

02/11/09 - The Importance of an Adoption Story



One question that is asked of me often is "When did you tell your kids they were adopted?" My answer is very different than what the common reply would have been 30 years ago. Back then, adoption was a hush-hush thing not openly discussed. Children were placed with adoptive parents who had similar physical features so they could blend in. Some of those children didn't discover until they were much older that they were adopted into their family. Nowadays, that way of thinking is completely out the window, at least within the adoption community. Adoption is not hidden anymore thanks to open adoptions, transracial adoptions, celebrities adopting and frank discussions about family building options.

The best advice I had heard about answering the question above is that your child should have no recollection about being told they were adopted. Just as you should have no idea when you discovered you were a boy or a girl, your child should have no idea when they found out about their adoption. It should just be a natural part of their life. As part of their identity, the child should know that they entered their family through adoption.

Start as Young as Possible

Since I adopted all of our children as newborns, my experience with this will vary from those who adopted older children. In adoptive parenting classes and an adoption support group, my husband and I were given wonderful tips on how to tell our children their adoption story. Newborns need to be spoken to as much as possible to help them develop language and personal relationships with caregivers. So we were told to talk to our newborn about their adoption story. This seemed crazy for us to do as their story would be way more advanced than singing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star".

At first when I told my firstborn, K, his adoption story it lasted at least 10 minutes which is about 9 minutes and 45 seconds too long for a baby. There were so many details that I thought were important to include such as why we chose adoption, the birthparents' feelings, how we selected our agency, how long we waited, our travel to the hospital and so on. I also cried when I told the story. Some of the tears were from sadness and some from happiness. It seemed surreal to be sharing this emotional story with my baby boy. He didn't care what I was saying as long as I was talking to him.

Include the Child in Their Story

Over time with telling the story over and over to K, the story lost a lot of the details. It became shorter and shorter. Soon there were sound effects and goofy facial expressions ("And when we saw you we were SO happy!" (Insert big smiles and squeals of delight from me)). His adoption story was becoming more age appropriate. By the time he could say a few words he helped us tell his story.

We also had books to assist us in his adoption story. For us, "Tell Me Again About the Night I was Born" by Jamie Lee Curtis and Laura Cornell was very popular. Its story is pretty close to our adoption experiences. At the beginning of the book is a child's family tree which includes branches with pictures of the Birthparents. Once K could point, he would point out the Birthparent pictures in the book when we told

him his adoption story.

We don't tell our child their adoption stories on a daily basis. About once a week, we may share a quick adoption story during baths or snuggle time. It is told to them often enough that it is now easy for us to tell it. Our children were raised with the word "Adoption" used often in our house. They don't associate that word with anything negative. They can see how Mom and Dad's face light up when they are told their adoption story.

Questions from Out of the Blue

I've noticed that as our children get older the times for them to ask questions about their adoption stories are not preplanned. Trying to get a three year-old to sit and listen about their adoption is pretty painful. We just let our kids know that they can ask us questions of us at any time. For us most all of the questions take us by surprise.

Recently in the car, my Kindergartner out of nowhere wanted to know why my "tummy is broken?". That is how I explained my infertility to our children. I said that I don't know why it's broken but I'm happy that it is. This seemed to confuse him as in his mind any body part that is broken needs to be fixed by a doctor. I then said that "If my tummy wasn't broken then I wouldn't have adopted you. That would make so sad because I love being your Mommy." He then nodded and started to tell me what happened in the latest episode of "The Clone Wars" television show. It goes to show that what I perceived as possibly a big important moment was no more than a fleeting thought to a child. They definitely need time to process things at their own pace.

The Difficult Questions

The older our children get, we will add more details to their adoption story. The reasons why the Birthparents placed a child for adoption can often include some unpleasant aspects. We try to be prepared for sharing those difficult details with our children if they bring up the subject and if the answer is age appropriate. These difficult questions could be "Why did my Birthparents not keep me?", "Who do I look like?", "Where is my Birthfather?", "Why don't I ever see my Birthparents?" My husband and I truly hope to have answers for our children but also need to say, "I don't know" instead of making up false information to fill our child's need to know something about their adoption.

Telling our children their adoption story are special moments for us as parents, to share how happy we are about them entering our family through adoption. We believe that talking openly about adoption in our household can only make our children feel more secure and loved. We told their adoption stories long before our children had words and hope that they keep talking about it for a long time to come.

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