

Using Books to Open the Adoption Dialog

by Jane Brown, MSW

Using children's literature is a wonderful, gentle, memorable and highly effective tool to proactively introduce your child to his or her adoption story. Stories can help to guide his/her thinking about the unknown or little known circumstances surrounding the separation from birth parents, adoptive history, and to initiate and sustain discussion between you and your child. *WE SEE THE MOON* will be one of those books that will become a best-loved story that promotes intimate discussions between you and your child about personal history and feelings regarding what is known or wondered about birth parents.

About this Guide:

This guide is meant to be a help to parents to ease their way in talking with their children about their pre-adoption journey. Many parents wonder when to begin, how much to tell at once, whether their child is ready for the discussions, and will they do it "right". Although we all, as adoptive parents, understood that these discussions would be necessary, many of us feel overwhelmed by the seeming enormity of the task before us and isolated in our struggle to know how to execute it.

My philosophy, based on what I have learned through raising my own adopted children to adulthood and through working with numerous adoptive families across the United States in my program, Adoption Playshops is this: that we owe our children these discussions. They should be done early and gradual, age-appropriate, gentle and straightforward, honest, matter of fact, comprehensive and a complete disclosure of information about their Past. This should also include discussion about the many, complicated feelings we all have about the pre-adoption history that is an inherent part of who our children are.

Parents are often surprised by their child's early interest, the depth of their provocative questions, and the intense feelings that accompany their questions about their story. Other parents are concerned about their parenting skills or worry that there are underlying reasons when their children show little to no interest in their adoption. Still other parents have concerns about how their own surprisingly powerful feelings about their child's early history might be affecting the way their child is interpreting or reacting to the stories they tell. Some parents are relieved when their children show little interest in adoption discussions, avoiding the big talk for another day.

Our children need and are entitled to explore, understand, incorporate and embrace both the significant loss and tremendous gain that forms the foundation for their adoptive history. Whether we help them TO explore and integrate the adoption losses and gains impacts who they will become and how they will tie the Past into their Present and Future lives. I believe that our children can have brilliant lives BECAUSE of the help we give them to navigate through this complex, but inextricable part of themselves.

In this guide, I would like to offer you the opportunity to consider how to use this very special book to encourage your own child's exploration of his or her Past-- a part of which includes the original parents-- the birth parents. These are the people who began the life story with your child and whose presence, though absent on a day-to-day basis, is and always will be felt by both you and your child. Using the book as a vehicle for discussion can make a meaningful difference in whether such influence is positive or confusing and detrimental to your child's emotional and psychological development of self. I think its very important for parents of Today to learn lessons that others have learned before them from Yesterday in order to enhance their parenting skills and provide a rock-stable foundation for discussions that will continue throughout life.

Please read the guide several times to familiarize yourself with the essential components I suggest are a part of talking with children about birth parents and pre-adoption history. This will help you to gain insight into some of the most effective ways to launch and sustain those discussions. You may want to refer back to this guide occasionally as your child's depth of comprehension grows. This will help to expand your set of skills for meeting the challenge of addressing the adoption-related issues you and your child will need and want to talk about.

You will note that the emphasis is on recognizing, naming, exploring, and acknowledging your child's feelings and fantasies rather than on the facts surrounding your child's pre-adoption history. Most of us have a false, unknown, or largely unknown set of facts to contend with. Our children want to know where he or she has come from and why he or she is growing up here with us, instead of with her original family in her country of birth. It is in that exploration of feelings and facts that children derive meaning from what they imagine, feel or think they know that determines a good portion of their self-worth as they grow older and attach more and more meaning to their shadowy Past. So this is the aspect of talking about adoption with our children that we want to focus in on—what our children feel as opposed to the limited or missing facts.

Creating a Foundation with the Past for the Future

Our children need to develop a connection not only with our history, but with their ancestral history for it is in knowing and claiming the Past that one has a sense of marking one's place in the universe that can help them dream of and build for the Future. One of the common myths that are taught to adoptive parents is that they should wait until their child asks questions about his or her birth parents or expresses interests in the Past before they should consider talking with their child about such matters. Also, that if a child says little or says that she knows it all already or is disinterested, they should cease to try to engage their child in such discussions.

Adopted children quickly pick up on Society's subtle but unmistakable and diametrically opposed beliefs and this tends to cause them to feel confused and disloyal for their natural, universal yearning to know where they came from, who (birth parents) gave them life, and why they did not raise them. The first societal myth is that adoptees who are loved and well-nurtured should not be interested-- that such interest indicates that their adoptive family life is unsatisfactory. The other, which is frightening to young adoptees is that adopted people will return and claim their "real" (birth) parents if they are able to find them-- that their parents and family are disposable substitutes for "the real thing."

Children do not know how to tell us that this is what they are taking in and worrying about. Instead, they tend to deny interest in birth parents and their own Past. That their birth parents are unknown quantities who feel to them like ghosts contributes, too. Yet they DO wonder, fantasize about, and have intense feelings that arise about their birth parents and the surrounding circumstances that led their birth parents to separate from them.

Left alone to wonder and create fantasies, many come to the false and damaging conclusion that they or their birth parents must be flawed-- unlike most other people. They can fret as they grow into adulthood that their birth parents behavior and decisions may be an unwritten script that they will follow, leading them to be unable to keep relational commitments. Or they may fear that they are flawed, unloveable, and unkeepable so that they behave in ways that alienate those they love or they cause disruptions in relationships and leave before they give the other the chance to hurt and leave them first.

When adoptive parents take the initiative to talk about and embrace birth parents matter of factly, fairly often, and ongoing through their lives with their children, they normalize having birth parents and convey to their children that those birth parents were people of worth who had problems. They convey to their children that it is all right to have inherited their genes from those birth parents. That circumstances, rather than inborn character flaws caused their birth parents to decide not to raise their child so that they are forgivable people. The earlier this process of weaving them into family life, the more permissible adopted children tend to feel that it is to talk to them and ask questions. The more easily their children can figure out how to frame such questions. The more likely it is that their children will continue to communicate with their parents their thoughts, feelings, questions and fantasies about their birth parents.

Using the book to start discussions

Most cultures have a harvest festival and sometime close to or on the date of their specific harvest festival, the moon is fuller and rounder and appears larger than at any other time of the year. The moon, in Chinese lore, is a symbol of family wholeness and completeness. So it is that on the Autumn Moon Festival, families gather if they can to

walk under the light of the full moon, share food and companionship, and eat moon cakes. *We See the Moon* is a vehicle for beginning to share this concept with an adopted child.

Throughout China and other parts of Asia, if family members are not able to come together, they know that they and their other family members still gaze up at the shining moon. They know that somewhere in the world, the missing member(s) of their families are looking too and thinking of them-- sending messages of love and hope across Time and Distance.

It is the one night of the year that adopted children can know that while they are thinking about their birth parents and wondering where they are, how they are faring – their birth parents are very likely to be thinking of them too. Perhaps remembering them and hoping that their lives continue on. It is a time that their birth parents are likely to be feeling sad over not being able to be with them and hoping for forgiveness over the painful decision that they made. That is one of the things that makes this poem and this story so useful for adoptive parents. It helps their children connect to their birth parents and pre-adoption story in a way that is healing. It also empowers them to incorporate their story in a way that contributes positively to who they are becoming.

Although the story is set in China, the enchanting words and images can lead a child born in any land to connect with his or her birth parents and personal history. In fact, it is sometimes more effective to use a character and story set in a place that has little seeming connection to the child and her birthplace to initiate adoption-related chats. Some children are more willing to share their thoughts and ideas when the book appears to them to be about something outside of their own experience. In addition, sharing a story about a child born and adopted from a country different from their own can help children understand that the feelings and wishes of adopted children are more universal than not.

As you read the concise, but engaging text, call your child's attention to the beautiful and emotionally evocative illustrations taken from Chinese peasant paintings. Ask your child what he thinks the little one telling the story is thinking, imagining, and feeling. What does she wish for? What might she be thinking about her birth parents? What might she be a little worried about? Who should she talk to about her thoughts and feelings knowing that they will listen carefully and try to understand? Who else has a

story that is like this one-- and are there others, too, who share the same story? Does she think that they have questions and feelings like the little girl in the story? Why or why not?

Help Your Child Learn to Tell Their Own Story

One of the critical adoption-specific parenting tasks that all adoptive parents face is developing their child's emotional intelligence so that their child can talk about and tell their own story in their own, individual way. When a child has two parents, it is critical that each parent be involved in telling the child his story and helping the child tell his own story, in return. Otherwise, a child may begin to think, without saying, that only one parent accepts him and the Past circumstances and set of birth parents who contributed to who he is now. The major part of task is helping a child recognize, name, claim, and express his or her own feelings. Knowing and feeling are two different things. Feelings are just as important as facts and can affect our lives just as much or even more. Parents do not automatically know how to develop this aspect of who their child is and usually benefit from some suggestions and practice.

Children who have joined their families through adoption love their parents and express great satisfaction and joy over having become a part of their very special families in a very special way. At the same time, however, in order to integrate all of the pieces of what has made them who they are, they need and deserve to claim their birth families as having contributed something very positive and unique and irreplaceable. This is quite confusing, at first, for a child who can neither see or know much if anything about those ghostlike birth parents.

The most helpful and beneficial thing adoptive parents can do is enable their children to understand that they were conceived and born like everyone else BEFORE they were adopted. A part of teaching a child about this past history is explaining how and why it was that the child was separated from those original birth parents. This can be confusing and complicated when little or nothing is known for sure about them or about their motives for having decided not to raise their child. Adopted children MUST claim their birth parents as a valuable and cherished part of their past life if they are develop a sense of positive self-worth. As they grow older, they will recognize that their birth parents

made significant genetic and historical contributions that continue to shape who they are becoming.

Children also need to know that their history and their birth parents choices do not write a script for how they will live their lives and cannot know this without exploring the possibility with their parents and ruling it out. The earlier and more pragmatically adoptive parents begin to talk about this, the more likely it is that their children will be open to discussing their thoughts and feelings with them. The more likely, too, that these discussions can be sustained and continued across time as the child develops more sophisticated questions and thoughts and feelings shift and evolve.

Fine Tune your Communication Skills

Here are some ways to effectively help your child learn about and be able to express her feelings and develop meaningful parent-child communication that goes far beyond just exchanging words:

1. Model Your Own Feelings-both Good and Bad

Parents must be conscious of and work at modeling expressing their own feelings in front of their child. Its imperative that parents get comfortable with verbalizing both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Its important that parents understand and teach their children that all of our feelings are of value to us-- that the unpleasant feelings we experience tell us that we have a problem that we need to pay attention to and do something about. In a two parent family, it is important that BOTH parents practice modeling their feelings for their child for this is what makes it permissible for children to claim and express their own unique set of feelings.

2. Use Parallel Stories to Elicit Feelings

Parents can make observations about what they think others may be feeling and talk this over with their child. This helps convey the idea that feelings are important and affect who we are and how we behave. By helping a child recognize how a character in a story may be feeling or how others involved in the story may feel about him or her, we

provide the context a child needs for understanding that she has the right and need to explore and express her own feelings. It is often much more possible to gently get a peek at how our child feels about her own adoption story by engaging her in brief, but meaningful conversations about how the story character feels about hers.

3. Mirror What Your Child Might be Feeling

As you read the story with your child and ask questions about how she is interpreting the story, you will want to mirror what you think your child may be feeling. "Your face looks so sad and I am guessing that you feel a little sad for the little girl as she thinks about her birth parents. I am wondering if you ever feel like she does-- and I'm thinking that you probably do sometimes."

You'll want to keep your guesses tentative though and share them in a way that helps your child know that while you are trying to understand how she feels, she does not have to tell you whether your guess is accurate or not-- at least not right now. For sometimes children need some time to consider whether you have or haven't named how it is they feel. Others may not be willing or able "in the moment" to admit to how they are feeling. Still others are more comfortable sharing their feelings in nonverbal ways, but still appreciate that their parent(s) are trying to understand how they feel.

4. Teach Your Child that Sharing Feelings is Good

Use the story to help your child understand that expressing your thoughts and feelings, or asking questions even if they don't have answers is a healthy way to take good care of yourself. That children and grown-ups who know how they feel and can talk with others about that are more able to get control over their feelings instead of having their feelings take over control of them. They are also more powerful when they can let themselves think about their feelings, explore them, and help them to shrink through sharing them with someone who listens carefully and tries to understand i.e. "The little girl in this story really knows how to take good care of herself for she does a good job of asking questions that she wonders about her birth parents. She does a great job of telling us about her feelings. Its important, isn't it, TO tell your feelings to someone who loves you

and listens closely. Who do you think she is telling the story to? Who do you think she should tell her feelings to? Its great that you already know that!"

5. Validate the Feelings your Child Has

Validate your child's feelings if she shares some of them with you. "Good for you for knowing how you feel and telling them to someone else/me. That's great! It means you are learning how to take good care of yourself instead of leaving your feelings locked up inside where they can cause you to get very mixed-up, think up wrong ideas, and hurt you from the inside. I like that and I'm guessing you are pleased with yourself, too."

6. Validate Differences in Perception

Look carefully for and note any difference in how your child is interpreting the story or feeling from how you are-- and validate that difference in perspective for your child. "Isn't it interesting that you were thinking that maybe her birth parents left her because she was a girl and I was wondering whether, instead, they were too young to raise a baby? We each have terrific ideas. Good for you for telling me yours. I also am noticing that I was very sad when the girl told that she'll never know her birth parents, but you didn't seem to have big feelings today. Our feelings get big and then shrink-- they don't always match and they don't always stay the same size. Do they?"

7. It is Healthy to Share Feelings

Talk with your child about why it is not healthy to keep your feelings hidden inside or stuffed way down deep. That sometimes when children or grown-ups do that, their feelings build up like lava inside of a volcano and then explode making them feel very out of control. Sometimes, the feelings can grow and grow and have a great power to affect how they behave. Think of when someone starts to get a little annoyed over a sister or brother teasing them, but say nothing, and then have the feelings get bigger and bigger till they shout or hit—and then get into trouble over making a poor behavioral choice.

8. Feelings Will Change Over Time

It's important, too, to help children think about how their feelings change over time. Parents can help their child make a comparison with clouds in the sky. That they are always moving, always changing shape and size. That sometimes they are tiny and dance in the sunlight while at other times, they are big and dark and fill up the sky so that we have to remember that the sun WILL come out again and the clouds WILL shrink. Parents can help children decide what to do when their feelings seem very powerful. They can help their children to know that they will always be there and will always listen with understanding.

9. Loving Both Doesn't Exclude Either

Help your child know that it is normal and all right to have two different, even opposite feelings at the same time. Draw her attention to the end of the story in which the little girl relates that her journey, while having had some sadness, brought her to where she is now-- and that she is glad for that. Ask your child what the little girl means when she says "I will always love you. And now I love others too." Ask your child if she thinks that that is how it is for most children who have birth parents and parents they live with now. Help your child see that she can contain feelings for both those who were part of her Past and those who are with her, loving her, now.

10. Bring Your Child's Birthparents into the Circle of Family

Develop your own generosity about bringing your child's birth parents into the circle of your family. Remember that while you will, of course, want your child to claim you as her "real" parents, her birth parents have and will continue to play a significant, "real" role in her life-- one that will grow and expand as she moves towards and into adulthood. The more positive, but honest and accurate account you can provide about that role and what it means to who your child is, the greater permission you give your child to claim all of the pieces of herself that she has the need and right TO claim. Keep in mind that YOU are the one(s) bestowing the daily hugs and kisses, and reaping the joy of sharing your child's day to day life. YOU are the one(s) your child will always know she can count on to fulfill her need for family. That may help you to be more generous about allowing your child's birth parents into your family life.

“A family history is like a novel in progress with a full cast of characters and because each of them is a part of you, you want to know them all.”

Frederick Waterman from “November's Letters,” Hemisphere Magazine

I hope that you will both enjoy this lovely book and use it to full advantage for helping your child weave together her Past, Present, and Future!

Best wishes!

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