

Lifebooks: Adoption Tips for Dealing with Secrets

Secrets...we all have them. Adoptive families have too many, it seems. I'm tired of keeping secrets. They're too much work. They clutter up the relationship section of my soul. Who knows what pieces; how much do they know?

I am a child of the 1950s—a dark time for adoption. Social workers instructed adoptive parents not to discuss adoption. I was raised on 'secrets,' which made it hard to feel real and 'a part of.' Today, things are different. Aren't they?

Secrets once again came into my life when I began helping families create Lifebooks. People complained that insufficient time was the bane of Lifebook creation. Often, what was *really* holding things up was a fact—an uncomfortable or overwhelming fact—which they didn't want to share or didn't know how to share. The Lifebook went on the back burner because of the secret.

A secret for one family is dinner table discussion for another; much of how you communicate is learned from your family of origin. No one starts off parenting with a plan to deceive a child. Families fall into these dark spots by accident. It's that age-old parental desire to 'protect' that is a prime motivator.

Who wants their child to feel pain? To feel different, or somehow 'less than'? There is never a good time to disclose many difficult facts. But waiting can turn information into a secret. Suddenly, what was innocently tucked away is now under lock and key.

Here are a few questions to help you assess your child's history and whether or not to hold back: The proactive approach, often via a Lifebook, typically works best to solve this problem. Get free tips on lifebook creation on my website.

1. Who else has this information? What is the likelihood that it can be discovered or disclosed accidentally?
2. If your child finds out later, how will s/he feel? Will s/he still be able to trust you?
3. Is this a custom common to all adoptions in the country where your child was born? For example, in China, most babies are 'found' somewhere...but this does not change the fact that adopted children of Chinese origin will eventually ask, "Where was I found?" And whether you use the word 'abandoned' is another article!
4. How well can you lie? An innocent cover story eventually becomes a lie. Will your child sense this? How will you feel? Will this affect respect and communication?
5. Is this something your child may figure out alone, without your support? This danger exists around such realities as the existence of birth mothers and birth fathers, the fact that only girls seem to be adopted from China, and that sometimes birth mothers later have, and try to parent, additional children.

1. Might the information be damaging to your child's self esteem right now? Do you plan to discuss it later? Plant a seed. Try saying, "This is something we will talk about when you're older." But ask yourself; is it too hard for *you* or for your child?
2. Is this something you think the outside world will judge? Try to evaluate which is more important, your child's ability to trust in and attach to you, or the potential fallout from the outside world.
3. Is the birth fact something that other children will know about? For example, many school-age children are told that internationally adopted children come from orphanages. Who can protect your child from racial jeers or insults about Orphan Annie? Be proactive.
4. Is it possible that a child might hear this information differently? Adults have years of experiential input and developed values, whereas a child might simply take in the information without judgment.
5. Is it a secret through omission? What we don't talk about is sometimes more emotionally charged than what is said. The silence says, "This must be so bad that it's unspeakable." Often the adopted child fills in the blank with stories much scarier than reality.

As an adoptee, the older I became, the more important finding out the pieces to my story became. Those found facts filled in the grief-ache, and the missing facts eventually became 'just the way it is.' Some of my story is not pretty. But it is my story. I would not have wanted one person to have lied or protected me 'for my own good.'

It is so valuable to let children hear the pride in our voices as we discuss their birth countries and caretakers from early years. They too, will feel proud of their heritage.

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