



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Choosing Adoption for One Child and Not Another

by Brenda Romanchik

The scene opens in a hospital room. An exhausted new mother and her anxious husband breathlessly await their first chance to gaze at and hold their newborn baby. The door opens...in comes a committee of doctors, nurses and other hospital staff. Bewildered, the new parents look in vain for their baby.... What could possibly be the problem? "Mr. and Mrs. Jones," one woman beg

Two years ago, as part of preparing for the birth of my daughter, I began rehearsing what I would say to my birth son, Matthew, age eight, when he finally asked the question, "Why are you keeping her and you didn't keep me?" Surprisingly, the question never came. Looking back, I can see that he never had to ask the question because the circumstances surrounding adoption were always were so openly discussed. He is comfortable and secure with his place in life.

He did, however, ask for a picture of my father looking at the baby. When I asked why, he replied that he wanted to see if "he looks at her the same way he looks at me." I told him that, of course, I would send the picture, but that he should know that no one could ever change the special place he has in my Dad's heart.

That experience taught me a lot... about my own fears and the ability of children to understand and accept difficult concepts. It also taught me that I do not need to be afraid of my daughter's reaction to the adoption. At two, Matthew and his adoptive family are already a regular part of her life. She will grow up knowing his birth story as well as his own.

Many birth parents fear "the moment of truth," when the tough questions are asked and need to be answered. I have come to realize that for birth parents in open adoptions, "judgment day" need never come. A birth parent's presence in their lives provides an adopted child tangible proof of their love and commitment, while the ability to relate the birth story openly and naturally often answers questions before they arise.

Telling the Birth Story

Ever since I can remember, my mother has told the story of my birth. I am Sunday's child, born before my due date after barely thirty minutes of labor. My mother often used this as a means to explain why I am always in a hurry. All of us long to know the story of how we made our grand entrance into the world, to connect with a beginning that we experienced but cannot remember. We rely on the one who gave birth to us to tell us how active we were, how it felt to have us kick, what it was like to see us for the first time.

For an adopted child in an open adoption, these stories provide more than just personal history. By including the birth parents' experience in making an adoption plan, it also provides reassurance that the child was loved and confidence of the child's place in both the birth and adoptive families.

Story-telling is an art, and as with any art there are principles that you can follow that will help you best recount your child's birth story.

Work together.

Children most often talk about their questions and concerns with their adoptive parents first. Birth parents and adoptive parents, therefore, need to work together in telling the birth story. When adoptive parents are well informed, they can help their children define what it is they really want to know, and support the birth parents' stories. I can always tell when Matthew has had something on his mind. Besides the usual tip-off of his mother's gentle reminders, his questions are very well thought-out. Having talked to his parents beforehand, he knows exactly what he wants to talk to me about.

Take your time.

The story of your child's birth and adoption presumably took over nine months to develop; do not try to tell it in an hour. Instead, try and see each experience as a story in itself. Hearing the heartbeat for the first time,

choosing adoptive parents, the actual birth... all are separate stories. By breaking down the whole story into a series of vignettes, you are likely to help the child to retain both their content and spirit.

Keep it simple.

It is very important that the language used be simple and not abstract. Children are concrete thinkers and will interpret literally what is said. For example, if you tell the child that he was "given up for adoption," he may interpret that as meaning that he was "given up on." For a child, giving up on something means to quit trying, that whatever the activity, it is no longer worth the effort. Try instead to relate the story in terms of the love and concern that went into making the decision. I told Matthew that I chose Doug and Cathy to be his parents because I felt he deserved more than I had to offer at the time. That as much as I loved him, I couldn't provide the love of two full-time parents.

Be honest.

Nothing can damage a relationship more than dishonesty. If there is an aspect of the pregnancy, birth or adoption that requires delicate explanation, it is important for all the adults involved to come to a decision on how it will be discussed. This includes talking about the birth parents' grief. Ignoring the issue of grief can send the child the message that being separated from them was an easy process. I believe it is crucial that children know that this was not a simple decision for the birth parents to make, nor has it been easy to live with. At the same time, it is equally important that the child know that she is not the source of the birth parents' grief. At three, Matthew was told that I was sad when he went home with his parents, that I missed him very much, but I wanted Doug and Cathy to be his parents. We also talked about letters and visits, and how glad I am to be a part of his life.

Avoiding difficult issues like grief can also send children the message that their own conflicting feelings are not acceptable. Many adopted people go through a period of grief related to the loss of not being raised by their birth families, the loss of the people they may have become. Being open with difficult feelings will help adopted people better understand and accept themselves.

Use pictures.

Small children learn best visually. Make a photo album with pictures of the birth mother during the pregnancy, the hospital experience, and other birth family members. Put in the baby's ID bracelet and bassinet card and

ultrasound images, if available. Pictures help to tell the birth story in a natural and relaxed way. Pictures also encourage children to ask questions and allow the child to direct the flow of information. They frequently end up determining how and when the story is told. There was a period where Matthew brought out his baby album at every visit. We would look at the pictures together, and when he had had enough, he would close the book. A sure signal we were done.

Use humor whenever possible.

Real humor is not all slapstick and punch lines. In story-telling, it is a tool that teaches, as well as making us laugh. Unplanned pregnancies are filled with complicated emotions and decisions. It is often difficult for birth parents to remember that there were times we smiled and laughed. It is important to look back at those days and find those lighter moments. One of Matthew's favorite in utero stories is of the time I went to see the movie "Ghostbusters" in my eighth month of pregnancy. During the last, deafening, act, I was forced to leave the theater, because Matthew was so active it hurt. Not only does Matthew think this is hilarious, but he likes to tell people the story as proof that he liked "Ghostbusters" even before he was born. On a deeper level, in knowing that story, he has come to understand better our connection to one another.

Be open to questions.

Not all stories need to be narratives. What you may want to talk about may not be what your child wants to hear. It reminds me of the story of the little girl who asked, "Where do babies come from?" Her mother took a deep breath, got out her charts, and proceeded to give her daughter a very detailed explanation. At the end of the presentation, she asked if there were any questions. Her daughter replied, "No," going on to explain that she had "just wanted to make sure babies didn't come from the hardware store" like the little boy down the block said. If you are not sure what kind of answer they are looking for, respond as simply as possible. Then ask if they have any more questions.

By being candid in all things, by using gentleness and concern as your guides, by drawing from the love and respect we have for our children, we will find the right words to say. And our children will hear and understand.

Brenda Romanchik lives in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan with her husband and two children, her first son lives in Northern Michigan with his adoptive family. Brenda is the founder of Insight, a publisher and website for birth parents and other members of the adoption triad.