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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 7

ADOPTED CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

As school-age children strive to make sense of adoption, their friends, neighbors and classmates who know of their adoptive status are also trying to understand adoption. Adopted children may be asked a variety of questions from their peers (and other adults). Thus, adoptive parents need to know how to help their children answer these unavoidable questions with dignity, confidence, and appropriate consideration to privacy.

To help prepare children, parents need to first be aware of what their children are going to experience. Then parents can help their children anticipate what may happen. Any situation is easier to cope with if children have been able to consider in advance, the ways that they would be most comfortable responding. Their answers to questions will then be more likely to reflect greater comfort and spontaneity.

Parents are likely to find this entire challenge more understandable (and so will their children) if they pay attention to how other children learn about adoption or adoptive families. Look carefully at children's books for adoption themes (including fairy tales with evil stepmothers and stories about orphans), movies, and TV shows. Also, be aware of how other adopted children in school might be handling *their* adoption stories—will their choices have an impact on how all adoption is understood? What does the school do to acknowledge adoptive families?

It is helpful for parents to anticipate what kinds of questions their children might be asked in reference to adoption.

The following are some examples:

“Why didn’t you stay with your real family?”

“How come you look different from your mom? Is she your real mom?”

“Is that your real brother? Your hair is different.”

“Why were you adopted?”

“How do you feel about being adopted?”

While it is impossible to prepare your child for every situation, the following suggestions can assist parents in this important endeavor:

Be a model for your child. Your child can learn the most useful and appropriate responses by listening to you field questions and comments about adoption. Generally, your responses should be calm and respectful, even if you determine that you need to let the questioner know that either the question being asked is “not appropriate” and/or that the answer is private. Being hostile teaches others that adoptive parents are “too sensitive”, and nothing about intrusive questions.

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Continued from Page 1

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Ask your child if he/she would be willing to answer questions and take responsibility for choosing answers. This helps to build confidence with your support to help if needed. After a situation occurs, parent and child can discuss other possible responses to help the child learn that there is no one correct response and that he/she has choices about how to handle each situation.

Help your child consider the source and meaning of the question before the response is chosen. Was it well meaning but invasive? Curious and friendly? Ignorant? Unkind?

Acknowledge the often painful or frustrating feelings that go along with being perceived as “different” by others and encourage effective coping skills. Help children to realistically assess problems, anticipate consequences of their actions, make the best choices, and learn from those choices.

Give your child the tool to handle any situation that might come up: Teach the W.I.S.E. UP! program and then practice it together. (The [W.I.S.E. UP! Powerbook](#) is available through The Center for Adoption Support & Education, Inc. or C.A.S.E.) This is also a way to continue to open communication about adoption over the years, as you can also share your own experiences with the questions and comments that may be heard about being an adoptive family.

Another suggestion is to find a place where you child can be with others in adoptive families. Children and teens enjoy sharing experiences and learning that they are not alone. Additionally, as your child grows, help him/her to develop a broader understanding of the history of adoption, how it is currently presented by the press, and how literature and movies impact the way that others gain knowledge about it. This kind of background can ease the tendency to personalize the way that others view adoptive families.

RESOURCES

Help your child identify the names of people who might be able to help at school, during neighborhood play, or in various social situations. Advocate for your child by educating another parent or a school counselor or teacher about adoption (e.g. use of positive adoption language) so that they may understand the need for them to step in to assist your child if necessary. ([S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators, A Manual for Teachers and Counselors](#) is available through C.A.S.E. to help educators create a positive school environment about adoption and for adoptive families.)