to all who meet them. Sara says, "I am so grateful to have such an amazing family. I feel that we were meant to be together."

Their family circle includes Tony, Sara's friend and colleague who has evolved into the role of the children's father. When Sara told Tony of her plans to foster, he encouraged and supported her at every step of the journey. Sara says of him, "Tony is an excellent role-model and father figure to both my children."

The road to establishing her family was not always smooth. Sara explains, "Fostering DeJon was an emotional roller-coaster. The week before a court appearance, the social workers wanted to take him out of state to visit his biological

mom. Nobody had considered the effect this would have on a 2 ½ -year-old who had never been separated from his foster mom. He was to ride with a stranger and to spend 5 nights in a brand new environment." (Ironically DeJon became too ill to travel, the birth mother's whereabouts were later unknown, and a Termination of Parental Rights was filed.)

Sara understands the importance of family visits, but she questions the wisdom of putting foster children into unhealthy situations. She says that after these experiences, she did not have the emotional strength to work with the foster care system again. However, because DeJon expressed a desire to have other children in the house, she decided to accept emergency placements. "Of course we fell in love with Alicia shortly after she arrived. Her family abandoned her, so the process to adopt was relatively drama free."

Sara is committed to keeping DeJon and Alicia in contact with their birth families. DeJon sees his biological siblings and parents often. The Knutsons travel to Chicago every month for visits with Alicia's older siblings and their foster families.

Sara's background in working with minority youth, and the friendships she has developed in the African American community (especially with Tony) have been her most valuable supports for raising her children. She appreciates the activities offered through Post Adoption Resources that help her children to feel special; it also gives them a



*"I am so grateful to have such an amazing family. I feel that we were meant to be together."
-Sara Knutson, adoptive mom*

chance to meet other children who are adopted.

Sara thanks the members of Congress for the Adoption Tax Credit which has been "extremely helpful" in supplementing daycare expenses. She respectfully asks legislators to revisit length of stay policies in foster care, paying special attention to what languishing in foster care means for a child's development. Sara stresses that when it is apparent that biological parents are not a safe place or are not making a diligent effort to make a safe home for their children, "birth parents should not get years of chances, and foster care should not be a life sentence."

Taken from the **2015 VOICE FOR ADOPTION: ADOPTIVE FAMILY PORTRAIT PROJECT**. Please visit: <http://www.voice-for-adoption.org> for more information.

SPOTLIGHT on PARC Families (continued)

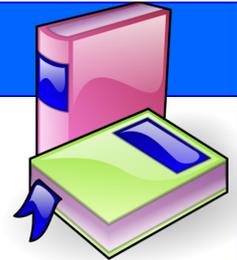
PARC Family Recommendation

Email from a PARC family:

"I wanted to suggest a training for foster parents/families (children are welcome). Scholarships are available for participants. The 27th Annual Children Come First Conference will be held at Glacier Canyon Lodge at Wilderness Resort, Wisconsin Dells, WI, November 16 to 17, 2016 and November 13-15, 2017 also at Glacier Canyon Lodge.

This year was the first time I had attended this conference. I am looking forward to attending it again next year. I was able to meet social workers, foster parents, parents, teachers and other special needs workers. Examples of sessions I attended included: "Meaningful Use of CANS Trauma Assessments with Youth and Families (by Eve Altizer, LCSW, Waukesha County Health and Human Services & Rebecca Hollister, MS); "Social Emotional Learning Differences" (by Jen Townsend, Educational Consultant, Elmbrook School District); "Don't Forget to Include Me: Remembering the Siblings" (by Chris Bivins, Child Life Specialist); "Identifying Pediatric Mental Health Community Resources" (by Naomi Westerman Outreach Specialist, WISMHI & Molly McGregor CAPSW, Outreach Specialist for WISMHI)."

PARC Adoption Library



The PARC Adoption Library has moved to 702 S. High Point Rd., Suite 105, Madison. Come and visit PARC's spacious new library with many books, magazines and DVDs on a wide array of adoption topics such as attachment, trauma, special needs and school issues. Materials may be checked out for up to one month.

A complete list of resources can be found on the PARC webpage at www.parcsonthernwi.org.

FEATURED RESOURCES

Are We There Yet? The Ultimate Road Trip: Adopting and Raising 22 Kids!

by Hector and Sue Badeau

Sue was the keynote speaker at "A Place in My Heart Conference" in November.

Help for Billy by Heather Forbes

A Beyond Consequences Approach to Helping Challenging Children in the Classroom.

The Connected Child by Karyn Purvis & David Cross

For parents who have welcomed children from other countries and cultures, from troubled backgrounds and with special behavioral or emotional needs.

IEP: Understanding the Process

By Cheri Sylla and Carlene Chavez, WSPEI Family Engagement Coordinators
Resources and materials from the IEP Workshop offered in October.

AROUND THE PARC

Upcoming Adoption Training and Events

Mom's Night Out

Tuesday, January 12, 2016

6:30pm - 8:00pm

Great Dane Restaurant

876 Jupiter Drive, Madison

Join PARC for an evening connecting with other adoptive moms. Open to all pre and post adoptive moms. RSVP to Judi at postadoption@ccmadison.org (608) 826-8009 or (800) 236-4673 Toll-Free

Teen Bowling

Tuesday, February 9, 2016

5:30pm – 7:00pm

Dream Lanes

13 Atlas Court, Madison

Join PARC for an evening of pizza, pop and pins! An opportunity for adoptive teens to socialize. Bowling, pizza and soda will be provided. Open to adoptive teens ages 12 to 17. Cost: \$2/person

RSVP to Judi at postadoption@ccmadison.org (608) 826-8009 or (800) 236-4673 Toll-Free

FACE-Kids Adoptee Group

Thursdays, January 28th - March 17th

4:30pm - 5:30pm

(8 group sessions)

Family Service Madison

128 E. Olin Avenue, Madison

This group is free, and open to ***trans-racial international adoptees*** ages 12-17. For more information, pre-screening and registration, email Cameron Small at camerons@fsmad.org with your telephone number and the best time to contact you.

Sensory Sensitive Parenting

The Parent/Child Relationship - The Key to Helping a Child Regulate

Tuesday, January 19, 2016; 6pm - 8pm

Regulate Yourself to Regulate Your Child - Parent Sensory Self-Care

Tuesday, January 26, 2016; 6pm – 8pm

Playing and Regulating Together

Tuesday, February 2, 2016; 6pm - 8pm

Children's Therapy Network
14 Ellis Potter Ct #200, Madison

These trainings are great for families who have some concerns for their child and are looking for initial strategies, those who are already in individual treatment, and those wanting to learn more while waiting for individual services.

For more information and to register:

info@ctn-madison.com
<https://www.ctn-madison.com>.
(608) 234-5990

Adoptive Families Fun Night

Wednesday, March 2, 2015

5:00pm - 8:00pm

Madison Children's Museum

100 N. Hamilton Street, Madison

Join PARC for a family fun night at the Madison Children's Museum. A great opportunity to meet and spend time with other adoptive families. Open to all pre and post adoptive and foster families.

Event is FREE.

RSVP to Judi at postadoption@ccmadison.org (608) 826-8009 or (800) 236-4673 Toll-Free

AROUND THE PARC

Upcoming Adoption Training and Events

Red Thread Learning Seminar Schedule

Saturday, February 13 – Issues Affecting Child Development

- 9:00am - 3:00pm
- Nature/Nurture (morning); Promoting Attachment (afternoon)
- \$60/person for entire day, or \$35/person for just morning or just afternoon

Saturday, April 2 – Navigating Life As a Family

- 9:00am - 3:00pm
- Grief & Loss in Adoptive Families (morning); Being a Non-Traditional or Transracial Family (afternoon)
- \$60/person for entire day, or \$35/person for just morning or just afternoon

Saturday, April 23 – Talking With Kids About Adoption (includes discussion of making and using lifebooks)

- 9:00am - 12:00pm
- \$35/person

Support Group (for families experiencing challenging behaviors)

- Saturday, January 30, 10:00am - 12:00pm
- Saturday, April 9, 10:00am - 12:00pm
- We meet at Yola's Café (www.yolascafe.com)
- RSVP is required

To register, please email Lori DuRussel at lori@redthreadlearning.com. More information is also available at Red Thread Learning's website (www.redthreadlearning.com).

Knit Together Support Group

Saturday, January 16, 2016
5:30pm - 7:30pm
St. Dennis Catholic Church
505 Dempsey Road, Madison

A get-together for adoptive families to meet and share a meal. More information about the meal to follow.

Each family is asked to chip in \$5.

For more information and to RSVP:
knit-together@hotmail.com

COMING SOON

W.I.S.E. Up! Training

When it comes to handling questions and comments about adoption and foster care, kids need to be empowered with answers.

W.I.S.E.Up! gives children and teens the power to choose how to talk about their story.

The Post Adoption Resource Centers in Wisconsin will be offering this training at various locations in the state.
Stay tuned for more details!

AROUND THE PARC

Upcoming Adoption Webinars

Strengthening Your Family Webinar Search and Reunion in International Adoption

Tuesday, January 26, 2016
1:00pm - 2:30pm (Eastern Time)

Amanda Baden will address how, in the day and age of social media and advanced technology, families manage cultural differences and long-distance relationships, and how they can integrate these new relationships into relationships with their adoptive families.

For more information and to register:
<http://adoptionsupport.org/>

Ask the Expert: Answers to the Five Most Common Adopted Teen Parenting Challenges

Thursday, February 18, 2016
1:00pm - 2:30pm (Eastern Time)

Debbie Riley will focus on the following 5 areas of greatest concern: relationships with birth family in open adoption/search and reunion; handling risky behavior; getting help for serious mental health concerns; changing family relationships; and supporting positive identity development. We invite you to submit your questions ahead of the webinar at burke@adoptionsupport.org.

For more information and to register:
<http://adoptionsupport.org/>

Parent to Parent: Addressing Trauma-Based Behaviors to Promote Attachment

Thursday, March 17, 2016
1:00pm - 2:30pm (Eastern Time)

Debbie Schugg will discuss how approaching frustrating behaviors with curiosity and compassion can lead to better outcomes, greater healing, and more peace in the home. She will share strategies for interpreting behaviors, identifying the unmet needs which drive them, prioritizing the parent-child relationship, and recognizing the role of self-care in being emotionally present with our children.

For more information and to register:
<http://adoptionsupport.org/>

Post Adoption Resource Center (PARC) of Southern Wisconsin

We've Moved!!

Catholic Charities Madison
702 S. High Point Road, Suite 105
Madison WI 53719
(608) 826-8009 | (800) 236-4673 Toll-Free
postadoption@ccmadison.org

Like us on Facebook - Search for Post Adoption Resource Center of Southern Wisconsin
Visit PARC's website: www.parcsothernwi.org for current adoption information.

