

The Ten Commandments of Telling: Principles to Consider

1. Initiate Conversation About Adoption

Parent often handle discussion about adoption in the same way they handle conversations about sex. They believe they should wait until the child asks questions and answer only the questions asked by the child. This strategy is not helpful in assuring that children understand their histories . . . Adoptive parents must look for opportunities to raise the issue of adoption and ask the child for questions. In this way the adoptive parents assure the child that his or her feelings are normal and expected, and that they, as parents, do not feel threatened or believe that the child is disloyal.

2. Use Positive Adoption Language

When parents talk with their children, friends and extended family members, they must model positive adoption terminology. Careless use of language may inadvertently connote negative ideas about the birth parents, the child's history, or adoption itself. Here are some excellent examples of both positive and negative adoption terminology:

Positive

Birth parents

Made an adoption plan

My child

Birth child

To choose parenting

Waiting child

Adopted person

Adapted adult or person

Negative

Real parents

Natural parents

Gave up for adoption

Put up for adoption

Adopted child (when overused, it can become a label)

Their own child

Their real children

Keeping

Hard-to-place

Child with special needs

Adoptee

Adopted child (when speaking of an adult)

3. Never Lie to a Child About the Past or a Birth Family Member

Lying about a child's birth parents or history generates serious trust issues. When the trust is revealed in the future due to a search, a slip by either the adoptive parent or extended family, or an accidental discovery of adoption-

related documents, a serious rift in the parent/child relationship occurs -a rift which is difficult to repair with an apology or explanation. What began, as "protection" of the relationship with the adopted child can become a "termination" of trust and intimacy in that relationship.

4. Allow a Child to Express Anger Toward a Birth Family Member without Joining In

While the child should be allowed to express both positive and negative feelings about birth family members, foster/adoptive parents cannot echo the negative sentiments. Many children who are caught up in multiple family systems (stepchildren, foster children and adopted children) find themselves torn by divided loyalties. If members of any of those family systems berate other involved families, the child's conflict is greatly intensified.

5. Omissions Are Okay Until Age Twelve. After That, all Information Should Be Shared

The complete history may be too complicated or too "adult" to share with a toddler or even a school age child . . . It is sometimes in a child's best interest to learn about his history in increments appropriate to his developmental level. Parents know their child's developmental level better than anyone. There are no rules about the right age for giving details to a child. This discussion depends on the child's developmental level and understanding. Parents must assess each situation individually.

6. If Information is Negative, Use a Third Party, Such as a Therapist to Relate the Most Troublesome Details.

Adoptive parents who decide to use a third party to share especially troubling information with their child must be careful to choose that helper wisely. Not all therapists are skilled in working with adoptive families and some agency workers may even be insensitive to the needs of the child or the parents. Finally, parents must communicate to their child throughout the interview and after, that they have heard "the worst" about his history and they still love him unconditionally. Their presence sends a powerful message of love, support and commitment to the child.

7. Don't Try to "Fix" the Pain of Adoption

All parents naturally try to protect their children from pain. However, adoptive parents must recognize that their child must experience some pain in the normal resolution of adoption-related grief. The only way "out" is "through." Do not impose unrealistic expectations that parents can, by saying

exactly the right thing, erase all of the pain and sadness caused by separation from the birth family.

8. Don't Impose Value Judgments on the Information

Information about a child's history may seem very negative, even horrific, to adoptive parents or social workers, but may be interpreted quite differently by the child. As stated earlier, information about a child's history should never be changed, or given to an older child with significant omissions. Facts must be presented, however, without the overlay of values, without judgment.

9. A Child Should Have Control of Telling His or Her Story Outside the Immediate Family

Remember that the history belongs to the child, not to the adoptive parents. If friends or extended family members ask about sensitive information, simply tell them that the information belongs to the child. They can ask him about it when he is old enough to understand their questions. Parents should not decide with whom, when and how intimate details of the child's life are shared.

10. Remember That the Child Probably Knows More Than You Think He or She Does

Sometimes adoptive parents tell others in the family about "troublesome" details of their child's history, and they believe they will tell the child - but later. When information comes to the child from someone other than the parent the child does not have the support of parents in integrating information into a positive self-identity. And, unfortunately, information is sometimes shared that is not entirely accurate because it has been passed through too many tellings.

"Keeping lines of communication open is vital to adoptive family health. Observation of the ten commandments of truth telling can aid a family in assuring they are creating an emotionally healthy environment in which their child can develop a healthy sense of self and an experience of honest healthy family relationships."

Taken from the book: "Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child - Making Sense of the Past" by Betsy Keefer & Jayne E. Schooler

Resource from the NJ Adoption Resource Clearing House (www.njarch.org)
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