

Chatting With Kids About Adoption

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I don't talk with my kids about adoption. It's not that I don't think it is a good idea – it certainly is. It's just that, even though all four of my children were adopted, they have no interest in “talking” about it. At this age they seem to much prefer chatting about it casually, when and if they feel like it and on their terms. So that's what we do, and I love every chance I get.

Misconceptions About “Adoption Chats”

I think there are several misconceptions when it comes to talking or chatting with your kids about adoption. One is that it's the mother's job – that somehow and for some reason “adoption talk” will more likely (and more appropriately) come up between moms and kids rather than with dads. That certainly has not been my experience – nor the experience of many of the adoptive dads I know. For a variety of reasons, every time our oldest boys (ages 7 and 5) engage in any “adoption talk” it is most often with me. It will certainly be interesting to see if this trend continues and how it changes with our twins (age 3), one of which is a girl.

Another misconception is that “adoption talk” is always a serious matter. While some questions about adoption require an air of seriousness, many more do not. It is important not to be too serious about adoption, even while taking the matter very seriously. For us some of the funniest (and sweetest) things our kids have ever said have been adoption-related, as their creative and sponge-like minds process the world around them and force it through the adoption-tinted filter which for them is perfectly normal and commonplace. One instance in particular stands out. Grant (age 4 at the time) and I were walking on the trail behind our home and were noticing our neighbor's backyard. Grant asked why there were no toys or swings or the like in their yard, to which I replied, “well maybe they don't have any kids.” Without missing a beat Grant replied “looks to me like they are going to need adoption.” And with that he had started an adoption chat. As usual with Grant, it only lasted 30 to 45 seconds before he lost interest and changed the subject. That exchange was a fairly typical adoption chat for Grant and me – and I love every one that we have.

Yet another misconception is that you “tell” your kids about adoption – as in a one time event when you sit them down at the kitchen table and break it to them in dramatic fashion. In past generations a single moment of “telling” may have been the norm, but now this is often simply not an option whether due to the race, age or any number of other characteristics of the child or circumstances surrounding their adoption. For many children (though certainly not all), the “cat's already out of the bag” so there's no need to schedule a time and plan to “tell” your kids about adoption. For the most part you may not even need to go out of your way to force the conversation. Instead, just let them bring it up or look for natural and comfortable ways to work it into everyday conversation. For my oldest two boys I've made it an occasional part of our bedtime

routine for years now. We will get out their “special books” (which are scrapbooks or lifebooks of their early years filled with pictures and brief captions) and just chat away about whatever comes to their minds as we tell and re-tell the story of how we became a family. I have found that over time these conversations build on themselves as children develop an ever-evolving understanding of themselves and their family – and how the two came together in a very “special” way.

A Truly Forever Family

Chatting with your kids about adoption presents one other very unique opportunity as well – one that has eternal significance. As our children get older, our adoption chats increasingly provide me with the chance to relate God’s love for them and his desire to welcome them into his family to their own personal experience and understanding of adoption. As my kids have begun to ask more and more questions about God and Jesus (the other night Grant exclaimed “Daddy can we talk about God tonight? I have 80,000 questions!”), I’ve been able to chat with them about how God chooses to love us (even though we can’t and don’t deserve it) and how he wants to adopt us into his “forever family.” These are all concepts that they understand, and I am excited to gaze with them through this beautiful (but often overlooked) lens as we seek to better understand and experience what it means to become a child of God by adoption through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the end, chatting with your kids should be something dads (and moms) look forward to . . . something we treasure. Yes, it can certainly be a bit intimidating and maybe even scary at times, but it’s important to make sure that you are the only one that feels that way. It is critically important that your children feel the freedom to talk with you about any and every aspect of their adoption. Only you can give them that gift. The opportunity to talk with your kids on so many levels about something so meaningful, so incredibly personal is truly a blessing and honor. So make it your job to chat with your kids about adoption . . . and start thinking now how you will react and respond to the wide range of thoughts and questions they are likely to throw your way. You will all be the better and richer for it.

Ideas and Resources to Help You with Your Adoption Chats

Here are a few ideas to get you started chatting and help you along the way:

- **Start early, chat often** – There is no such thing as starting too early chatting with your kids in age-appropriate ways. In addition, your child’s understanding of adoption and their own story will constantly be evolving – so don’t stop being available and open to chat as the years go by. Chatting once or twice is not enough, so be sure to ask questions or raise the subject in a comfortable, natural way as often as possible.

- **Be honest and accurate** – Talk about what you know (at the right time and in an age-appropriate way) and keep in mind that “I don’t know” is a perfectly fine answer. Share your child’s curiosity about the facts that are unknown, but be sure not to turn your child’s story into a fairy tale. Adopted children were born just like all other children, and it is important to remember that their story (and therefore part of who they are) begins *before* they were adopted.
- **Listen and acknowledge your child’s feelings** – Listen and attempt to understand the feelings behind what your child is saying. Remember that feelings of loss, curiosity and even sadness and confusion are natural. Keep in mind that statements about birthparents are not a reflection on you, but most often simply an attempt to make sense of every aspect of who your child is.
- **Use positive and respectful adoption language** – How you talk about adoption with your child communicates loudly to them. Be sure that you convey that chatting about adoption is acceptable and even desired, and be sure to use positive and respectful adoption language. It matters. Check out these sites for great tips: www.perspectivespress.com/pjpal.html and www.carolinaadoption.org/education_1.asp.
- **Don’t tear down or overly romanticize birthparents** – It’s important to remember that part of your child’s identity (and therefore self-esteem) is undeniably linked to their birthparents – no matter the facts and circumstances that led to their adoption. Therefore, it is very important to refer to your child’s birthparents by name (if known) and speak respectfully, yet honestly, about them.

Below are a few additional resources to check out:

- ***Adoptive Families Magazine – Special Section: Talking About Adoption***
<http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking>
- ***Talking With Young Children About Adoption***
by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher
<http://www.amazon.com/Talking-Young-Children-about-Adoption/dp/0300063172>

Michael Monroe is married to Amy and together they lead Tapestry, a ministry for adoptive and foster families at Irving Bible Church. You can find out more information about Tapestry at www.tapestry.irvingbible.org.