

Not Your Everyday Conversation:

Talking About the Difficult Realities of Adoption & Foster Care

October 2009



Why this is important . . .



Joining Our Children on Their Journey

Our children are on a journey. It is a lifelong journey and one that involves all of them; it is a physical, emotional, relational and spiritual journey. It is a journey to discover *who* they are and *whose* they are – and there are no shortcuts. It is a journey they must travel; we cannot travel it for them, and neither can we plan every twist and turn or determine where it will ultimately lead.



Joining Our Children on Their Journey (cont.)

But we can choose to travel it with them, often following their lead and compassionately guiding them when needed. Along the way they are certain to lead us through rocky places of confusion, valleys of grief and loss and even into dark places of pain. But if, by God's grace, we will embrace *their* journey as our *own*, we will experience one of life's greatest blessings – the deep and lasting connection that comes from making each step of their journey an inextricable part of our own, and their destination our shared fate.



Our Goal

To help us as parents *“think before we talk”*

- Think
- Pray
- Seek Advice

... so we can join our children on their journey and thus better love, guide and care for them



What Keeps Us from Joining Our Children on Their Journey

- Fear
- Lack of confidence in what to say, and when and how to say it
- Sense of competition with their past
- Our own pain and loss
- It's just not a priority for us



The “What” Depends on “Who”

- What you share depends on who you are sharing with
 - Your child
 - Needs the whole truth, not the “hole” truth
 - Your family (and inner circle)
 - On a need-to-know basis, with an understanding of strict confidentiality
 - Others
 - Protect the privacy of your child's story



Secrecy vs. Confidentiality

- Secrecy → damages
 - Undermines trust and intimacy
 - Creates exclusion and division
 - Destroys authenticity
 - Implies a lack of full acceptance
- Confidentiality → protects
 - Allows for appropriate communication within healthy boundaries by those directly impacted or involved
 - Foster parents have specific obligations



Important Questions About Communicating with Our Kids

- If
 - Do I communicate the information to my child?
- What
 - What information do I communicate to my child?
- Who
 - Who should be the one to communicate the information to my child?
- When
 - At what age and how often do I communicate the information to my child?
- How
 - How do I go about communicating sensitive, painful or negative information?



Answers to Important Questions

- **If** (Do I communicate the information?)
 - Yes
- **What** (What information do I communicate?)
 - The whole truth, in age appropriate ways
- **Who** (Who should be the one to communicate the information?)
 - The parent (with a few exceptions)
- **When** (At what age and how often do I communicate with my child?)
 - It depends on the child and the type of information
- **How** (How do I communicate sensitive, painful or negative information?)
 - Compassionately, nonjudgmentally and in "layers" as part of a complete story"



How You Talk is Important

- The focus must always be on the child
- Engage the whole child in a way that
 - Promotes understanding
 - Fosters healing
 - Creates a sense of safety and belonging
 - Communicates their inherent worth
 - Builds a foundation for forgiveness
- Nonverbal communication is very important



Who's Talking?

- For children adopted or coming into care at a young age, parents generally know the history
 - Parents will share the facts with the children
 - Children will share their thoughts and emotions with the parents
- For children adopted or coming into care at an older age, the children may know the history
 - Parents may not know the history
 - Children may share disturbing information, as well as their thoughts and emotions
 - Information children share may or may not be true
 - Foster parents need to document conversations and coordinate with their caseworker
- **Key:** We need to be prepared to listen, not just talk



Let's Talk Specifics

- Child's history
- Issues of grief and loss
- Parent's history
- Child's desire to search
- General issues



The Child's History

- Facts surrounding conception
 - Rape, incest or prostitution
 - Infidelity
 - Rule of thumb for when to share: *8 to 10 years old*
- Criminal or harmful behavior by birthparents
- Facts and motivations surrounding relinquishment or abandonment
- Abuse/neglect
- Mental illness
- Birth siblings



Issues of Grief and Loss

- Feelings of grief and loss are normal and inevitable
 - Accept that your child's grief and loss does not diminish you or your relationship with him
- Understand your child's "trigger moments"
- Avoid the temptation to try to "make it better"
 - Often simply "understanding" is all that is needed



The Parent's History

- Why you adopted or fostered
- Your infertility
- Your own grief and loss



The Child's Desire to Search

- All children search in some way
 - Some undertake a physical search
 - All are on an emotional search
- The search is ultimately a search for answers
 - It is not about us as parents
- Joining our children in their search can lead to a stronger and deeper connection



General Issues

- Corruption and issues of adoption ethics
- Problems with the foster care system
- Role of money in adoption
- Issues of justice, poverty, disease
- Reproduction and sex
- Transitions (for foster children)
- Information about adoption assistance



Emotions and Reactions from Our Children

- Confusion
- Rejection
- Grief
- Loss
- Anger
- Pain
- Fear
- Shame



Things We Must Not Do

As parents we must not:

- Try to “fix” the difficult realities
- Ignore
- Wait until they are “older” (i.e., in their teens or older)
- Dismiss or minimize
- Exaggerate or maximize
- Communicate that such topics are “off limits”
- Treat as if the realities are only our child’s history (as opposed to our “shared history”)

Above all, parents must never lie



Things We Must Do

- Check the facts
- Assess your child’s developmental level and current functioning
- “Think before you talk”
 - Have a plan
- Be non-judgmental
 - Need to separate the behavior/action from the person
- Always be honest
 - Be willing to say “I don’t know” when that is true
- Listen and be willing to understand and affirm your child’s emotions and reactions



The Difficult Reality . . . About the Difficult Realities

- For most of us, it is the difficult realities – our broken and painful past – that has brought us together
 - But for the difficult realities, most of our children would not be in our lives today
- To ignore or fail to embrace the difficult realities is in some ways to fail to embrace an essential aspect of our children, ourselves and our shared history



The Blessings of Embracing the Difficult Realities

- The difficult realities allow us to:
 - Build trust and create lasting connections with our children
 - Create a foundation for open and honest communication
 - Model forgiveness and grace
 - Understand how God is at work in our lives
 - Become more “real”



“For me, a real mother is one who recognizes and respects the whole identity of her child and does not ask him to deny any part of himself”

Dr. Betty Jean Lifton
Journey of the Adopted Self



Sources

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by Sherrie Eldridge
- ***Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens***
by Debbie Riley
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by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher
- ***Real Parents, Real Children***
by Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb


