



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Is It Private or Is It Secret? Sorting Out What to Tell Whom

by Pat Irwin Johnston, MS

Secrecy hides far more than what is private. A private garden may not be a secret garden; a private life is rarely a secret life. Conversely, secret diplomacy rarely concerns what is private, any more than do arrangements for a surprise party or for choosing prize winners. In each (of the secret) cases, one's purpose is to become less vulnerable, more in control.

Sissella Bok

Not everyone is entitled to the details of our private decisions or our private lives. All families set privacy boundaries and help their children learn to do so. But setting privacy boundaries and secret-keeping are not the same.

Let's clarify these two concepts:

- Secrecy involves fear and/or shame that motivates people (and systems) to guard information and create safeguards (often dysfunctional) to prevent leaks or links.
- Privacy is what we give to others and ask for ourselves out of respect for dignity and the right to live life without oversight. It is an act of choosing healthy boundaries and staying comfortably within them.

Many elements of an adoption are appropriately enclosed within healthy privacy boundaries. Why? Because within every adoption there is not just one story, there are a minimum of three stories: the birthparents' story, the adopted person's story, and the adopting parents' story. Each of us who are parties to an adoption should respect the privacy of the other two (or three, or four) parties by acknowledging that their story is not ours to share!

So on the surface, there's an easy answer to the question, "is it private or is it secret?" Adoption issues are often private, but should never be held as secrets. But figuring out where to place and maintain boundaries can be challenging.

In general, "sharing the news" stops with the basics: a new child of x age has arrived in the family by adoption. But this news tends to generate a lot of curiosity and questioning. Thus begins a balancing act. On the one hand, we want to demonstrate that we are proud and happy to be adoptive parents, and rid adoption of any shameful, secretive stigma it once had. On the other hand,

we need to learn to share with caution any further information, keeping in mind who owns the information in the first place. Once shared, control over that information goes is irretrievably lost. We have just given away someone else's story.

Who Should Know What?

Inside the Immediate Family

So that they may make fully informed choices, expectant parents need open access to information about would-be adopting families. This includes whether or not the family has other children; whether they are actively involved in infertility treatment; whether would-be adopters are working with more than one agency or facilitator or attorney; and whether they are in conversations with more than one pregnant woman. Withholding any of this information suggests that would-be parents and/or intermediaries have secret-keeping motives.

Similarly, adopting parents should be aware of any circumstances that might influence their fully informed decisions about adopting. This would include full disclosure about the identity of the birthfather; information about any drug or alcohol use during a pregnancy; access to medical histories of birthfamilies and the child; full disclosure about traumas experienced in prior care by birthfamily, orphanages, foster homes, etc. To withhold any of this information demonstrates inappropriate secret-keeping on the part of professionals or birth families and should be questioned.

Most mental health professionals suggest that children who have been adopted should have access to all details about their own backgrounds known to their parents by the time they reach their early teens. The existence of birth siblings; their birthparents' circumstances at time of placement; complex information such as abandonment, conception by rape, abuse or neglect in infancy, mental health issues in the birth family, incarceration of a birthparent—all these are topics that teens can handle with support. To withhold such details does not protect a child, but instead mires him in "family secrets," and promotes fantasy and speculation, often to the detriment of his self-esteem.

Close Family and Close Friends

Those closest to us, those who provide our primary support system, can usually be trusted not to share private information that is meant only for your intimate circle. Grandma may be given information that she should not share with her gossipy sister, Aunt Gladys. This should be made very clear.

Birthparent circumstances are private, period. No one other than the parents and the adopted person has a good reason to have access to the specific circumstances that led a birthfamily to choose adoption for their child unless the birthparent chooses to share it with them himself or herself. If an adoption is to be open between extended families, then grandparents, aunts, and uncles will learn what any other member of the expanded family wants to share.

The fact that an adopted child spent time in foster care or in an orphanage or group home is less private than are particular traumas—abuse, neglect, prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs or violence. The time in another family or living situation is obvious to those who know the family well, so acknowledging that you visited the orphanage, or that you have a transition plan in place with foster parents, is information that is usually shared. The specific traumas a child has experienced before coming to your home remain, for the most part, the private information of parent and child except when shared as needed with professionals such as therapists and physicians.

Some behavior issues that come from those traumas, however, may require special parenting techniques. People who will spend time frequently with the family or who may be asked to provide some care-giving will need to understand the importance of buying into the program set out for the child and his family by helping professionals. and should agree not to sabotage that program in any way. If these family supporters express offense at your boundaries, give them some things to read to help them understand the principles behind your parenting techniques.

Neighbors, Co-workers, Acquaintances

More distant family members, neighbors, co-workers, and even mere acquaintances may ask lots of questions that nudge inappropriately at your privacy boundaries or threaten to break right through them. It's usually possible to deflect these questions and comments while remaining cordial.

First, make sure that you understand what the question is. Perhaps the questioner has been considering adopting and is looking for information. You can refer these folks to a website, book, agency or family support group, or give them your phone number and invite a more private conversation at a time convenient for you. If the comment or question concerns something you feel should not be shared or is intrusive, just say so. For example, "We know everything we need to know to feel completely comfortable." Or, "Well, you know, that's something we feel should remain private."

Every so often, you may have to risk offending someone in order to protect the privacy of your child or their birth parents. Making this a priority demonstrates to your child that their emotional needs are more important to you than the feelings of casual acquaintances.

It's always best to err on the side of privacy rather than to share too much. Why? Because information, once shared, can't be retrieved, and it is likely to be spread much more widely than you can know by those who don't understand the concept of privacy. An example I share with parents trying to sort out the privacy vs. secrecy boundaries in adoption is to ask them to think about conception and birth. Would you feel it appropriate to ask questions about how a child newly arrived in a family was conceived? ("What intercourse position did you use to conceive that beautiful baby?") Would it be socially acceptable to ask a new parent if the child was genetically related to both of his parents? If mental illness or substance abuse ran in your family, would you share this information with relative strangers when discussing your own pregnancy? Such intimate information is almost always considered completely private—not secret, but private. Adoption involves family-planning intimacies. They are private.

Pat Irwin Johnston is part of a family touched by adoption over at least four consecutive generations. The founder of Perspectives Press, Inc., she is the author of Adopting: Sound Choices, Strong Families, Adoption Is a Family Affair! and Perspectives on a Grafted Tree. A renowned adoption educator, she leads workshops throughout the US and Canada.