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"What a difference it makes to come home to a child"

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The Facts of Life

Kids' questions about sex are a tad more complicated when adoption is involved. Here, our experts give you the answers you need.

My daughter's curiosity about pregnancy reached a fever pitch when she was five years old. With no regard for place or time, she hit me with question after question: How do babies come out? How does a woman get a baby in her tummy? I gave her a little information. She begged for more: What does the egg look like?



I felt embarrassed that an obsession (truth be told) with baby-making had hit CeCe before her friends were showing any curiosity, and turned to my friend, Ann, an adoptive mother of four. Talk candidly about pregnancy and birth with my daughter, just as we'd talked openly about adoption from an early age, she counseled. Set the birds and bees free and they'll lose some of their allure. "My kids were so grossed out that their interest waned a bit," she said, laughing.

But a recent trip to the vet to have our dog neutered set off another round of questions from CeCe, now seven. Seeing my golden opportunity, I took a couple of deep breaths, and, this time, my words flowed more assuredly: The testicles make sperm. Sperm and an egg have to combine in order for a baby to be made....

While my daughter's questions have tapered for the moment, I'm ready for the next part of the discussion. Read on for some advice from AF's panel of experts and you will be, too.

—Deborah Pope

Meet the Experts

Mary Ann Curran is director of social services at World Association for Children and Parents (WACAP) in Seattle.

Ronny Diamond is director of the Adoption

Q: Your next-door neighbor is pregnant—and your preschooler is fascinated with the idea that there is a baby in her tummy. He's been asking what it was like when he was in your tummy.

Joni Mantell: All children this age want nothing more than to be as close to their mother as possible. For your child, this is not an adoption question but a very age-appropriate expression of his love for you. Acknowledge his feelings and, because he's asked directly, explain honestly that

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Resource Center at Spence-Chapin in New York City.

Marybeth Lambe, M.D., practices family medicine and lives outside Seattle.

Joni S. Mantell is director of the Infertility and Adoption Counseling Center in New York City and Pennington, New Jersey.

Deborah Pope is an adoptive mom and writer of the “*Here a Mom, There a Mom*” column ([hamtam.com](#)). She lives near Dallas.

he grew in another woman’s tummy.

He’ll be sad; this sadness will not be about his birthmother but about his wish to have grown inside the mother he knows and loves. You can say, “I know you feel sad. Sometimes I wish you had grown in my tummy, too, but I feel as close to you as if you had. I love you.”

Marybeth Lambe, M.D.: Children this age are inexhaustible questioners! They are frequently under the misconception that babies are either born OR adopted. This is the perfect time to help your child understand that babies come into their families in different ways but that all babies grow for nine months in a mommy’s uterus before they are born. Reinforce to your child that, like all children, he was born, and that afterward he joined his family through adoption.

Q: Your three-year-old’s favorite game is pretending that she’s being born from your tummy. She jumps out from under your dress,

saying, “I’m here!” at which you exclaim, “Oh, what a beautiful baby!” Sometimes, though, you wonder if it’s confusing or strange to play this game.

ML: Young children learn about the world—including about pregnancy and birth—through imitative play. Pretending to be born is a common game at this age and is not cause for concern. Look for the teachable moment. After she’s done, share a cuddle and say, “Let me tell you about the first time I saw you!”

Mary Ann Curran: Most children don’t really grasp the fact of another mother until they reach age five to seven, so go right ahead and play the game. You can also introduce an adoption game, in which you pretend to travel to meet her and then enact your joy at this first meeting. Multiple games will ensure that the fact of her adoption and her birth will be parts of her story until she’s ready to sort it all out.

JM: Children this age are making sense of being separate from the mom they adore. Just as we don’t tell children they are not doctors or cowboys when they pretend, there’s no reason for an adopted child to not play “being born” with you, their mother. Their understanding of the adoption part of the story will come soon enough.

Pretending to be born is a common game for any child to want to play, and is not cause for concern.

Q: You’ve told your kindergartener about her adoption, and she seems to understand that she was born to another woman. It seems too early to mention how babies are conceived, so you haven’t talked about her birthfather yet.

JM: Until kids understand birth and reproduction, it is confusing to think about having two sets of parents. You can simply add “and birthfather” to your child’s adoption story, to text in a book on the birds and bees, or to any comment you make about her birthmother. “When your birthmother and birthfather were expecting you,” you might say, “they knew they could not take care of a baby, and they wanted you to have a forever family.” If the birthfather isn’t mentioned, a child may think that her adoptive father is her birthfather. This makes sense, especially if the adoptive father is the only man in her world. It



also suits her fantasy, since he is the father she knows and loves.

Ronny Diamond: Just as children grow into an understanding of adoption, so too do they grow into an understanding of conception, birth, and reproduction. You may want to start by talking about the fact that it takes a woman and a man to make a baby. Emphasize that everyone who has ever been born came from both a mother and a father.

Then, if you still have her attention, explain that “babies grow in a special place inside the woman, called a womb. Some babies always live with the people who give birth to them, and others, like you, go to new parents, and that’s called adoption.” You can remind her that she has a birthmother and mention that she also has a birthfather.

Q: You’re getting ready to explain conception to your seven-year-old, but are worried about the fact that you don’t know much about your son’s birth family.

ML: Even if you don’t have much information about your son’s birthparents, include them in the conversation, so he understands that he has two biological parents. You’ll probably need to define words, such as sperm, ovum, embryo, and fertilization, but don’t feel you need to give all the details at once—you’ll exhaust your child and yourself!

Explain that babies are made when a man and a woman decide to make love. You might say, “Your birthfather’s sperm and your birthmother’s egg combined inside her uterus to form an embryo. Nine months later, that embryo became you. Your birthmother contributed one half of your physical traits—like your blue eyes and brown hair—and your birthfather, the other half.”

Give your child plenty of time to ask questions, to make sure you haven’t confused him. If you’re more comfortable using a book, see **Suggested Reading**, below.

Q: You adopted your six-year-old through an open adoption, and she knows you were at the hospital for her birth. Lately, she’s been asking a lot of questions about the day she was born.

RD: This is a great opportunity for you to tell her what happened before you brought her home. You can say, “You were growing inside your birthmother’s womb, and when you were ready to be born, you let your birthmother know, maybe by kicking the inside of her womb. That meant it was time for all of us to get to the hospital.” Don’t leave anything out—tell her who called you to say ‘come now,’ how you got to the hospital, who else was there, and any amusing mishaps that happened as you rushed to get there.

Then you can say, “When you were ready to be born, you came out of a part of a woman’s body called the vagina.” Let her know that her birth was a special moment for everyone.

JM: Children often want to know what happened from the time they were with their birthmother until the time they came to their adoptive parents. They may be anxious about this “in-between time” and may wonder if they were alone and abandoned, or safe and cared for. Reassure your daughter by saying something like, “We were in the delivery room. We watched you being born and we held you as soon as the doctor delivered you.” Emphasize how happy you were at her arrival. Share anything her birthmother said about her, as well: “Your birthmother held you and said you were beautiful.”

ML: If she wants to know about the physical process of birth, you can say, “First, we saw the top of your head and all your dark hair as your
Children often want to know what

happened from the time they were born until the time they came to be with you. birthmom pushed you out through her vagina.” Whatever you describe, use correct anatomical terms, such as breasts, vagina, or labia—just as you taught her nose, eyes, and toes when she was a toddler. Using proper words for body parts helps her become comfortable with them.

Q: Your seventh-grader knows that his birthmother was 17 when she had him, and you want him to understand that you don’t want him to be sexually active as a teen.

ML: Express your views with a positive, rather than a negative, focus. You might say, “Some kids your age wonder or worry about sex. We think sex before adulthood (or marriage) is unsafe. You have great dreams and goals for your life, and we want to see you achieve them.” Wherever the conversation goes, don’t denounce his birthmother’s sexual behavior. This will only make him defensive.

JM: If your son’s birthmother placed him for adoption because she wanted him to have a traditional, two-parent family, tell him this is why you—and his birthmother—believe postponing sex (and avoiding teen pregnancy) is best.

Q: You’re worried that your daughter, who’s a junior in high school, thinks that it’s her destiny to get pregnant because that’s what her teenaged birthmother did. You want her to understand that this doesn’t have to be so, but how?

RD: As parents, the most important thing we give our children is a sense of values, ethics, morals, and principles by which to live their lives. Adoptive parents tell their children all the time that being adopted isn’t better or worse than being born into your family, it’s just different.

The fact that you want your daughter to wait until she is more mature, or married, before becoming sexually active or having a baby is about your values and choices for your family. It’s not about her birthmother, and in no way does it disparage her or say that she’s a bad person for making different choices.

MC: Now’s the time to revisit her adoption story. You can reopen the topic by saying, “You’re older now, and I want you to know the facts of your adoption in a grown-up way.” Say that teen sex can lead to difficult choices. Point out that her birthparents made a responsible choice to place her for adoption, but that it was a very hard choice. You would hate to see her have to make such a tough decision.

ML: Some teens try to claim their identity by identifying closely with their birth family. Help your daughter understand that her birthparents are complex human beings, and they can’t be thought of solely in terms of a sexual union. Point out the positive traits she’s inherited from them: an aptitude for writing, musical talent, or a wry sense of humor. Let her see that her destiny is hers to choose.

Suggested Reading

These books can help you talk about sex with your child

For kids 5-8:

First Comes Love: All About the Birds and the Bees—and Alligators, Possums, and People, Too, by Jennifer Davis (Workman)

It’s Not the Stork!: A Book About Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies,

Families, and Friends, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick)

It's So Amazing!: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick)

What's the Big Secret?: Talking About Sex with Girls and Boys, by Laurie Krasny Brown (Little, Brown)

For kids 9-12:

It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health, by Robie H. Harris (Candlewick)

The Period Book: Everything You Don't Want to Ask (But Need to Know), by Karen Gravelle, et al (Walker)

What's Going on Down There: Answers to Questions Boys Find Hard to Ask, by Karen Gravelle, et al (Walker)

The What's Happening to My Body? Book for Boys: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Sons, by Lynda Madaras, et al (Newmarket)

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