

EMPOWERING CHILDREN AND PARENTS TO COPE WITH QUESTIONS/COMMENTS ABOUT FOSTER CARE OR ADOPTION

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What happened to his parents? You're such a Saint!

It is the rare family who is fostering or adopting that has not encountered questions or been subject to comments that relate to foster care or adoption. In same race families, they may come from people who know the family is fostering or adopting or by someone who assumes that the family is a biological one. In racially and culturally diverse foster or adoption, questions or comments may come from known acquaintances, or complete strangers who or are trying to figure out what the family is about.

Typical questions include:

- “Oh, is your husband African-American?”
- “Do you know anything about his real parents or why he was removed from them?”
- “Did her mother use drugs?”
- “Are they really brothers?”

Or, comments like:

- “Oh, those children are sooo lucky!”
- “She’s so adorable, how could anyone give her away (adoption) or mistreat her (foster care)?!”

Well-meaning people may ask questions to be friendly, out of curiosity, or to express their own opinions. While some people may be naturally nosy, most people are usually not aware that their questions are inappropriate. Most adults certainly know that it is inappropriate to inquire about someone’s finances – salary or savings, or about their sex lives. But relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches, other parents, and strangers do not know that the information they are seeking pertaining to foster care or adoption is PRIVATE. They are unaware that asking questions about a child’s foster care or adoption story – their heritage, their birth family, the circumstances around why they were placed with this family; why parents made the decision to foster or adopt, etc. is a violation of a family’s boundaries. They also are not aware of the hurt, embarrassment and pain their inquiries may cause. With relatives and friends, it is important to acknowledge their curiosity, but explain that the child’s story is private, and they are not at liberty to share this information. These close adults will also need encouragement to be mindful of questions they pose to the child as well. They should not be asking intrusive questions.



Compounding this problem, the questions and comments made by others to families who foster or adopt are usually based on ignorance and a lack of accurate information about foster care and adoption. With little experience of foster care or adoption, people's attitudes are often a reflection of societal views. With regard to adoption, despite the fact that racially and culturally diverse adoptions increase the visibility and acceptance of adoptive families, adoption is still considered "second" best to building a family by birth. A study conducted in the 1950's (Shared Fate by David Kirk) around attitudes toward families who had adopted indicated that Americans overwhelmingly believed that a parent would favor their biological child over their child who had been adopted. Today, that is likely still the case. Attitudes toward foster care are even worse. If birth parents who voluntarily place their children for adoption are viewed as irresponsible and uncaring, birth parents with involuntary placement fare even worse. There is little societal sympathy or empathy for the challenges and circumstances that birth parents face in terms of substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, poverty, etc. Society continues to view mothers who do not raise their offspring as bad. With regard to parents who are fostering, many people cannot imagine loving or wanting to help or raise a child that is not born to them. And of course, racism is very much alive and well.

In addition to societal myths, what others know about foster care and adoption is, unfortunately, often based on limited personal experience, as in "Oh, I know a foster family and that teenager was completely out of control." There is also little in the media that helps people to know that most parents who are fostering are good people who are motivated to provide a loving, stable home for a child in need. Media stories often portray parents who are fostering as abusive or neglectful, who are in it only for financial compensation. They portray children who are being fostered as being challenging or damaged.

How do parents who are fostering or adopting cope?

Parents who are fostering can be especially challenged when they encounter intrusive questions/comments. They often describe a range of emotions – feeling "caught off guard", angry, violated, scared, sad, helpless to name a few. They may feel compelled to respond and share aspects of the child's history that later they regret. Or, they may display anger that is uncharacteristic and unsettling. For parents who adopted and arrived at parenthood after years of coping with the stress and grief related to infertility, they may feel especially "battle weary" around having to defend and protect the legitimacy and privacy of their children and their family.

Parents who are fostering or adopting can quickly learn how to prepare themselves for intrusive questions and develop responses that they can comfortably use, which minimizes their distress over not knowing how to respond. Realizing as well that these experiences may or are already happening in the presence of their children who are old enough to be aware of what is going on, parents may feel especially concerned. They worry about the impact of these questions on their children, as well as how the children feel about the way their parents are responding and reacting to the questions/comments.

Stepping into the children's world

Children who are in foster care and/or who have been adopted are likely to encounter these very same experiences – with their peers and other adults – friends, classmates, relatives, neighbors, teachers, coaches - when they are alone, and not under the "protection" of parents. It is imperative that parents provide them with help and guidance. It is clear that if adults do not have accurate information about



foster care and adoption and do not realize the impact of their questions on foster and adoptive families, children not connected to foster care or adoption cannot be expected to do better.

In fact, there are often good reasons why children, in particular, ask questions of their peers in foster care or in adoptive families. Children unfamiliar with foster care or adoption have a very natural curiosity about why foster care or adoption happens. They often have difficulty understanding all the complexities, and most importantly, they may lack the resources to obtain factual information to help answer their questions (i.e., their parents or teachers are not certain themselves how to address the children's questions).

Children also receive the same misinformation and are subject to the same myths about foster care and adoption that their parents are – from books, television/movies, videos and other social media.

- “Do birth mothers sell their babies on the Internet?”
- “Are some adopted children kidnapped from their birth parents?”
- “Do foster parents abuse the children?”
- “If you're not biologically related, you don't really love each other.

In addition, school-aged children in particular may be frightened by the thought of foster care or adoption. The idea that one can “lose” or be separated from one's parents is a very scary one and is often the subject of many childhood stories and fairy tales. The “mother” replacement is usually wicked or distracted (e.g. Cinderella, The Wizard of Oz).

Driven by understandable curiosity and perhaps fear, with little understanding of what foster care is about or what adoption means, children may relate to the child in foster care or the person who was adopted as they might to a child with a physical disability - asking questions and making comments to accentuate how these children are different. Their goal is to distance themselves from the child who is being fostered or is adopted in order to reassure themselves that what happened to that child could never happen to them. And, sensing that they are delving into private territory, these peers are likely to ask a lot of questions when other adults are not around.

Will you go home to your real parents? Do you miss them?

We have had the opportunity to learn about the special challenges faced by children in families who foster and adopt. The thousands of children we have worked with have told us that one of their most important concerns is responding to questions about foster care or adoption. Sometimes the questions or comments relate to the child's own foster care or adoption story; other times they are asked to be expert commentators on a media event connected to foster care or adoption.

- “Where is your real mother?”
- “Why didn't your real parents keep you?”
- “Why were you put into foster care/adopted?”
- “Can I see a picture of your real mother?”
- “How come you don't look like your parents?”



- “Did your birth mother sell you just like the one I saw on TV who sold her twin baby girls?”
- “Is that your real sister?”
- “Don’t you want to find/go back to your real parents?”
- “Did your birth mother do drugs? Is your father in jail? Did the police come to your house?”

These questions often go right to the heart of a child/s self-concept, self-esteem, challenging who they are and where they belong.

These questions are just samples that youth report getting from their peers. Add to that list questions/comments meant to tease like:

- “You must have been a mistake.”
- “Your real parents didn’t want/love you.”

Children in foster care and families who have adopted may feel especially emotionally vulnerable to these questions from the “outside” – because these questions/comments often mirror the exact questions that the children are asking themselves “inside” as they struggle to make sense of what has happened to them. As they cope with loss and grief, they may be wondering “Where is my birth mother?” “Why did my birth mother leave me?” “Why did my birth parents let this happen? Why didn’t they get their act together?” “Do they ever think about me?” “Was something wrong with me?” “I’m a different race from the rest of the family? What does that mean?” Children in single and LGBTQ2S families will also get questions like, “Why don’t you have a dad/mom?” These questions and reinforce the painful feeling of “being different” from other children.

Just like their parents, comments made by others can also make children feel vulnerable and uncomfortable because they do not always know how to respond or may regret what they said (or didn’t say!) Consequently, children and youth who are in foster care or adopted report being left with a variety of painful emotions: confusion, anger, embarrassment, sadness, or frustration.

Learning to use W.I.S.E. Up!

Before children can think about responding to questions and comments about adoption, the W.I.S.E. Up! Program first helps children realize that they are smarter than their peers – or WISER about foster care and adoption because of their experience of being part of a foster or adoptive family. Whatever the reason for the questions or comments – benign curiosity, ignorance, or intended insults – foster and adopted children need to know that they (and their families) are WISER than other people about foster care and adoption; that others do not have the benefit of the knowledge that they have. The W.I.S.E. Up! program therefore empowers children to help the “uneducated” learn about foster care/adoption. In effect, the children can W.I.S.E. Up! the world about foster care or adoption. This understanding helps introduce and prepare children who are being fostered or adopted for the distinct likelihood that they will get asked questions and helps explain the reasons why. Many children are eager to help others learn about foster care or adoption. It is important to most children that others feel comfortable with something that is so important to them.

Second, children learn to think about who is asking the question/making the comment and evaluate the motivation behind the question. Is the question coming from a trusted friend, from the class bully, or from a teacher? Is the person just curious or teasing?

Third, children learn to identify how they feel about 1) the person asking the question/making the comment, 2) when the question is being asked – are they alone with their friend, or in front of other classmates; 3) what kind of mood are they in – how are they feeling at that particular moment, and 4) how they feel about the question/comment. Children are helped to be familiar with the range of feelings including – sad, angry, surprised, embarrassed, happy, etc. Obviously, there may not be much time for long reflection in this process, but it may be just long enough to help children “slow down” and take charge, in preparation for the next empowering step which is to actively CHOOSE how to respond.

Power to Control the Situation

In the final and fourth step, children learn that they have four possible options for responding – each represented by the four letters of W.I.S.E., a tool designed for quick memorization:

W = **WALK AWAY** or ignore what is being said.**

I = **IT’S PRIVATE**, I do not have to share information with anyone, and I can say that, even to adults (respectfully.)

S = **SHARE SOMETHING** about my foster care or adoption story, but I can think carefully about what I want to let others know.

E = **EDUCATE OTHERS** about foster care or adoption in general. know a lot about it.

** (If child is being bullied, it is recommended that they Walk away with ‘attitude’ by saying, “Whatever.” “Who cares.” This is said to discourage further victimization.)

When WISE Up! is introduced to children in groups, it is hard to match the sheer pleasure that the children feel as they laugh together at the questions they have heard and realize they are not alone. However, underneath the silly faces and groans is relief that finally, there is a way to take care of this challenge!