

Adoptive Parents = Real Parents
Teaching This Equation at School and at Home
By Deborah McCurdy

“They’re not your real parents!”

The little girls’ words were not meant to hurt. At 8, she was struggling to understand her own adoption. But our adopted son was hearing these words for the first time, at the age of 5. And he was devastated.

For weeks, Mark could not bring himself to share the incident, nor his pain, with us. What terrible thing might happen if he did? His behavior showed he was troubled, but when he came to our room at night complaining of monsters, he could not speak of his underlying fears.

One evening, as he lay with his head on my lap, with my hand stroking his forehead, Mark broke into sobs and burst out with his terrible discovery: “Becky says you’re not my real parents!”

I hugged and reassured him. He had known for a long time that he was adopted and that this meant his “first parents” could not take care of him. He knew that we had become his “forever parents” because we were able to provide food and toys and clothes, and because we very much wanted a little boy like him. As a social worker in adoption, I had read all about “telling” and had thought that our explanations had covered all the bases.

But we had never dealt with the question of “real” parentage. It simply had not occurred to us that other children would openly assert that “forever parents” were not real parents. Yet this has happened to Mark at least three times in the years he has been in school.

Mark knows what to answer now: “Yes, they *are* my real parents,” he will insist, “Because they are the ones who are bringing me up.” If the other child persists, he will say, “You’re confused about that!”

It is not only the children who experience this confusion. Their parents and other adults tend to define adoption as something that happens when your “real parents” can’t keep you. The problem is largely with our language, since the term “birth parents” is not yet in common parlance and it is the first parents who traditionally have been referred to as “real parents.”

Of course, our language reflects the perceptions and values of past generations, and it has not caught up with our more modern concepts of adoption. I have often heard pre-adoptive parents say, “We have two children of our own and now we’d like to adopt.” These parents are caught by the limitations of outdated language, which does not yet reflect their own progressive thinking and feeling. Although they may already think of the children to be adopted as their own, they can find no words besides “own” to distinguish children born to them from those they plan to adopt.

What can adoptive parents and teachers and other concerned adults do to help adopted children feel fully a part of their families? Several suggestions come to mind:

1. **Work on the problem of language.** In the course of the adoption process, adoptive parents learn to say, “Sarah and John were born to us, and Maria was adopted,” when they are asked which children are their own. They are urged to help their families, and the parents and teachers of their child’s playmates, to avoid the use of “real parents” when talking about birth parents. I now make a point of asking new adoptive parents to tell their children *before kindergarten* that they are their real parents by adoption and to add that other people “may be confused about this.” This needs to be gone over more than once. The point to stress to your child is that “real parents are the people who bring you up,” and that the child is *your own* child, by adoption.
2. **Keep the birth parents’ role in the past.** The first parents must be spoken of sympathetically, as adopted children need to feel pride in their origins. They need to feel that their birth parents would certainly have kept them if they could have. But they should be told they have new parents now. It is very important for adopted children to know that they are where they are meant to be – that the first parents made a loving plan for them to be with their adoptive families *forever*.

I believe that it is a mistake to make the birth parents too real by speaking of them frequently, or glowingly, or in great detail, when children are small. Although birth parents have their own reality, we do not want our children to worry that there are people out there who have a claim on them and may try to take them back. There are simple ways to clarify that you are the child’s real parents now. Some adoptive parents refer to the birth parents by their first names, if known. Others may feel comfortable with the term “first parents,” used in conjunction with “forever parents.” There will be plenty of time later on to help curious older children get a clearer, more detailed understanding of their birth parents. (Adoption workers do recommend that adoptive parents try to obtain as much specific non-identifying information as possible about the birth parents and their circumstances, and that they present this information in a favorable light as the child seems ready for it.)

3. **Speak positively about adoption as one good way that children come to parents.** It is best for adults not to speak of adopted children as “special” or “chosen,” lest the child come to feel over the years that those adults overemphasized their differences. Every adoption is a story of pain and loss, as well as a story of fulfillment and love. Thoughtful parents speak with pride of their adoption and the pleasure the child has brought them. At the same time, they need to be open to hearing the child’s concerns about having been given up by the birth parents. These concerns tend to surface when a child is about eight or ten, no matter how well the adoption has been handled. “Adaptive grieving” is a normal process, entailing some uncertainty and confusion and – for some children – a degree of sadness over the loss of birth parents. It is important for parents to let their children know that these are normal feelings for adopted children to have, and that they will get through this time of uncertainty or sadness. If the feelings are strong and persist a long time, parents can have their child evaluated as to whether brief psychotherapy may be helpful.

Parents should realize that their child’s feelings do not indicate that they are doing something wrong. Adoptive parents generally do a good job if they feel like real parents, with children who are fully their own whether or not they match them in race and color. As long as these parents are open about adoption, speak freely and naturally on the subject, and think of adoption as a truly positive

alternative to childbirth, their children will learn to view their adoption with pride and should feel fully a part of their families.

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