

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time Podcast, Preparing For and Managing Intrusive Questions. I'm your host April Dinwoodie. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom on preparing for and managing intrusive questions. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children in their home transition through different developmental stages. In this episode, we welcome licensed clinical social worker, Ellen Singer. We'll explore strength spaced approaches and responses to potentially intrusive questions and how to best encourage family and friends as you welcome a child through adoption or foster care to your family, all while honoring a child's privacy. Welcome, Ellen. We're so happy to have you on the podcast.

Ellen Singer: Oh, thank you, April. It's great to be with you.

April Dinwoodie: Managing intrusive questions and honoring a child's privacy is so critically important and it's an area that requires a lot of thought and preparation. Before we talk about some of the practical tools and some of the responses, can you first help us understand what kinds of things may go on for children when people ask about adoption, foster care and why they're not living with their birth families?

Ellen Singer: Absolutely, April. That's a great place to start. The questions that come from friends and family, and sometimes complete strangers, they often mirror the same questions that the kids are having inside that the children are working to make sense of themselves and trying to understand what happened to them and what it means about them. There may even be questions that the children themselves haven't even thought about yet. The children, as their processing loss in grief, having been separated from their birth family, these questions really can be very hurtful reminders of the confusing and the complicated feelings that they're struggling with. The questions and comments also really reinforce that painful feeling of being different that children often struggle with.

Ellen Singer: And we cannot underestimate how being different can bring feelings of shame and embarrassment for the kids.

April Dinwoodie: As a transracially adopted person, I remember being out in public with my mom or dad or both my parents and getting these intrusive questions from strangers at the grocery store. When this happened, I wanted to disappear. I felt confused, sad, and totally different. While we can't always control what strangers do, how can parents who are fostering or adopting best prepare their friends, family, and community members to welcome a child through foster care or adoption?

Ellen Singer: Sure, April. This really important to discuss. First, of most importance, is preserving the child's privacy around the specifics of their story. It is so vital and parents need to educate those around them, that children experiencing a separation from their birth families or foster families, friends, school that

they're experiencing loss in grief. And that these are very complicated feelings for children, especially children who have histories of trauma, abuse, neglect. One thing that I think parents find hard to do is to help their loved ones, understanding that adjusting to a new family, a new home takes time and patience. They want their loved ones to be supportive, nonjudgmental, welcoming, accepting, and they really want questions directed to themselves, to the parents, and not to go directly to the children with their questions.

April Dinwoodie: Okay, Ellen. Give us an example of what it means to follow a child's lead in a conversation like this.

Ellen Singer: Sure. For example, a relative might ask a child, "Oh, do you have any siblings?" And the child responds, "Yes. They live with another foster family." And the relative says, "Oh, how old are they? Are they brothers, sisters?" And the child communicates either non-verbally that they really want the conversation to end. Perhaps they look away or they say something to change the subject, saying I'm hungry. The relative really needs to go with the nonverbal or the verbal cue that the child does not want to continue the conversation. And so the relative might say, "Okay, let's go get some lunch." Or go with changing the subject and say, "Oh, what's your favorite video game?"

April Dinwoodie: That's so helpful. I want to go back to something that you said just a bit ago related to protecting the privacy of children. Whose role is it to protect the child's information? The people in the system, parents who are fostering or adopting, others?

Ellen Singer: That's a great question, April. It's everyone's responsibility to protect the child's information. And that includes from other siblings in the family. Siblings, especially those born into the family, may be naturally curious about the child's birth family or adoption story and parents need to convey that while they understand their child's interest, that it is up to the child they're fostering or the child they've adopted to decide if, when, and what they wish to share. The other siblings may ask the child questions, but they need to respect whatever their sibling decides about sharing information. And the children certainly need to respect the child's privacy and keep whatever they are told to themselves.

April Dinwoodie: Ellen, why do you think it can be so hard for parents to keep the child's information private from family and friends?

Ellen Singer: Well, April, I think parents worry about hurting their loved one's feelings or making them feel excluded. Parents are looking for support and encouragement, and they may feel that keeping the information private will make them feel isolated. It's really important that they know how to get the support they need without divulging the details of their child's story.

April Dinwoodie: Right. Now that we've established that, in more practical terms, what can a parent who is fostering or adopting do if approached with questions from family and friends about the child's background?

Ellen Singer: First, I would say parents need to acknowledge the person's curiosity, but clearly and kindly state that you've learned from adoption professionals, that all information on the child's background is private and decisions about sharing that information belong to the child. You may want to explain the difference between secrecy and privacy. Secrecy often implies that something is not shared because it's bad or shameful. However, things that are private are not expected to be shared with others, like people's salaries or their sex lives. These things are certainly not bad, but they are private.

April Dinwoodie: Ellen, can you give an example here of how you would respond to some of these potentially intrusive questions?

Ellen Singer: Sure. For example, someone might ask, "Do you know anything about your child's birth family?" And the parent responds, "Yes, I do." And if pressed, "Well, what do you know?" You can say, "I understand your interest, but that information is private and not for me to share." Or another common question that parents say they get is "Did his birth parents do drugs or something?" And a good response would be, "I understand your interest, but the reasons he's with me are private."

April Dinwoodie: I want to go a little bit deeper here. Tell us a little bit more about managing these questions that come from strangers, complete strangers on the street or in the store or somewhere as you make your way through life.

Ellen Singer: To be very clear, you're not obligated to spend any time responding to a stranger. If you wish, and only if you wish, you may want to find out what the stranger's reason is for asking the question. Maybe they're looking for general information about adoption or foster care. Maybe they're interested in fostering or adopting, or they have a family member who is. And then you can just direct them to appropriate resources for information. However, you may also want to help them understand that the questions they're asking, the information that they are seeking is private because providing that education may help them learn not to intrusive questions the next time they see a foster or adoptive family.

April Dinwoodie: That's really great advice. Let's take things in a slightly different direction. Why do you think it's hard for parents and/or kids to talk about being in foster care or adoption? Just more generally speaking.

Ellen Singer: Happy to answer that, April. I think parents and children are often very aware that the non-adopted, non-fostered care world has biases against foster and adoptive families, that society sees them as second best to families that are formed by birth. And other adults and children often feel sorry for the parents

who are fostering or adopting, or they feel sorry for the children. They say things like, "Oh, I could never do that." Or, "Oh, your child is so lucky." They're also aware of other people's curiosity. And they're aware of sadly the negative reactions to adoptive families who are transracial or LGBTQ+. And just to say a little bit more about this, parents and children are very aware that being in the foster care system or adopted is often used by children in a teasing hurtful manner, as when biological siblings try to convince their sibling, oh, mom and dad or mom, we adopted you.

April Dinwoodie: I remember like it was yesterday, Ellen, being teased about having been adopted and how hurtful that was. And I'm so glad we're talking more about this. Would you be willing to just share a little bit more about why you think being in foster care or having been adopted are such easy targets?

Ellen Singer: Well, I think, April, this is a direct response to our society in that there's still quite a bit of shame around birth parents that may have experienced challenging situations that bring children into care or resulted in an adoption plan being made. And with this in mind, children are at great risk of blaming themselves and having great blows to their self-esteem because they are just too young to understand the adult problems and situations that result in a parent being unable to provide care for their child. And one more thing to say here is children are often afraid to share these feelings with their parents, for fear of being disloyal or hurting the parents' feelings if they have questions about their birth family.

April Dinwoodie: Thank you so much, Ellen. Well, there was certainly no fear in this conversation today and I'm so, so glad that we were able to talk about some of the elements of adoption and foster care that can sometimes be overlooked and/or surprising to parents as well as to give them some really practical tools and tips. Thank you so, so much for joining me to today.

Ellen Singer: Thank you, April, for having me. It was my pleasure.

April Dinwoodie: The NTDC was funded by the Children's Bureau Administration on Children, Youth, and Family's Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services, under grant number 90-CO1132. The contents of this podcast are solely the responsibility of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children's Bureau.