

In Charge of Their Stories

Preteens should decide which adoption details to share with friends or classmates, and which to keep private. **BY MARYBETH LAMBE, M.D.**



It's no secret that preteens want to be popular, or, at least, to feel they fit in. But in an effort to be liked and accepted by friends, our kids sometimes feel pressured to answer questions about their adoption, even ones that are prying or pushy. How do we help a child decide which details to share and which to keep private? And how do we do so when many preteens would rather face a firing squad than have an earnest talk with Mom or Dad?

EMPOWER YOUR PRETEEN

Throughout our children's lives, we've likely been honest with them about their adoption stories, however painful or sad. We've also been discreet when sharing their personal history with others. But some of this burden shifts onto our preteens as they develop deeper friendships outside the family and interact more independently with peers. Although some are mature enough to decide with whom they want to share their personal information, they must realize that, once they reveal certain things, they can't take them back.

Let your kids know that they are the experts on adoption. (This will give them confidence in facing unwittingly hurtful comments from peers.) Here are five more ways to empower your child:

1. Help her learn boundaries, and remind her that she doesn't need to reveal anything that she doesn't want to.
2. Stress the importance of privacy. Tell your child that it's OK to put her personal values and concerns above the curiosity of others.
3. Demonstrate and practice different ways she can respond.



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4. Suggest that she put a temporary hold on a conversation by saying, "I have to think about your question."
5. Remind your child that, at times, we've all been upset or dissatisfied with the way we've responded to unexpected questions or circumstances.

There may be times when our preteens feel unprepared to deal with questions from friends, and times when they're upset or embarrassed by what they said, or did not say, during an exchange. Though we can't always be there to intervene, we can teach them how to handle sticky situations themselves, and help them decide how much of their adoption story they want to share. **AP**

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IF YOUR PRETEEN BECOMES ADOPTION-SHY

Throughout the teen years, of course, parents should strive for open communication about adoption. But when your child isn't talking about adoption, don't assume he isn't thinking about it. Instead:

1. Continue to look for reachable/teachable moments. You might occasionally remark about your child's skills, looks, or interests, indicating that some of these attributes probably came from her birth family: "You play the piano so well. I wonder if anyone in your birth family has musical talent. Do you ever wonder about that?" While your child should not be forced to discuss adoption, keep letting her know that you're open and comfortable with the subject when she is ready.
2. Cultivate side-by-side, rather than face-to-face, conversations. You'll probably have better luck bringing up adoption when you're driving to soccer practice, watching a movie together, walking the dog, or shopping for school supplies. Reinforce your willingness to listen by saying, "If you want to talk about your adoption, Dad and I are always happy to listen," or, "We haven't talked about adoption lately. Now that you're in sixth grade, you might be thinking about it in a more grownup way."
3. Be alert for "anniversary reactions." A child may be especially somber around his birthday or adoption day. Instead of allowing him to suffer in silence, anticipate sadness, and help him express it: "I always think about your birthmother around your birthday. Do you think about her too? Do you have any questions about her that I could answer?"
4. Let children know they can love two sets of parents. Preteens may feel disloyal to their parents if they have questions, or even emotions, about their birth family. Assure your child that you expect her to love both you and her birthparents. Explain that parents do not stop loving a child who is already there in order to start loving a child who has just arrived. In the same way, children can love more than one set of parents.

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