

Supporting a child through loss

Adoption is a profoundly life changing event for all involved. For the adoptive parents they have lost the opportunity to parent a biological child, for the birth parents they have lost the opportunity to parent their biological child and for the adoptee, they have lost the opportunity to be raised within their biological family.

For many children they begin to hear their adoption story as a positive explanation as to how they joined their adoptive family. It is only with age and maturity that they understand the ramifications of what being adopted actually means. To be part of this adoptive family means they had to leave another family. This understanding of the complexities of adoptions starts to develop in the primary years, usually somewhere between the ages of 6 to 12 years. It's a time when the penny drops from an intellectual understanding to an emotional understanding of adoption. This developmental stage is commonly referred to as Adaptive Grieving.

It is important to talk openly with your child about their feelings and to be aware that your child may not talk about their thoughts and feelings towards adoption but may express their emotions through their behaviour. Adopted children may feel that there is something wrong with them which is why they were placed for adoption but they may express this by being withdrawn or alternatively through anger.

As a parent it can be very difficult to watch your child experiencing any kind of pain, particularly the grief surrounding their adoption. A natural response as a parent may be to try and minimise or shield your child from their pain. When you as a parent move into problem solving however, it gives the message that you are not interested in your child's experience. Unfortunately this can lead to your child believing that their loss is insignificant and that they as individuals are not important. When children believe that their experiences are not important or valid then this can lead to them hiding their emotions from you which puts up an emotional barrier between you and your child. Alternatively they may choose to explain your apparent unwillingness to talk about their pain because it somehow causes you pain and they therefore believe that not talking about their own feelings will somehow protect you from your feelings of sadness.

An empathic response would be to sit with your child and acknowledge their grief without trying to solve the problem. If your child expresses their grief by saying "I miss my birth mother" a simple empathic response would be "I think that must be really sad for you". If your child expresses their grief by being angry and for example saying that they hate their birth mother, a response that indicates to your child that you understand how they are feeling would be to acknowledge the situation, for example, "I know it's really hard for you that your birth mother hasn't been in contact. I think if I was you I'd feel really angry and disappointed too". With this type of response you are acknowledging your child's experience and giving them an emotional language for their feelings.

By joining emotionally with your child you are building your bonds as parent and child, you are giving your child an emotional language and you are letting them know it's ok to feel the way they feel.

Children do not innately know the language for feelings and can sometimes be scared by the depths of their emotions. You as a parent need to help your child find the words for their feelings and to help them understand their very real loss experience.

Problem solving can come later once you have supported your child emotionally. The most important thing you can do to support your child through loss is to simply be there with them.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

NSW/ACT Post Adoption Resource Centre Locked Bag 6002 Hurstville NSW 1481 T 02 9504 6788 F 02 9570 2699 E parc@bensoc.org.au www.bensoc.org.au	<u>QLD</u> Post Adoption Support Queensland Brisbane, QLD 4000 T 1 300 914 819 E pasq@bensoc.org.au www.bensoc.org.au
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