Talking to Your Children About Their Birth Parents

Coalition for Children, Youth, and Families

Most children who have been adopted wonder about their birth parents—at least to some extent. For parents, the challenge comes in knowing when to bring up birth parents and how to answer tough questions. Should you bring it up? Should you wait for your child to come to you? If you wait for your child to bring it up, it might not happen. They might be afraid of hurting your feelings or they might not know it’s okay to talk about birth families.

While the subject can seem scary, talking about birth parents with your child can actually reinforce the bond you share and strengthen your relationship.

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Searching for Birth Relatives

Childwelfare.gov Factsheet for Families

Methods for searching for birth relatives or an adopted child have changed dramatically in recent years. Previously, many adoptions were closed, meaning no contact occurred between the birth and adoptive families, and no identifying information was made available to the adoptive family or the person who was adopted. A social shift in the 1980s and 1990s toward open adoptions led to various levels of connection between the adoption triad (adoptivee, birth parents, and adoptive parents), as well as extended family members and other important connections—sometimes called the adoption constellation. Today, adoption exists along a continuum from shared information to regular contact between the child and the birth parents or other family members.

Social networking can be a useful tool for anyone on the adoption continuum to identify, search for, or reunite with birth relatives. Youth who were adopted are also using social networking sites to find their birth parents or relatives and to establish relationships with birth families.

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Tips for Helping Children and Teens Before and After Visitation

From healthychildren.org

Children and teens in foster care have court-ordered, regularly scheduled visits with their birth parents, siblings and/or other members of their family, as long as such visitation is deemed safe for the child. Both physical and emotional safety should be considered. Visitation should be sufficient in frequency, duration, and quality for the birth parent and child to maintain and strengthen their relationship.

BEFORE VISITATION:

Some reasons for extreme distress before visits include:

- The visit is disrupting the child’s daily routines. Some children do not deal well with breaks in routine.
- The child is feeling overwhelmed by desire to see the birth parent.
- The child is fearful that going to a visit means never returning to his foster/kinship home.
- The child is reliving trauma during visitation (this can be quite subtle so the person supervising the visit must be very attentive).
- The child is reliving the trauma of separation, but this time he is fearful of separation from his foster/kinship parent or from his birth parent.
- The child is picking up on the foster/kinship parent’s distress or on that of the birth parent.
- The foster/kinship parent is undermining the birth parent in front of the child, creating confusion and distress.
- The child is fearful of an unfamiliar person who is providing the transportation.

FOSTER AND KINSHIP PARENTS CAN HELP PREPARE CHILDREN AND TEENS FOR VISITS BY:

- Insisting that visits be scheduled around the child’s schedule (i.e., not during school hours, not late at night, not during after-school activities, not during nap-time if possible)
- Suggesting that the child be picked up from and returned to the foster home (and not child care or school) if at all possible
- Helping the child decide on a transitional object (e.g., stuffed animal, blanket) and what to wear to the visit
- Sending a healthy snack with the child
- Helping the child draw a picture or make something to give their birth parent as a gift at the visit
- Reminding the child that you will be there to welcome them when they return after the visit
- Transporting the child to the visit, when possible

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