



pact's

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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Why Children Don't Talk (*Much*) About Adoption

by Virginia Keeler-Wolf

Parents often say that their children don't talk much about adoption and don't seem interested when parents bring up the topic. Does this mean children really aren't concerned about adoption's themes?

Adoption is a concept that takes many years (into adolescence at least) to be fully comprehended. For pre-schoolers, the earliest understanding may be that adoption is just the way they arrived in their families. Young children should be told simple versions of both their birth and their adoption stories. These stories introduce children to the significant people in their lives in both the birth and adoptive families. In telling the adoption story, it is important to identify your motives for adopting. It is crucial to acknowledge the important role of the birth parents and what may have motivated them to make an adoption plan. Children usually love to hear how their parents prepared for their arrival and the details of their entry into their families. Children also need to hear and enjoy hearing their birth stories, as these stories connect them to the human race and reiterate the epiphany that is each child's entry onto the planet. Both of these stories should be told regularly, adding details as the child is able to take them in.

According to clinical psychologist Mary Watkins and psychoanalyst Susan Fischer (both adoptive mothers) in their book *Talking With Young Children About Adoption*, the job of parents isn't just to inform children that they are adopted, nor simply to mete out information as they mature. We must learn how to listen in order to understand how children experience adoption and what it means to them at different stages. This ability to listen can be a big challenge, for discussing adoption with your child involves an interaction between two people (you and your child) who are not only different developmentally but are also differently-related to the adoption experience.

Research by Dr. David Brodzinsky has shown that adoptive parents, mothers in particular, are likely to overestimate their children's knowledge and understanding of adoption. He cautions parents not to stop discussion prematurely simply in the mistaken belief that a child who can "talk adoption" can understand adoption. Parents need to attend to how a child's understanding is evolving, to know at what point he might be eager and able to understand ideas that just weeks before would have held little interest for him. What is a parent to do? If it is typical for parents to over-estimate children's understandings, how can they assess their own child's interest in and readiness for more information? The best way to develop a window into his interests and concerns is to listen to the language he uses to make sense of the world. The universal language of children is play. Children's stories, roles and games reflect the themes and issues they are interested in and are grappling with.

One way for parents to regularly have this window into their children's interior world is in "floor time." Passive activities like reading a story, doing a puzzle or watching a video together, as important and educational as they may be, can't substitute for floor time. The goal of floor time is to be fully involved with your child, wherever he or she may go. Floor time involves setting aside a special period of time (about 20-30 minutes) several times each week, for yourself and your child together. Turn off the phone and TV so there are no distractions. Within this structure of time, allow yourself a spontaneous and unstructured role, following your child's lead. The goal, according to Stanley J. Greenspan, MD, author of *Playground Politics: Understanding the Emotional Life of Your School Age Child*, and a strong advocate of floor time, is to "march to your child's drummer" and to tune in to the child at his level. "Floor time goes beyond 'quality time' because your child determines the direction of the play or conversation.

The ideal floor time happens spontaneously, but with busy lives it helps to set aside specific times. With younger children, floor time will center on play. Having access to toys, costumes or other play materials is important.

The only rules are simple ones: first, that neither you nor your child can break anything or hurt either of you; and second, that otherwise the child is the complete and total boss. After that, you are off and running. You don't need to work hard at analyzing the unconscious elements of your child's world of play or try to interpret his feelings about it. However, as you have more experiences with your child's world of play, you will be able to notice recurring emotional themes (perhaps, such as questions about belonging, who is alike and who is different, lost pets/children/animals/animals).

Your goal is to assist your child communicate in a deeper way about whatever interests him or her. If you are an eager participant and empathic listener, you will be able to assist your child in exploring his concerns. It is crucial that you let your child be the director of her play time. If your daughter wants you to be a little lost kitten, ask her how you should play the role — how does the kitten feel? Is the kitten scared, worried, hungry, etc.? Let your child determine the course of the drama. The question of how the kitten's dilemma can be resolved should be up to your child, not you. If your child wants to crawl under your shirt and pretend over and over again that she grows in your tummy and that you give birth to her, do as she directs. Don't use this time to correct her; rather than revealing a miscomprehension of reality, she may be playing out her wish about you. If you feel the need to comment, you could share your own wish that she grew in your tummy too.

For adoptive parents whose relationship to loss is different from their child's, it can be painful to play the role of the lost kitten without trying to push the game toward a happy ending. Watkins and Fisher explain that parents need to listen not only to the ways a child's understanding is similar to their own, but also for the ways in which it is different. "These differences aren't simply efforts to be corrected, but can also be expressions of how adoption is experienced by the individual."

Many parents try too much to control the play or conversation during floor time. Adults can be uncomfortable with silent moments, filling them in with too many questions. Many parents find the first few weeks of floor time rocky because they can't resist slipping into the control mode. Greenspan says if you have clear and accurate expectations of what your child will do or say next, you are probably being too directive. Your floor time sessions should be full of surmises as your child pursues new directions, fresh solutions to problems, different resolutions to old stories. As you play, keep in mind that yours is the helper role: am I asking too many questions? am I telling my child what to do? do I know what is going to happen next? If your answer to any of these questions is yes, then sit back and listen more.

Floor time requires that we slow down our usual pace and usual habit of correcting our child's "incorrect" perceptions. It can be difficult just to relax and help children to move in the directions they choose. You need to participate in the play without taking it over. To get involved, you could say, for example: "Do you want me to be one of the animals in the forest?" "What should I do next?" You want to be an actor in the drama your child directs.

Parents sometimes say "he isn't interested in talking or playing with me. He turns his back when I try to get involved." This can be discouraging, but all behavior should be regarded as communication. Rather than feeling put off, you can instead take what the child offers and explore those themes with him, allowing yourself to tune into and become part of your child's interior world. Unstructured, child-directed play can have a powerful effect upon your child. It offers a strong sense of being cherished for uniqueness, of being cared for, of being loved and protected, and of being understood. It lets your child know you are interested in him as an individual. Floor time opens opportunities for your child to process vague, half-formed feelings — whether the feelings are needy, angry, anxious, sad, or anything else — within the loving container of your relationship.

For further reading about using child-directed play to promote security, trust, and self-worth in children, see: *Talking with Young Children About Adoption* by Watkins and Fisher; *Playground Politics* by Greenspan; and *How To Talk So Children Will Listen and How To Listen So Children Will Talk* by Adelle Faber, all available through Pact.

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