

HOW CHILDREN UNDERSTAND ADOPTION

What Children Understand at Different Ages

All children are different and what a child wants to know about their life story at different stages in their development will be unique to them. There are however cognitive stages of development that can give an indication of what a child can understand at key ages.

BABIES AND TODDLERS 0 - 4

Very young children have no understanding of adoption. However if parents talk about it from the start e.g. a favourite bedtime story, they will become more confident about the subject and young children will pick up the positive value their parents place on the words long before they know what adoption means. A comfortable atmosphere is created around the subject.

Keep your story brief, simple and accurate Basic Information about why birth mother and birth father's "weren't able to look after you" or "couldn't keep you safe". Use their life story book to point out pictures to help explain about birth mother/tummy mummy, birth father and any siblings.

Using basic explanations about how you look after them, i.e. making sure they have breakfast, lunch and dinner, playing with them and keeping them safe, will lay foundations for future explanations. Children placed trans-racially become aware and the social values placed on skin colour before they can talk properly. They are sensitive to people's reactions to them long before words have meaning.

3-4 year olds do not understand the difference between birth and adoption although some express sadness that they didn't "come out of your tummy". That it something good that they would have liked to have happened because it means being close to you.

STARTING SCHOOL 4 - 6

At this age children start to ask more questions. They enter the "why" phase. Children will start to ask "why" birth parents couldn't look after them or "why they couldn't keep them safe".

This can often be the age when more difficulties occur if children are battling with unresolved information gaps.

This is because children reach a new cognitive phase, the intuitive thought stage, where reasoning develops. They start thinking through why they couldn't live with their birth family, especially if they remember them.

Children of this age know more about the birth process and are usually interested in babies and genitals! They- ask "why" repeatedly but still do not understand the difference between birth and adoption. Some believe everyone is adopted. They can mislead you with apparent "understanding" by repeating what you have said. Children who do not remember a birth family or foster carer may not have as many questions at this age.

School introduces them to other people's reactions. By 6, children know to which racial group they belong, and that some people are valued more than others. Children of this age are not particularly concerned about adoption but they play out a lot of fantasy games and use 'magical thinking'.

Keep the adoption story simple, concrete and be specific e.g. "your first family couldn't look after you so you lived with (carer's names) and then came to live with us when you were 2 years old".

MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS 6 – 12

6-8 years. Children begin to differentiate between birth and adoption as ways of entering a family. They accept adoption as a permanent state without understanding why – they accept things because 'Mummy and Daddy said so'. They begin to wonder why the birth family 'couldn't keep them' and can accept concrete explanations e.g. 'they didn't know how to look after you'.

At this age children's thought processes become more logical and adult like. Children develop the ability to understand a perspective other than their own. Children become better able to understand concepts such as why birth parents may have taken substances, or may not have been able to parent effectively as they were not taught parenting skills by their own parents. The ability to understand this however is not fully developed until teenage years.

8-10 years. A time for gathering information and solving problems! Children understand by now the difference between birth and adoption, and may begin to doubt the permanence of all relationships. Children of this age can understand simple explanations of drugs, alcohol and

violence especially if they have experienced them in their earlier years and have a frame of reference.

It can be a disturbing time for adopted children as they realise that social situations change, e.g. if a mother was 'not good' at looking after a child, is she more able now? If she was too young to look after a baby, can she look after you now you are both older? This can lead to thoughts of 'will she come back to get me?'

8-10 year olds need to be reassured 'she may be better now but you are going to stay part of our family and that birth families at the stage in their lives when the child left probably couldn't have cared for any child, not just him or her. Children sometimes become withdrawn, depressed or angry at home and school. They realise that to have gained their adoptive family they had to lose their first family, and they need to mourn these losses.

This stage of development is called ADAPTIVE GREIVING. It can involve anger, denial and despair about the past. Some children do not want to talk about adoption when they are sad; others find it helpful to have their sadness recognised for what it is.

10-12 years. An understanding of the social problems which lead to adoption becomes more sophisticated (e.g. lack of support, infertility). Children are more confident that things will stay as they are, i.e. they will remain in the adoptive family, and have some idea of the role of social workers and the courts in their placement. They can discuss why their parents decided to adopt and understand that children need different sorts of care – not all needs are as 'concrete' as having enough food and somewhere to live.

THE TEENAGE YEARS

WHO AM I?

When children reach adolescence many want more information about their life story. They may want specifics about why decisions were made and why they couldn't live with birth family. Many children can understand and manage this information if it is provided sensitively.

Teenagers need facts and it worth writing to the placement agency to see if there is any more up-dated information on the birth relatives to help at this stage. Without facts teenagers may fantasise or idealise their 'other parents'.

Many ask for photographs and are obsessed by what they look like and whom they resemble. They need as real a picture of their first family as you can obtain. They may idealise or rubbish these details in the same way as they may accept or criticise you.

Some teenagers try to assume their birth parents identities (their hobbies, interests, talents) and appear to reject all you stand for. It is an age of confusion and turmoil for most adolescents and adopted youngsters struggle to make sense of having two families. Many have to grieve the loss of their first 'identity' and emphasise with the distress of their first families as they become more aware of the complexity and sadness involved in family breakdown. The loss of racial/cultural identity for some trans-racially placed youngsters is acute. Some reasons for adoption (e.g. incest, rape) will always be hard to share. The 'right' time will depend on the young person's maturity and your own level of comfort in talking about the facts openly.

BE CLEAR ABOUT THE FACTS, OFFER SUPPORT IN SEEKING MORE INFORMATION, BE PREPARED TO TALK ABOUT ADOPTION. ALLOW YOUNG PEOPLE TO MOURN THEIR LOSSES AND ABOVE ALL, HOLD ON TO YOUR BELIEF IN YOURSELVES AS PARENTS.

AWKWARD QUESTIONS

Children rarely ask questions when you expect them or are feeling prepared. Therefore it is sensible to think through some probable questions and answers before they arise. What you say will depend upon the age of the child - long explanations are rarely necessary. Children will listen to and accept what they need to know, so don't be surprised if they don't remember all the facts you gave them - remember it is similar to understanding the 'facts of life' for them. Some children never ask questions, or in a family of adopted children, one may want to know and another never query. This does not mean that they are disinterested. Raising the topic at suitable times and feeding them some information opens up the chance for them to discuss it if they wish. If they sense you are not comfortable with the facts they may feel awkward about asking and not wish to hurt you. Do not force the topic on them but give it regular airings and use opportunities which may occur, such as birthdays, TV programmes, pregnancies, etc.

Each adoption is different. The answers below to common questions are merely suggestions and should be adapted to you to suit your child and his or her circumstances, especially as more open adoptions develop.

Q. "My friend says you're not my real mum? I did come out of your tummy didn't I?"

You were born out of somebody else's tummy and she is your birth mother who loved you and wasn't able to look after you. A mother is also the person who looks after, and loves you, usually from when you were a tiny baby and that's a very real mum.

Q. "Why couldn't my mum and/or dad keep me?"

She/he found it really difficult (she or he was too young/found it hard to look after herself or himself/didn't have much support/couldn't take care of any baby) at that time of their lives. This will be dependent on each child's particular background.

Q "How will I know if my mum/dad/grandparent is dead?"

It must be hard for you not to know but if you'd like to find out about this we can ask the adoption team who placed you with us or try and find out. Death certificates can be obtained from St Catherine's House in London (you can impart this information to your child if you feel s/he is ready to hear it). If you are having letterbox contact with the birth family, your agreement specifies whether you would want to know about the death of any birth family member.

Q "Suppose my mum/dad need me?"

We won't know that and that's sad for you, but when you came to live with us they knew they wouldn't be able to tell you that.

Q "Can they find me?"

They cannot look for you while you are a child, or take you away from us. You will always have us as your adopted family (when you are grown up they may look for you, or you can look for them and we will help you).

Q "Can I find them?"

Yes, when you are older and able to understand more about your birth family and why you were adopted. You can look for them should you want to and we will help you (only say this if you honestly feel you could support contact).

Q "Why can't I see them now?"

A judge decided that you could not live with your birth family (explanations will be age dependant) and you were placed into our family and adopted. When you are older we will help you to find them if this is something that you want to do.

HALF OR REAL SIBLINGS AND UNRELATED SIBLINGS

Children should always be told of their exact relationship to each other from the beginning if adopted children in a family are unrelated then there is no reason to over-emphasise the fact, but they need to be aware that families are made up in different ways and they have different birth parents.

If the family is a mixture of related and unrelated children then it is very important that these relationships are understood from the outset, this will of course by depend on the age of the child at adoption – again be careful not to over-emphasise it, but avoid any deception so that it simply becomes another fact of life and not a sudden shock at a later stage.

For complex background situations see Lois Ruskai Melina's 'Making Sense of Adoption' (published by Harper Row). Chapter 6 deals with explaining difficult and painful family histories and the whole book is an excellent guide to exploring and explaining the facts of adoption and also the 'Difficult Stories' handout.