Answering Your Child’s Adoption Questions

By: Pattye Hicks, MA, Director of Post Adoption Services
Billy loves playing with his building blocks. He stacks a few and then knocks them over….they all come toppling down. After much practice, Billy builds a house and later a skyscraper. It all began one block stacked atop another.

We can all remember playing with building blocks as children – stacking the blocks to make something simple and then something much more complex the older we became. The simple approach of building blocks is helpful when explaining their adoption story to your children. Information can be introduced one “block” at a time, giving your children the opportunity to receive information gradually over time. With this approach, parents begin building a foundation of trust and creating the structure in which their child will learn about adoption and about their own adoption story.

A child’s understanding of adoption is an ongoing process. Parents cannot tell their child his/her “adoption story” and never talk about it again. What children understand at the age of 4 is different than what they understand at the age of 14. When a child asks questions, adoptive parents must remember their child’s age, the developmental stage of their child and what to expect in each stage.

For instance, when a young child asks, “where did I come from?”, he/she is not asking for a lengthy explanation. Instead, adoptive parents could reply with a simple answer “you were born in San Antonio.”

It is okay for adoptive parents to not know the answer to their child's questions; however they should reply honestly. For example, a school-age child might ask, “What does my birth mother look like?” If a parent did not have the opportunity to meet and get to know the birth mother, it’s okay to say something like, “I am not sure, but I have no doubt that she looks a lot like you.”
There are 4 developmental stages that influence the questions a child will ask related to adoption. These stages are infancy, preschool years, school-age years and adolescence.

**THE ADOPTION STORY DURING INFANCY:**

Obviously, infants understand little about adoption. But during this stage of development, parents can begin to use the term adoption around their infant. While holding and loving the baby, parents can begin to say “We are so happy that we adopted you and that you are a part of our family.” Although the infant cannot understand the words, the child can absorb the positive feelings when the parents are sharing the adoption story.

Some professionals, such as psychotherapist Karen Benjack of Atlanta, GA. believe that adoptive parents can gain comfort and confidence by talking to their child about adoption as well as practice their responses to inevitable questions. Benjack says “it’s during the infancy stage as the baby sleeps and coos, that parents must begin to develop and adoption philosophy.” This philosophy frames how a family will acknowledge and face their child’s adoption questions.

Pat Johnston, author, educator, and adoptive parent, says it is a good idea for parents to practice; however the approach is not foolproof. “Don’t expect your child, even as old as school-age to have complete understanding…… it’s repetitive jargon to them. Many parents think they’re doing such a good job, but then become shocked by how little their child really understands. Parents still need to start early. If they don’t practice, they’re entirely too nervous and children pick up on it.”

Practicing helps adoptive parents become more comfortable with adoption issues. Most adoptees report that they cannot remember when they were told that they were adopted. Most of their parents began telling them during the infancy stage.
There are those who will disagree with this approach. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse notes that some adoption experts believe that infants do not need to hear statements about adoption, and that these verbal statements only harm parent’s feelings of entitlement. Instead, parents should focus on the infant developing a sense of trust.

As with all parenting decision, it is important that parents take the approach that is most comfortable to them.

**PRESCHOOLERS ASK SIMPLE, DIRECT QUESTIONS:**

A preschooler’s understanding of adoption is as developmental as walking and talking – their understanding hasn’t fully developed. As they develop physically and intellectually, a child’s questions will range from simple to complex.

While in preschool, a child often becomes aware of pregnant women, causing them to begin questioning their own birth. They wonder, “did I grow in Mommy’s tummy?” Their question should be answered simply, “No. You didn’t grow in Mommy’s tummy, but I wish you did. You grew in your Betsy’s tummy. And we love you very much and are so excited that you are a part of our family.”

During this stage, professionals have noticed a trend. Many parents begin the telling of the “adoption story” at the child’s placement, some preschoolers assume that they were either born or adopted. It is important to help children understand that they were born first and then adopted. Parents can tell them that all children are born in the same way. A child may ask directly, “Was I born or adopted?” Adoptive parents should answer, “You were born first and then we adopted you. You were born in a hospital like all of your friends. After your birth, your sweet birth mother chose an adoption plan for you. We adopted you because she ____________ (give the reason). She loved you very much.”
Books are an excellent resource when explaining adoption to a preschooler. Adoption related books and the child’s life book are effective tools. Both allow for increased communication and understanding between adoptive parent and child. We know that children enjoy having books read to them. Story time is a great opportunity to include the readying of some adoption-related books.

A life-book is much like a scrapbook, where the family records special people and events in the child’s life. The book might include photos of birth family members, the family before the child’s adoption, the placement day, holidays, birthdays, etc. Having a life book helps the parent tell a child about his/her adoption simply, truthfully and accurately. Benjack says the book “conveys to the child that he/ she was expected and planned for and well loved.” Some children, who were adopted at an older age, may like to create their own books and choose important events, people and places to include. Children of preschool age want to hear about themselves. They love to hear their own story. What a better way to help them understand about adoption then to have their own book.

**SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN FOCUS ON DETAILS:**

School age children strive to understand more and know more about their adoption. Their questions may include: “Why was I adopted?” “Who do I look like?”

During the school-age years, an adopted child centers on these core issues; however, the child is not preoccupied by the issue of adoption. Some adoptive parents assume that their child gets up every day thinking, “I am adopted!” It is just not so. Children have way too many other interests and activities.
A child in this age group often does not want their adoption discussed freely with others and parents should respect their child’s wishes. In any event, parents should never share details about their child’s adoption and birth parents outside of the immediate family. It is best that other family members don’t know something about their child that the child doesn’t even know.

As an adopted child enters school, many face their first harmful comments. Role playing is essential to preparing a child for such encounters. For example a friend may say “She’s not your real mother!” After coaching, the adopted child is ready to reply with “Yes, she is and she is waiting on me to get home from school”.

Often, the school-age is the first time parents, particularly mothers, may hear the statement, “You are not my real mother, so why do I have to do this?” Adoptive parents should not take this statement personally but can diffuse the situation at its first opportunity. The child is merely trying to push “buttons”. Instead of reacting, Mom can respond, “I look very real to me.”

**ADOLESCENTS SEEK ANSWERS RELATING TO IDENTITY:**

During the teen years, a young person faces may physical and emotional changes. It’s a time when adolescents are struggling with their own identity. When combined with adoption issues, the question “Who am I?” is crucial.

Adopted teenagers sometimes yearn for the truth. They need to know all of the available information about their birth and adoption. At this stage, all papers, names of places, pictures and events should be shared. If the information is not shared, Johnston says “parents risk their teenager feeling betrayed and the teenager considering their parents not trustworthy.”
When difficult truths are conveyed in a loving and supportive manner, teenagers cope well and without trauma. Typically, they are pleased to start filling in the gaps through knowledge.

The Gladney Center’s Post Adoption Department can also help. Many teens and their parents tour the campus and visit the adoption museum. A trip to Fort Worth is a wonderful tool, especially if the teenager has not had contact with their birth parent. Often it’s beneficial for them to tour the campus in which they can read the stories of birth parents and learn their personal stories.

Obviously, adoptive parents want their child to feel good about adoption. To be successful, adoption discussions don’t need to occur with scheduled frequency: however, it’s essential that parents encourage adoption communication throughout their child’s various stages of development. This exchange allows children the opportunity to ask questions and parents to provide facts.

By introducing information little by little – stacking blocks one atop another- children are likely to better understand difficult adoption ideas.

*Billy started with a mere foundation and finished with a complex structure. The approach is simple: one day at a time, one question at a time, one “block” at a time.*