

# STEP BY STEP



## TO EFFECTIVE PARENTING

Helping children Understand Adoption:  
Communicating Effectively

By Jayne Schooler and  
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## About Step by Step Booklets

Parenting is both an exciting and challenging journey. Having a child to love, nurture, and encourage is a blessing. However the journey is filled with challenges which are sometimes puzzling and at other times frustrating. This booklet and others in the series are designed to help you sort through the steps in helping a child grow and develop to reach her fullest potential.

Each booklet contains core information on parenting attitudes, skills and abilities. There are activities to work through to help in applying each strategy. While the booklets contain information which can lead to more effective parenting, it may not answer all the questions a parent might have in the area presented. It is therefore recommended that each and every parent join the thousands of other parents in the journey for lifelong learning. Parenting is a step by step learning process.

We invite you to read all our titles and join us in one of our many different training sessions. We look forward to walking together with you step by step to effective parenting!

Sincerely,

Ruby M. Johnston  
President, International Leadership and Development Center  
Founder, LAMb International

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## Helping Children Understand Adoption

*“Children will ask the questions they feel they have the permission to ask. They have to be grounded enough and whole enough to ask questions that they don’t have permission to ask.”*

Dr. Jane Hoyt-Oliver, LISW, PH.D,  
Chair of Social Work Program,  
Malone University

Creating an environment of adoption communication openness is the primary task for parents. Talking to children about their adoption is one of the most important responsibilities for adoptive parents. Yet many parents feel inadequate for this critical parenting assignment.

In decades past, it was believed that after a child was adopted, it was like he was born into the family and that nothing needed to be communicated about adoption. Many thousands of adopted persons grew up under the shadow of secrecy in adoption, only to find out the truth in late adolescents or adulthood. The revelation of the truth sent many of these adopted persons into what they have described as a “sea of bewilderment.” Trust in their parents was damaged. Their identity, who they believed themselves to be – the biological children born into the family - was snatched from them. They felt alone, disconnected and betrayed.

Research into the field of adoption communication and scores of anecdotal illustrations have been greatly responsible for the assertion that adopted children do best when they have knowledge of their adoption early in their lives. Research also indicates that as children grow, they move through stages of understanding what adoption really means.

The goal of this guide is to provide you, as the adoptive parent, with understanding of the importance of creating a family environment of openness around your child’s adoption. Also, another goal is to provide strategies to enable you to do this task with confidence.

The next few pages of this guide contain the following:

- The Power of Family Secrets
- Why Children Need to Know Their Complete Adoption Story
- The Child's Developmental Understanding of Adoption
- Strategies for Parents



## THE POWER OF FAMILY SECRETS

Shelly, a beautiful 17 year old with a dynamic personality, always looked forward to family Christmas gatherings. It was a time when her home overflowed with people, noise and food for three days. This year was not going to be any different — or so she thought. However, by the end of Christmas weekend, Shelly’s realization of who she is would be forever changed.

Late on Christmas evening, Shelly and her cousin were driving to the movie theater. Her cousin asked a question, “Shelly, I have always wanted to know, what does it feel like to be adopted? ‘

Shelly sat shell-shocked. “What are you talking about? I am not adopted?”

“Oh yes you are”, the reply came. “Just ask your parents.”

Instead of going to the movie that night, Shelly turned the car around and they went home. Devastated by the words of her cousin, she confronted her parents and learned the truth.

“We wanted to tell you, Shelly, a long time ago,” her father said. “The time just never seemed right.”

Broken by what she felt was her parents' betrayal, she began to withdraw from them and become increasingly angry and sullen. Her parents were dumbfounded. What was going on? Was it a problem with school? With friends? No, Shelly was angry because she was hurt knowing that her parents had kept important information from her. Why did they not tell her the truth?

So much damage can be done when the truth is concealed — even if it's an attempt to protect someone's feelings.

Secrets are powerful tools often used to hide a family's potentially embarrassing or shameful event. But when discovered, family secrets can destroy the love and trust the family has fought so hard to build. What else can secrets do?

- Secrets Alter Reality

Katie was adopted as an infant and everyone knew that except Katie. One afternoon, when she was 11 years old, a friend at school asked her a casual question: "Do you know your birth mother's name?" Katie didn't know what to say.

"Birthmother? What are you talking about?" Her friend went on to tell her that her mother had said Katie was adopted and had another mother somewhere. Katie didn't know how to answer. But she did know how she felt — shocked and scared. Her world had changed. She did not know what to do with her feelings and this new reality. Secrets not only alter reality but they can create exclusion and division.

- Secrets Create Exclusion and Division

Keeping a secret can divide family members — those who know the secret and those who do not. To keep a secret, according to Harriet Webster in *Family Secrets*, the secret-keeper must carefully guard all communication with others close to him. This defense mode often leads to distance, anxiety and awkwardness in relationships with others. When there is exclusion from the truth, there will be division. Where there is division the probability of mutual caring, mutual understanding, and mutual honesty is diminished.



## WHY CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW THEIR COMPLETE ADOPTION STORY

*Not only do children need to know that they were adopted, but they need to know the whole truth about their adoption story.*

Compelling reasons to tell your children the story of their adoption

- To Build Trust in Parents and Other Important People

One of the most important issues for those who are adopted is trust. A major task for adoptive parents is to create an environment where adoption can be discussed freely, openly, and honestly.

A longtime expert in the field of adoption, Dr. Randolph Severson, commented that when adopted persons find out the secret(s), they state that they have suspected it, but have never admitted that. Severson explains, "There were probably subtle hints along the way, such as lack of pictures during pregnancy or coming home from the hospital. There were probably no stories unless they were fabricated. Some have resurrected memories of whispers at family gatherings. As the truth emerges, there is a rhythm of shock, anger and relief."

- To Know the Truth, Not Fantasy

When children join their families through adoption and do not hear their story, they sometimes fill the vacuum with fantasy. Katie, age 10, imagined that her birthmother lived in a beautiful home near the mountains and when she was older, she would visit her. The problem? Katie's mother was in prison and would be for a long time. Katie, because of secrecy and perhaps an attempt to protect, was forced to walk on the quicksand created by fantasy instead of the solid ground truth.

- Identity Confusion

Establishing one's identity is not something that happens only during a certain period in one's life.

Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao said, " I think that for adoptees, especially when there is little to no information about where they came from, there is an awareness that they don't really have the genetic information to do that kind of sorting out of their identity. They are basing it on their family of intimacy - their adoptive family, but that's not necessarily where their abilities, interests and traits have come from." For some, the struggle for identity brings about major behavioral changes.

- Fears and Unanswered Questions about Genetics and Medical History

Having little or no knowledge about one's genetic background and/or medical history can add to the sense of disconnectedness, which will be discussed next. One adoptee summed up the feeling like this:

*"Where did I get my red hair? What nationality am I? What kind of body am I growing into? What talents or special skills are in my family line? What hidden illness may show up in my life? All these questions follow me as I move into adulthood, and no one has an answer. I feel like I am walking around with gaps and holes in my life which I cannot fill without answers."*

- Feeling Disconnected

Having little or no information about one's past creates for many a deep and pervasive feeling of disconnectedness, of having a piece of themselves missing and incomplete. Many adoptees feel an extreme sense of sadness, pain, and confusion. There is a sense of unreality, of not being born properly...not being real...not being a part of society. Another term for this sense of disconnectedness is *genealogical bewilderment*. Providing an adopted child information about his birth family, the circumstances of the adoption, and any other pertinent information can do much to alleviate the sense of disconnectedness.





## The Child's Developmental Understanding of Adoption

As adopted children grow up, their understanding of adoption dynamics also matures. An incredible sense of loss and rejection may begin to shadow some adopted children during late childhood. This sense of loss and rejection can steal the excitement and joys of the teen years. This section briefly explores the developmental stages children and teens experience and their perceptions of the adoption experience. When adoptive parents understand the sensitive nature of adoption through their child's eyes, they'll be better prepared to communicate effectively during each stage.

- Ages 0-3 – Hearing the Story

Adoption is a very abstract concept. The idea involves a basic understanding of human sexuality, and such understanding is not found among infants and toddlers. Further, the notion of “letting go” of a beloved person or thing is much too sophisticated for a very young child. While children at this age are too young to understand the concepts of adoption, parents can begin foundational work to assist children in developing positive attitudes about adoption, their birth parents, and themselves during these early years. If parents adopt a child who is “pre-verbal”, parents have a wonderful opportunity to practice talking about adoption and the birth family, building their skills and comfort level before the child is able to understand.

- Ages 3-7 – Know the Story, But Do Not Understand Its Meaning

Pre-school aged children are only capable of concrete thinking. Pre-school children love to hear their “adoption story” and often ask to have it repeated as a favorite bedtime story. By the age of three or four, many adopted children can repeat the story verbatim as it was told to them. While children

between three and seven have acquired language to talk about adoption, they are repeating words they really do not understand. For example, the concept of growing “inside the birth mother’s tummy” and living with another family is very abstract, essentially unintelligible to the young child. Children under the age of seven years rarely have the cognitive ability to understand the concepts behind the words in their adoption story. While they can parrot the words, the light bulb of understanding has not yet “clicked” on.

- Ages 8-12 – They Understand the Meaning of Adoption

By the time a child reaches the age of eight, his ability to think in abstract terms increases dramatically. At this point, the child comprehends the meaning behind the words in his adoption story. Because school-aged children understand the concept of adoption for the first time around the age of seven or eight, they realize at that time that a significant loss has occurred in their lives. If they were adopted as infants, the children are now mature enough to understand the significance of this loss. Children have lost connections and a relationship with the birth family, knowledge of their own history and roots, and perhaps cultural understanding and continuity. Even if adoptions are open, children have still lost the lives they would have lived with their birth families. Because they become aware at this age of the significance of these losses, a grieving process begins, even though several years may have already lapsed since the separation.

- The Adopted Adolescent – More Questions Demanding Answers

The early adolescent, capable now of sophisticated, abstract thought, is confused about the reasons the birth parents have abandoned him. The teen’s understanding of adoption progresses at this age. The adopted teen has moved from gaining a family to losing a family, to being given away, to arrive at the conclusion: “I was rejected.”

The teen may be angry about a lack of control in his adoption, and he may look for someone to blame for earlier separations and the lack of information about his history. Often, the adoptive parents are selected to be the scapegoats for the child’s rage and confusion. If the history has not

been discussed since the child was a pre-schooler, as happens in too many adoptive families, the child may have used fantasy to create a web of new information, implicating the adoptive parents as kidnappers responsible for the separation. The adopted youth may firmly believe that the adoptive parents know full information about the child's history but, in collaboration with social workers, have chosen to withhold the information or even actively lie about it.

The older adopted youth may be anxious about growing up and leaving home. Losing the adoptive family may be a re-enactment of his earlier "abandonment" by the birth family. While connections to family remain after emancipation, the adopted youth has probably experienced a permanent termination of his relationship to the birth family when the adoption occurred. In other words, the last time he lost a family, it was forever.

As adopted youth approach legal adulthood, they may have conflicts about a beginning a search. They may fear a "second" rejection by the birth family, and they may worry that the adoptive family will see their interest in their birth family as disloyal or hurtful. Some adopted youth may feel pressure from peers, the media, or family to search (or to not search). Some adoptive parents, in an attempt to be helpful, may even initiate a search for the birth family.

A search for birth family members needs to be in the control of the adopted person. If a reunion is thrust upon him before he is ready for this relationship, irrevocable damage can be done. It is critical that adoptive parents understand that adopted persons have already experienced tremendous loss of control in the original termination of parental rights. They need to maintain control over a re-establishment of a connection to the birth family. Only they can know if, and when, they are ready for such a relationship



## STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

### For Parents of Young Adopted Children

- Talk about adoption comfortably from the time the child enters your home.
- As parents talk about adoption with very young children, modeling correct adoption language is essential.
- Gather as much information as possible about the child's history while the "trail" is still fresh.
- Encourage questions and answer concretely and simply.
- Listen for cues about misperceptions when child is playing or talking with peers.
- Don't assume telling the adoption story every once in a while is adequate.
- Adoptive parents telling the story should be positive but realistic.
- Reassure the children that they will not lose the adoptive family.

### For Parents of Pre Teens and Beyond

- When children are not talking about adoption, don't assume they aren't thinking about it.
- Let children know they can love two sets of parents.
- Allow the child to exercise control whenever possible.
- Attempt to keep from responding to child's anger (regarding his adoption status) with more anger.
- Be firm in limit-setting.
- Maintain your sense of humor.

- Clarify that the child may remain at home for a time following graduation.
- Be alert for over-reactions when relationships with peers fail.

When adoptive parents understand the importance of communicating to their child, not only that he is adopted, but also the true circumstances of their child's adoption, they are creating an open environment that will build trust, respect and connection.

This booklet was adapted from *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past*  
by Betsy Keefer Smalley and Jayne Schooler

## OTHER STEP BY STEP TITLES WITH NUMBERS

1. Understanding Child Development – Birth to Two – “The Infant”
2. Understanding Child Development – Three to Five – “The Preschooler”
3. Understanding Child Development – Six to Eleven – “The School Aged Child”
4. Understanding Child Development – Twelve to Fifteen – “The Young Teen”
5. Understanding Child Development – Sixteen to Eighteen – “The Older Teen”
6. Communication – Responding to Children
7. Communication – Feelings
8. Communication – Asking Children Strength- Focused Questions
9. Communication – Being Direct with Children
10. Communication - The Languages of Love for Your Child
11. Communication – What you Say and How you Say It
12. What Every Parent Should Know About Child Abuse
13. Sharing Secrets and Keeping Surprises – James’s Story
14. Teaching Your Child to Say, “NO” – Jessica’s Story
15. Understanding Childhood Illnesses
16. Caring for a Sick Child
17. Disease and How it Spreads
18. First Aide – What Parents Need to Know
19. Home Safety
20. Childproofing Your Home
21. Teaching Safety
22. Food Safety
23. Foodborn Illness
24. Nutrition
25. Feeding Problems
26. Bringing a Foster Child Into Your Home
27. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Family
28. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Marriage
29. Guide to Dealing with Stress As a Parent
30. Guide to Building a Healthy Marriage Relationship
31. Bringing our Adopted Child into Our Home
32. Helping Children Understand Adoption
33. Joining With my Adopted Child’s Culture
34. Understanding the Birth Parent of My Child
35. The Blended Family
36. When Family Members Treat My Foster or Adoptive Child Different
37. Understanding Attachment
38. Recreating History for My Adopted Child
39. Helping the Child who has been Sexually Abused

40. Teaching about Sexuality
  - a. How to Talk to Your Child
  - b. How to Talk to Your Parents
41. Understanding Sexual Behaviors
42. Teaching Your Child about Abstinence
43. Talking to your Teen about Identity
44. Contracting with Your Teen About Behavior
45. Developing Responsibility
46. Teaching Your Child to Build Relationships
47. Teaching about Marriage and Family
48. Telling Your Child Someone has Died
49. Understanding the Grieving Cycle
50. Understanding and Approaching Behavior
51. Dealing with Lying
52. Toilet Training and Bedwetting
53. Dealing with Defiance
54. Dealing with Hitting and Biting
55. Dealing with Stealing
56. Dealing with Anger
57. Dealing with Fighting
58. The Child Who Plays With Fire
59. Helping My Child Deal with Fear
60. Helping My Child Kick a Bad Habit
61. Help with Tattling
62. Dealing with the Two Year Old's Temper Tantrum
63. Help with Thumb Sucking
64. Help with Bedtime Problems
65. Dealing with Substance Abuse
66. Understanding Suicide
67. Developing Good Study Habits for School
68. Dealing with Failure
69. Demonstrating Manners
70. Helping Siblings Get Along
71. Nurturing Optimism

MORE TITLES TO BE DEVELOPED IN THE FUTURE