

■ Adoption language and education in a primary school setting

Dear Teacher,

One or more families with children attending this school have children that have come into their family through inter-country adoption.

This information sheet briefly covers:

- Supporting adopted children/siblings/friends in dealing with questions or situations which they may feel unable to cope with confidently.
- Discussing and normalising adoption as a way of becoming family when looking at family formation.
- Language appropriate to adoption.

Helping the child deal with inappropriate questions

This includes questions or comments from peers, teachers or parents of other children. These questions or comments may be simple curiosity and inoffensive to the child, or on the other hand, may be perceived as confronting, intrusive, distressing or embarrassing.

Unfortunately some adults assume because a child is adopted they have the right to ask intrusive and inappropriate questions, and some people have prejudice against adoption or are ignorant of the facts surrounding adoption.

Some facts which may be helpful if you are asked questions are:

- Adoption of a child from overseas is done within the guidelines of the Hague Convention through the government body in each state.
- Australia does not allow parents to travel to 'choose' a child.

- Adoption is done and is an alternative chosen with care and consideration for children who are unable to be cared for by extended relatives or through local adoption.
- Adoption is only done after extensive screening and assessment in both Australia and the country of the child's birth, of both child and parents.
- The culture of an institution or on the street in the country of birth is not 'culture' and is not considered a 'better option' than being raised in a loving home.

Your response to intrusive questioning about the child's origins can serve as an example to the child to how he/she can respond. Therefore, please respond in a way that supports the child and his/her right to privacy and autonomy, whether or not this satisfies the questioner. If an adult is asking questions please intervene.

Some helpful answers to questions have been taken from *Keys to parenting an Adopted Child*, by Kerrie Lancaster

- Q. "Are they your real parents?" A. "Yes".
- Q. "Didn't your other parents love you?" A. "Yes"
- Q. "Then why did they give you away?"
A. "Why do you want to know?"
- Q. "Are they sisters/brothers?" A. "Yes".
- Q. "What were her 'real' parents like?" Give a description of the child's adoptive parents.
- Q. "Does he/she have any brothers and sisters?"
This answer depends on how many siblings are in the family, biological or adopted.

Discussing why the child came to become adopted

Please remember that the child's pre-adoption story is theirs and the child should not feel pressured to share their history with their teacher, other children, parents or anyone else. However, if the child chooses to share his/her story, the following points are important to affirm:

- All babies and children are lovable and are never the cause of their birth parent being unable to parent them.
- Birth parents loved their children but due to any number of circumstances, and these are often unknown in inter-country adoption, were unable to care for their child. This may have been the result of poverty, the stigma of being unmarried in a society which does not tolerate this, or born into a family in a country where only one child is permitted.
- Adoption is not fostering; adoption is forever, and is as permanent and as real and as binding as birth into a family is.
- Adopted children are as loved by their parents and siblings as biological children, and they argue and get annoyed with each other, just like biological siblings and parents.
- Other children may feel afraid when they have little knowledge of adoption, fearing they may be adopted if their parent dies or if there is something wrong with them, as they realise that adoption means that sometimes children's parents can not parent their children and sometimes parents die.

Grief and loss issues

- Not knowing your birth parents hurts. This is normal and a child should not have to pretend otherwise. The fact that a child is loved and belongs within their adoptive family does not mean that they will not feel the pain of not knowing their biological family. Being adopted means having lost your birth parents, and this is not 'lucky'.
- Grieving adoption issues resurfaces in different developmental stages as new losses are recognised.
- Siblings/friends are often affected by grief and stress as they assimilate the fact that their adopted sibling or friend has experienced their worst nightmare – being separated from his/her birth parents and taken somewhere completely different and unfamiliar. Although they generally perceive the child coming into the adoptive family as a good thing for their friend or sibling, it may trigger irrational fears of losing their parents and they need to be reassured that their parents have ensured the care of them by others familiar to them in the event of this situation.
- If the child was present when a birth parent/sibling died prior to adoption, observing someone fainting or hearing of sickness may cause the child to assume that death has or will occur. For them it has become an expected scenario.
- Siblings born into the family need to be valued and feel special for being who they are. Some may resent the fact that their adopted sibling attracts so much attention.

Alternatively, or at different times, a sibling may draw attention to the 'difference' of their family in order to gain attention. 'Positive racism' isn't helpful or constructive to an adopted or biological child.

- The child may find celebrations such as Mothers or Fathers Day and birthdays difficult, with them being a reminder of their loss. Many children come from circumstances where actual birthdates were not known.

Developmental age and adoption

Reception age | At this age a child may confuse adoption as replacing birth, rather than them being born just like all the other kids.

Year 1-3 | Curiosity about adoption as the child becomes more able to comprehend the complexity of adoption.

Year 4-7 | A deeper understanding of adoption issues and a processing of related information may occur, with grieving as a result.

Racism

- Affirm diversity as a positive thing, but remember to point out that children are *more similar* than they are different.
- If racial slurs are used during a peer argument, consider if the 'victim' is using comments which are also discriminatory (ie. smelly, fat, ugly) towards the other child. If so, please treat both forms of discrimination as equal.

- Please notify the parent if the child is experiencing racial bullying, and work together with the parent and child to develop strategies which empower the child to deal with this confidently.

Adoption language

When discussing adoption at any time, please do your best to use the following positive language:

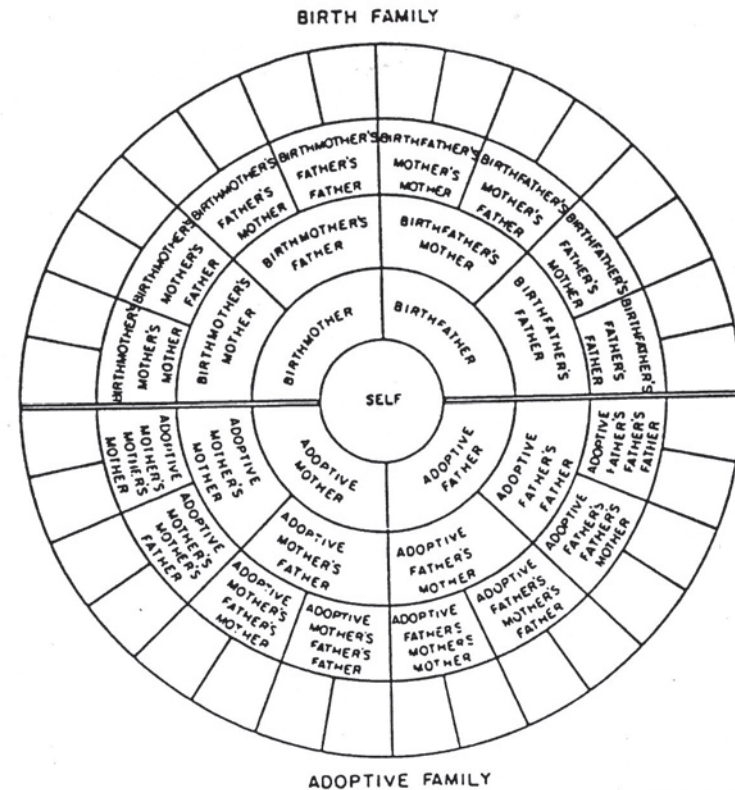
- *Biological children*
not 'real' or 'natural' or 'children of your/their own'
- *Birth parents*
not 'real' or 'natural' parents
- *International adoption*
not 'foreign adoption'
- *He/she was adopted*
not he/she is adopted.
- *Adoption is forever*
and is different to fostering

Adoption is just one more way in which families are formed, just as coming into the family through birth or as a step-child.

Birth parents, even though no information about them may be known, should be talked about with respect.

Similarities between the child and adoptive parent can always be found – their laugh, their kindness, their curly hair, the instrument they like etc.

Affirm adopted children's position in their family.



Family trees

'Family trees' need to be presented in a way that considers the variety of family structures of the children present. This may include families formed through adoption, step-parenting, single families and grandparent carers. With adoptive families, the birth relatives may or may not be known, and the child may or may not want to disclose that he/she is adopted. There are several possible approaches to this and it may be helpful to present a number of different ways a child can do his/her family tree so that the child can choose one which suits them best.

Some alternatives are:

- Using a traditional family tree, with placement of adoptive family in the above-ground part of the tree and the birth family in the roots, or alternatively with the left side being adoptive family and the right side of the tree being the birth family.
- Another idea is to use a wheel as shown above. This has been taken from *Making a Family Tree for the Adoptee*, by Lois Melina.



World Families Australia Inc.

This information sheet has been prepared by Sandi Petersen from World Families Australia. It may be reproduced with appropriate acknowledgement. For more information, contact us:

World Families Australia, Adoption support and child sponsorships
PO Box 2130 Kent Town 5071 Australia
Email worldfamilies@chariot.net.au
Web www.worldfamilies.org.au