

Responding to the concerns of the adopted child

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News

A parent writes, our eight year old daughter has been raised with the knowledge of her adoption. Upon the advice of professionals, we read books to her, answered her questions as truthfully as possible, and granted her request to meet her birth mother. This meeting has left her with many mixed feelings about the adoption which were not present beforehand. She is now expressing that she “misses” her birth mother and has started to deny that we are her “real parents.” What do we do?

Adoption stirs a child’s emotions and thoughts depending upon the strength of three key elements: age, personality, and environment. Certain stages of child development may cast a shadow over the fact of adoption, especially if circumstances contribute. Armed with the best intentions, some parents who pursue a policy of open disclosure may find their child uncomfortable with the knowledge they gain. It’s as if the child can’t find a way to fit the intellectual meaning of adoption into their emotional frame of reference. The younger the child, the more information is emotionally filtered, sometimes leading to unintended consequences. The results can include intense feelings of sadness or anger, perceptions of having been rejected, or stormy relationships within the family.

Adoption can be likened to a developmental task that children must assimilate into their evolving self-concept. Since the importance of self-concept ebbs and flows throughout childhood, attitudes and emotions surrounding the adoption issue tends to reflect those changes. Here are some coaching tips to consider when understanding and approaching this sensitive issue.

Consider the child’s emotional capacity to deal with the impact of information before imparting it. Parents are often urged to reveal the facts of adoption when children are quite young. In most cases this early awareness is offered in a loving and positive way, blending well with the child’s emotional state. A meeting between an older child and birth parent has the potential for very different consequences. Such contact can immediately intensify dormant feelings and push the reality of one’s adoption to a higher state of consciousness. Since it is not possible to predict which child would be susceptible to such reactions parents should exercise caution with children until they reach middle to late adolescence.

By explaining how attachments form parents can help children begin to distinguish between imagination and reality with respect to adoption. When a child speaks of “missing” a biological parent this might be her way of talking about the musings surrounding adoption. Help her move beyond this sticking point by reviewing how attachments to other people are formed through continued contact, such as with a teacher or coach. Parents may suggest, ‘Missing feelings’ come usually only after a lot of time together. Maybe what you’re doing is wondering about what would have happened if you weren’t adopted?’ After giving the child ample time to share her thoughts, parents can offer their own feelings of pleasure that she was adopted.

Children may refer to adoption to assert their will or as a smoke screen to hide some feelings they may be unable or unwilling to share directly. All children go through difficult periods and the adoption may play a part in those periods, or it may not. When children express negative emotions through the context of adoption parents are wise to listen carefully and reinforce the reality of their love and devotion. Pay careful attention to timing and your child’s word choice before determining whether the issue is really about adoption, or some other frustration that is embedded within the discussion. Try not to get baited into defending your rights as a parent. Suggest that when adoption comes up at times of anger it makes it hard to solve other problems, such as cooperation or what they see as unfairness. You may suggest, “Is this really about adoption or is it about what just happened and how you’re not very happy about it?”

Prepare for some of the possible social and emotional fall-out that adoption may occasion. Despite parents best efforts, adopted children may face teasing or other forms of social harassment because peers have learned of their status. Similarly, identity or self-esteem concerns may arise, either in adolescence or perhaps before that period. Parents are wise to consult with qualified professionals should such matters pose protracted problems for their children.

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