

Talking To Children About Their Birthparents: How To Handle Difficult Questions and Address Sensitive Issues



Can you tell me about them?

This is a part of the natural drive of all children to try to unearth what makes them tick. It is a normal part of development, and information you can provide them (in an age appropriate way) will make their process easier. While they are young and inquisitive, and have their trust in you for helping them to shape many of their world views, you are in the best position to address sensitive information about their birthparents. This is a position that will only last for a brief number of years. You can help your children to understand where they came from and be available to help them to frame and process the information in the most positive manner. Even if the information you have is not entirely

pleasant and you feel like you want to shield your children from it, it is important that you share what you know in an age appropriate manner, and then remain open with your children so that you can help to frame the information in a manner they can understand and place it in the most positive light for them. Growing up is confusing enough. Open and informative discussions are important for the development of their senses of self. Whether the information in your children's backgrounds is good, bad, or undisclosed, you can help to guide them through the process of discovering where they came from in a way that no one else can.

Difficult Answers

If children do not know the answers, their imagination will fill in the blanks.

If there is information that you do not want to divulge to them about their birthparents, know that your children will discover the information for themselves at some point during their lives. Not telling the whole truth usually backfires. Furthermore, it is important to remember that children are incredibly intuitive. The perception that their parents are "hiding" information from them might just increase their anxieties, intensify their fears about what the truth could be, and result in the creation of scary fantasies that are often much worse than the truth.

Before telling them the information, gather what parts are facts and what is speculation. Where did the information come from? Were they biased or did they add their own value judgments to the story? Also, check your own judgments because they will be passed on to your child through verbal cues: your tone, choice of words, nonverbal cues-body position, facial expressions, etc.

Children pick up on these cues, interpreting the information, their birth heritage, and ultimately themselves. Even though your motivation to withhold information comes from a place of protection, that explanation will not overpower their belief that they had a basic right to know the truth about their history. Remember that omissions also feel like lies and they will very likely feel betrayed by your secrecy. Ultimately, as difficult as it may be, the best time to discuss any problematic circumstances in their backgrounds is while they are living under your guidance.



If Your Child's Birthparent Struggles With Addiction or Mental Illness



Remember that your child understands that they are biologically related to their birthparent, and they will wonder what parts of the birthparent they may have inherited. Talk about why their birthparent may have had trouble coping or making

the right decisions. Did she have a difficult life growing up, an unhealthy family environment, or the lack of a positive role model?

Point out the differences in the life that their birthmother had from the life that she wanted them to have. Separate the quality of the person from the individual choices they made.

At an early age, be general in your answers. They may be too young to discuss drug addiction or mental health issues, but you can talk about the life circumstances that resulted from it which prevented them from parenting; for example, the lack of a stable home, work, or familial support. Tell the child more as they get older. Be honest. A 10-year old, for example, can understand that addiction and mental illness are not healthy for children to be around, so her decision to place is congruent with the selflessness involved in putting her child's needs over her own. You can help your child understand addiction as a disease, and separate the illness from the quality of the person. Eventually, you may also want to discuss the genetic implications of addiction so they can make educated choices when confronted with drugs and alcohol in the future.



If Their Birthparent Made Questionable Decisions

Since your child will know that they are biologically related to their birthparents, it is important to minimize their fears that they might have inherited a “bad gene.” Again, be honest but frame your explanations at an age-appropriate level.

There is no “magic age” in which children are ready to hear a painful truth, but as the parents, you can control the way in which the information is presented, and provide a safe place for your child to process the news.

Timing of telling the story should depend on your child’s individual functioning. Your instincts may tell you to wait until your child is an adolescent, but this is not the optimal time to share such difficult information. Teenagers are already dealing with the developmental tasks of separation and individuation.

Specifically, they are asking, “Who am I?” and “How am I similar or different from my parents verses my birthparents?”

Accordingly, this sensitive time of identity formation is not the best time to offer new, negative information about their birthparents.

Alternatively, although children in middle childhood appear more vulnerable, they are actually able to process negative information more easily. Learning this information around 8-10 years old will give them time to work through it prior to adolescence, lessening the potential that they will internalize the actions and shame into their identity.

Tell the story to the best of your ability. Speculating on what factors could have influenced their actions instead of labeling them as bad people will help your child to assimilate this new information and avoid fostering the fear that they may be a bad person as well.



Tips

- **Buy time.** Good timing is not a forte for most kids. If your child asks you a question about adoption at a difficult time, smile and tell them what a great question that is. Then promise to sit down and talk with them after you finish what you're doing. (*And do it*)
- **Don't clam up.** Avoiding adoption talk because it is just too uncomfortable for one or both of you is not the answer. If you just can't bring yourself to talk about it, get help from a licensed adoption counselor.
- **Your child is bound to experience a wide range of feelings when you talk about adoption.** Prepare to accept and validate your child's feelings, both negative and positive. Your home should be a safe place to feel a range of emotions.
- **If you don't know the answer, tell them that.** If at all possible, guide them to someone who they can ask who might know.
- **If you have contact with the birthparent, make sure that you are all on the same page as to how information is presented to the child.** You would be surprised at how many birthmothers wind up being a great resource in figuring out good explanations.
- **Be generous with hugs and kisses.** No matter what you say, actions speak louder than words.

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