

Making Peace with Missing Information

We may not have the answers to all of our children's questions about adoption and their birth families. But we must accept that fact, so we can help our children come to terms with it, too.

by Lois Melina

Now that most adoption education resources emphasize openness as essential for healthy psychological development, and it is common for children to have ongoing relationships with their birth families, parents whose children know little or nothing about their origins may wonder how this lack of information will affect them.

More and more, families who adopt internationally receive details about their children's backgrounds—including identifying information about the birth families—but many still do not. In the U.S., several states still designate sites as "safe havens" where mothers can leave newborn babies they can't care for. There is no opportunity for authorities to gather facts about the social or medical histories of children left in such places.

Adoptive parents may encounter unexpected barriers to obtaining information even in semi-open domestic adoptions. Corresponding through a confidential intermediary, adoptive parents may find it difficult to get the answers to all of their questions.

Tough questions

Adoptive parents may feel helpless if they can't answer questions about their own children, whether coming from a pediatrician asking about birth trauma or a teacher interested in a family history of learning disabilities. The feeling of helplessness can be even greater when the person wanting to know is the child himself:

- Why couldn't my birthparents take care of me?
- Do I have any brothers or sisters?
- How tall was my birthfather?

We want to be able to provide our children with everything they need, and without having the answers to questions like these, we may feel inadequate. Moreover, we may worry about the physical, social, or psychological impact on our children of going through their lives without concrete answers to seemingly basic questions.

Stop judging yourself

Sometimes unconditional love and compassion are all a parent can offer. Rest assured, these go a long way toward helping a child make peace with unanswered questions. But you can be only as compassionate with your child as you are with yourself. What assumptions have you made about how you *should* be as a parent? What assumptions are you making about your children? What limitations do your assumptions create?

For example, if you believe that openness in adoption is healthier than secrecy, are you assuming that adoptees without access to information are doomed to struggle psychologically? What does this say about how you view your child's capacity to deal with difficult situations? While you have a responsibility as a parent to help your child develop a healthy self-image, ultimately, your child is responsible for how she processes any information—or lack of information—about her adoption.

If parents are busy trying to do the impossible, they are not as quick to recognize and provide what is possible. For example, if parents are worried that their child is going to suffer because she has little or no information about her birth family, they may expend a lot of energy trying to compensate for what is lacking or to distract the child from what is missing. They may minimize a child's curiosity, discouraging the asking of questions that have no answers. They may fill up a child's life with activities and "stuff."

If one child has a lot of information and another has little or none, for example, parents may worry that being receptive to contact from the first child's birth family will highlight the other child's lack. If your son receives a birthday gift from his birth grandmother and your daughter asks, "Why don't I get letters from my birth family?" what is your reaction?

Do you think: *How can I make this better?* If you recognize that you are trying to protect your child from the consequences of "not knowing," you should look at how this might be driving your behavior. Does part of you assume it is your responsibility to "make it better," and that, if you don't, your child will suffer? If so, there is a real concern for your child there, but it is wrapped up in self-judgment.

If your reaction is: *I wonder what she is feeling. How can I help her cope with the ways life is unfair?*, you are allowing your child to own her own feelings while helping her learn to deal with them. You are able to make choices about what you can and cannot do—and how your child can grow and thrive—based on the reality of a given situation. You are able to focus on your child's needs, unencumbered by any misplaced guilt or judgment about yourself.

Sharing what you can

Naturally, parents should present whatever information they have to the child in an age-appropriate way, even if doing so leads to questions the parents know they will be unable to answer.

If you can accept that your child is missing information, and are open to the possibility that she can be emotionally and physically healthy without it, you'll be able to support that *possibility* rather than the *impossibility* of compensating for what isn't available. In other words, you will be more available to support *your child*.

Acceptance does not mean that you stop seeking information. It does mean, however, that you will be much more likely to focus on what your child is feeling and needing, rather than on your own need to feel competent. When unanswerable questions arise, parents can say, "I wish I could answer that question. If I were you, I'd want to know that, too."

Supporting exploration

Parents should come up with some specific strategies to help a child feel empowered rather than victimized by a lack of information. For example, if your child is wondering why she never hears from her birthmother, suggest a fantasy phone call:

"If your birthmother did call you, what would you say to her? Why don't I pretend to be your birthmother, and you can call me on the phone."

You can also ask the child what she thinks the answer to her question is: "Well, I don't know if you have any brothers or sisters. What do you think?" The accurate answer to the question may not be as important as giving the child ways to think about it.

Finally, give yourself a break. You are human. No one expects you to be omniscient or perfect—except you. You don't want your children to struggle, to hurt, or to wonder unnecessarily, but sometimes we must be satisfied knowing that we did the best we could with what we knew at the time. At times, compassion will be the only thing we can offer our children, but we must never underestimate the power of compassion to nurture and heal.

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