Dealing with Peers About Adoption
By Catherine Weigel Foy, LCSW, LMFT and Leah Rubin, LCSW

What is more poignant than when your child comes home in tears and relates the following?

Remember when you dropped me off at school this morning? Well, Jimmy saw me getting out of the car and he ran ahead of me to our friends. I heard him say, "Did you see Mark's mother? She sure doesn't look like Mark. Is that because he's adopted?" So everybody was looking at me; I was mad at Jimmy for doing that. I just went over to the fence and waited for the bell to ring. Then nobody came to sit by me at lunch either. Now I have no friends.

No parent wants to see their child in tears, hurt by a peer's remark. Yet these experiences seem to be part of the scrapes and bruises of every child's growing up. Being adopted presents just another arena where peers' comments can strike right to the heart. This article will focus on how parents can prepare their child to meet the challenges of being adopted.

The foundation for this work begins with an open emotional climate at home, where talk about adoption is encouraged, initiated and integrated into everyday conversations. (See Mary Watkins & Susan Fisher's book, Talking with Young Children About Adoption.) A child's first step to dealing with the questions peers raise is being able to talk with family members about their own questions.

How do you comfort and help a child like Mark deal with the fact of his adoption? First, an acknowledgement of his feelings of anger, embarrassment, confusion or fears of rejection might help Mark open up more about his experiences as an adopted child. Obviously, peers' questions have a powerful effect. The kind of emotion Mark experiences might depend on who is asking. A teacher's question might be experienced very differently than a peer's question. It might also depend on what they want to know or how Mark feels about himself on any particular day. Understanding the emotion and meaning behind your child's tears will facilitate a response that more accurately fits your child's needs in the moment. Offering support and understanding goes a long way in soothing a child's hurt.

Questions are normal

Mark might also find comfort in knowing that nearly all adopted children are asked about adoption. Normalizing his experience can be a step in beginning to deal with the difference that adoption makes in family building.

Your child's own feelings about such encounters can also trigger memories of similar experiences you have had as an adult. You might think of the day you played with your adopted toddler at the park. Another parent joined you and began a barrage of questions:

"Who does your son resemble?"
"How did you decide to adopt him?"
"Where is he from?"

All you wanted to do was to play with your son, not answer questions about him and your family. Like Mark, you might have wanted to go over to the fence to wait for the bell to ring. Sharing this experience with Mark will help him to know you understand, that he is not alone and that questions are normal.

Like many adults, your child's peers probably have very little knowledge about adoption. And the information they do have is often limited to society's myths or sound bites from talk shows. People are curious, but may not know how to time or ask questions in an appropriate way. Clarifying other's misconceptions and gaining understanding about the adoption process often falls on the shoulders of adopted children and their families.

Questions reflect different developmental themes

Children whose lives haven't been touched by adoption often lack the resources to gain factual information about adoption. So they are likely to ask questions that reflect the developmental theme they are grappling with. For example, a child between the ages of 6 and 11, with a beginning awareness of adoption concepts, senses that adoption resulted from birth parents "giving away" the child. Non-adopted children may ask "Where is your real mother?" and wonder if this could ever happen to them. At this age, children fantasize about living with different parents, (especially when angry). At the same time, it also very scary to think that one could somehow "lose your parents." In an attempt to assure themselves that this would never happen to them, non-adopted children might ask questions or tease an adopted child to make the adopted child seem as different from them as possible.

The questions of 12 to 14 year olds look very different, reflecting the identity issues they struggle with. All teens try to "fit in" and the sharing of difference during this phase of development can be quite scary, especially for adopted teens. While adopted teens are gaining more complex reasoning skills about their adoption story, they may not communicate the information clearly. Non-adopted teens may oversimplify how adoption occurs and the emotional impact of this on an adopted peer. Non-adopted teens may ask questions in an attempt to better understand what sex has to do with adoption or to seek information that differentiates them from the adopted teen's experience.

Despite a peer's honest and curious intent, comments made by others can create feelings of discomfort and defenselessness in your child. Adopted children and teens may not always feel prepared to respond, may not want to respond or may regret what they did or didn't say. After such exchanges, adopted children often report feeling confused, frustrated, scared, angry embarrassed and sad. Whatever the context of the adoption-related questions, adopted children feel most secure and confident when they feel a sense of control. Giving them the tools to answer such questions can be the first step in helping adopted children feel some control over what and with whom they share their adoption story.
Tools for handling peer questions

Parents might first arm their child by discussing the peer's intent in asking questions. Knowing that a peer is curious, scared or just unaware often can lessen a child’s defensiveness. Reminding your child that he is much more knowledgeable about adoption than his peers can boost his confidence and set the stage for the following discussion about his choices when confronted by a peer's question.

Keeping things simple will help your child to use his choices when confronted by a peer. These choices include:

1) Ignoring the question, walking away or not paying attention to the peer who asked;

2) Choosing not to share information, and telling his questioner, "It's private" or "I don't want to talk about that now";

3) Choosing to share information about himself;

4) Choosing to educate others about adoption by giving correct information and helping others to understand it. (See W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook, developed by the Center for Adoption Support and Education.)

After discussing the choices, parents can help by rehearsing responses with their child. For younger children, (12 years and younger) write down on index cards scenarios of possible confrontations with peers. Have your child choose an answer from the four suggestions above. Use role-play if this suits your child's interests. Since younger children often have trouble understanding the right to privacy, discuss when it would be appropriate to answer a peer's question and when it would be OK to say "It's private," when to choose to educate others and when not to. Help them to learn the difference between what is known and what is shared. This can also protect them from disclosing information which might later embarrass them or be used against them in hostile ways.

Written scenarios might not be as necessary for teens, who are more able to verbalize their experiences and to think abstractly. The key is continued discussion of what they face and how they choose to handle it. As teens struggle more with identity, it's not surprising that they might choose to be more private about their adoption story with peers.

Parents as resources

Everyday life presents many moments to have conversations about your child's experiences in being adopted. These are some guidelines to keep in mind:

1) Give your child words and language tailored to his particular age and stage of development. This will enable your child to handle a peer's comments more confidently. However, it is important to discern when the comments turn to taunting and ostracizing your child. Direct intervention on your child's behalf with peers, their parents and/or school may be warranted.
2) Model how to handle other adults' comments in your child's presence. When your son hears how you answer the playground mom’s questions, learning happens without a word exchanged with your son. You may also choose to educate your child's class about adoption during Adoption Awareness Month. Through involving your son and respecting his wishes in this project, he learns to be proud of himself and his family. He also learns that his adoption story is his personal story, to be shared discreetly.

3) Pay attention to your tone and the emotions evoked by your child's experience. When younger, your daughter takes her cues from you -- if you’re upset, she's likely to feel the same or tenfold. When rehearsing scenarios with her, try to keep the experience fun and positive. Check in with her periodically to determine how well she is able to use her choices with peers.

When parents share their expertise, wit and adoption savvy with their children, they set a solid foundation for open dialogue where the difference between respectful privacy and fearful secrecy is learned. When this is honored by all peers, adult and child alike, adopted children are enabled to feel safe and confident enough to be more fully who they are.

References


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