



# ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

## Talking to Your Three-to-Five-Year-Old About Adoption

**T**hree-to-five-year-olds are curious; their burgeoning cognitive and language skills are tools for figuring out what life is about. The questions they ask offer insight into how much they want to belong, to be accepted, to be safe and secure. They have short attention spans and will change the subject or ignore us once their curiosity is satisfied or our talk goes on too long.

The best approach to adoption questions is to answer only the question your child is asking, in the simplest possible way. Offer words for expressing feelings and let your child know that you're always game for talking. Talking calmly and matter of factly about adoption sends your child the most important message of all: that adoption is okay and he can feel completely comfortable discussing whatever is on his mind.

Here are some questions children are likely to ask along with some answers you might offer:

### *"Why wasn't I born in your tummy?"*

■ "Your dad and I couldn't make a baby but we wanted a baby to love and take care of very much. You were born from your birthmother's tummy, and then Daddy and I adopted you." "I wish you'd been born in my tummy too."

### *"Why did you adopt me?"*

■ "We wanted a child to love and take care of."

### *"Why didn't my first mother keep me?"*

■ "Sometimes a man and a woman give birth to a child, but they can't take care of any child right then. It's not because of anything about the child. It's for grown-up reasons. So they find another family who can take care of the child."

### *"What does my first mother look like?"*

■ "You are wondering what your birthmother looks like." *If you know what she looks like, once you've acknowledged the question, describe her. If you don't know, you might say something like, "She must be very beautiful if she looks like you." Imagine together what she might look like, or invite your child to draw a picture.*

### SAY IT SIMPLY

- "Every baby is born to a man and a woman." (A key concept to impart at this age.)
- "Families form in two ways: babies can live with the family they were born in, or they can live with the family that adopts them."
- "Sometimes a woman can't grow a baby, so she adopts a baby."
- "Sometimes a mom and dad can't take care of a baby who is born to them, so they find another family to raise their child."
- "Sometimes families adopt children from far away."

### A SAMPLE CONVERSATION

**When my three-year-old, Sasha, adopted as an infant in Florida, first noticed a pregnant woman, our discussions of life and birth began.**

**SASHA:** "I was in your tummy too, Mommy."

**ME:** "You were in Linda's tummy. Your birthmother gave birth to you, and then Daddy and I adopted you."

**SASHA:** "But how did you and Daddy get me from Linda's tummy?"

**ME:** "Linda couldn't take care of any baby, and we needed a baby to love and take care of. So we adopted you to be our baby."

### What if a child doesn't ask about adoption?

Some of us believe that if a child does not ask about adoption, she does not want to know. In fact, a child who does not ask may simply be keeping her thoughts to herself. Your casual mention of adoption—"Did you know that Janie was adopted from Guatemala?"—gives her permission to ask.

### Talking Strategies

- ◆ **Make sure you know** what your child is really asking before answering a question.
- ◆ **Offer concrete ways** of expressing feelings. Suggest that your child dictate a letter to a birthparent, to send or to put in a special place. Have her draw a picture. Use dolls to act out feelings and questions.
- ◆ **Read books together** about adoptive families. Bedtime reading can be a warm and affectionate experience—a time when your child feels secure and open to questions.
- ◆ **Reflect and repeat** what your child says. Paraphrasing her words demonstrates that you are paying attention and are interested.

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## Adoption Books for Three-to-Five-Year-Olds

- ◆ *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperCollins)
- ◆ *Susan and Gordon Adopt a Baby*, by Judy Freudberg & Tony Geiss (Random House)
- ◆ *How I Was Adopted: Samantha's Story*, by Joanna Cole (William Morrow & Company)
- ◆ *We're Different, We're the Same*, by Bobbi Jane Kates (Random House)
- ◆ *Love you Forever*, by Sheila McGraw (Firefly Books)
- ◆ *Through Moon and Stars and Night Skies*, by Ann Warren Turner (HarperTrophy)
- ◆ *The Day We Met You*, by Phoebe Koehler (Aladdin Paperbacks)

## WHY IS TALKING IMPORTANT?

### Children at this age need:

...to know they were wanted and loved—and that nothing they did or didn't do led to their being placed for adoption.

...to know that we are here for them. As they grapple with what adoption means, help them understand that they can bring any question to you.

...to know that adoption is forever. They will not be un-adopted if they don't behave well.

...to know they have two families. (The details can come later.) My daughter delights in listing all the family she has, both birth and adoptive, even though she has only met a few of them.

...to hear that adoption is not shameful or secret. This is just one of the ways families are formed.

...to normalize adoption as a way to build a family. Even though most children are not adopted into their families, adoption has been around since human beings first formed communities. Children are remarkably clear about relationships and accept as normal what we present as normal.

...to hear our respect and compassion for their birthparents. Even if we know troubling information about birthparents, we should send the message that they did their best. Our children need to feel that they were born to good and loving people.

...to hear our acceptance of their ambivalence or sadness about having been adopted. Sad feelings don't compromise our family's closeness. Talking about them only brings us closer.

...to hear positive adoption language. They were not "given up," "put up," or "given away." Their birthparents made a plan so that they could be cared for. When we hear adoption concepts stated in a negative way, by other people or even by our children, we can rephrase what they say in positive terms.

...to be assured of our willingness to keep discussing adoption, even as they grow and the questions and feelings become more complex and difficult to express.

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