

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Explaining Adoption to Your Child

Deciding when and how to explain to your child that they are adopted can be difficult. Everyone’s opinions and values will differ, and different children will be ready to process the information at different times. But both children and adoptive parents can learn to see adoption as an act of love, and a source of pride.

Where to Begin?

Begin with yourself. Before approaching your child with the information that they are adopted, it’s important to understand your own feelings about adoption and about telling your child. Are you nervous? Dealing with shame or mixed emotions? Your child's reactions will be affected by how you introduce the issue. If you have any hesitation, work to overcome it before approaching your child. If you feel a need for support in this process, there are many books, websites, and counselors who can work with you to help you prepare.

Trust Your Child

Adoption can be a subject of discussion with your child like any other. Like major issues such as sex or religion, the question of adoption can be introduced to your child little by little. Know and trust that your child has the capacity to let you know how much he or she understands and how much more information he or she needs. They will come back for more information when they are ready.

When Should I Tell Them?

Very young children cannot necessarily grasp the meaning of adoption. Between the ages of four and six years, children start to be able to understand the general idea of having two sets of mothers and fathers, and that they did not grow in "mommy's tummy." Many experts agree that talking to your child about adoption at this age will develop positive views on adoption and prepare them to face the next step in life—school.

For parents who have adopted a child of a different race, this is also a time when children start asking questions about their skin color and physical features.

If Your Child Asks “Why Was I Adopted?

This question will most likely come from your child when he or she is ready to hear the truth. When it does, keep the following in mind:

- Reassure your adopted child that it was not his or her fault that their birth parents were unable to keep them.
- If you know the reason for the adoption, tell your child. Give as much or as little detail as you feel is appropriate based on your child's age and curiosity level. Try to be specific, but avoid stereotypes such as "they were poor."
- Let your child know that there is never just one reason to have to give up a child, and that no matter what the circumstances, it is a very difficult decision for any parent to make.

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- Do not depict your family as the savior of your child, but do express how grateful you are to have been able to become his or her parents. If appropriate, tell your child about how and why you decided to adopt.

- Reassure your child that they are safe and secure with you.

What to Expect as They Grow Up

Between the ages of six and eleven years, adopted children begin to understand that they were adopted. They start asking questions about their birthplace, siblings and who their "real parents" are. It is important to answer them truthfully. They start to form personal identity at this age, and your input is crucial.

This is also a time when other children can be judgmental and hurt your child's feelings. While you can't always prevent pain and suffering, you can be there to support your child, and help them feel loved and valued.

Adolescents

Adolescents are able to form their own opinions and understand in a more sophisticated way why their birth parents were not able to parent them. However, they also have fragile egos. Be careful not to reveal negative information you might have about the circumstances surrounding their birth. This information can wait until later in adolescence, as you sense your teen's readiness to accept it.

What About the Birth Parents?

As a child comes to understand that they are adopted, they might start to ask questions about their "real parents." In sorting out and sharing your own feelings about this question, it is important not to judge the birth parents or depict them as bad people. They too are real people who faced real issues and made a difficult decision. If you know you are able to do so, tell your child you can contact the adoptive agency for more information on their birth parents.

Other Helpful Tips

A final few tips to help you handle conversations about adoption with your adopted child:

- Never discuss adoption when you or your child are angry or upset; as with any serious issue, find focused, calm times to talk with your child.

- If the time is not appropriate, let your child know that you would be happy to discuss things with them at another time, when you can both concentrate and discuss the matter calmly together. Make sure you follow up, and have the conversation when you say you will.

- Create a scrapbook for your adopted child. Favorite pictures and other mementos help your child create their own, personal history and give them a sense of belonging and security.

- Use as many resources as possible to discuss adoption with your child: local libraries, schools, internet sites and associations may have videos, pictures, children's books and other media that you can borrow or buy.

- You and your child could have times of sadness related to the adoption. This is perfectly normal. It's important to be open and honest about your feelings, and share them with each other—this will reinforce the bond between you.

By talking to your child about their adoption, you are supporting them in knowing their whole life story, and giving them some of the information they will need as they grow into adulthood. As difficult as it

can be, maintaining an open and honest dialog about their adoption with your child will help to deepen and strengthen your relationship with them.