

Open Adoption over the Years

Birth - 3 years

- Develop positive adoption language (“birth mother” rather than “real mother”)
- Use positive voice tone and facial expressions when talking about adoption and birth family
- Talk about adoption and their adoption story often! The child should grow up knowing they are adopted as they grow up knowing their gender

3 - 7 years

- Children love to hear and internalize their adoption story, so tell it often
- Answer questions simply, a child’s thinking is concrete at this stage
- As curiosity about being born arises, explain that the child grew inside his or her birth mother
- Include information about birth father's involvement when telling the story
- Child begins to understand that they gained a family through adoption, but they also lost one. Explain that it was the birth family's plan for the adoptive family to raise the child
- Emphasize permanence in the adoptive family to promote secure attachment
- Children benefit from concrete evidence of birth parent's care such as physical contact and gifts
- Children can sense a parent's discomfort with questions or contact, remain positive!

8 - 12 years

- Curiosity increases: Provide information that you can, but know that the answers are not always as important as validating questions and emotions
- Use child’s problem solving skills to address concerns. Ask them what they think about their birth family’s decision to place him or her for adoption, for example. This can also reveal emotions otherwise unaddressed.
- May worry about being disloyal to adoptive families by interacting with birth family
- Reassure the child that they can love two sets of parents
- Share as much information as possible before adolescence, or have birth parents share, to promote honesty and understanding
- A birth parent sharing about their physical development during this phase of the child’s life may be particularly helpful
- May deal with insecurity surrounding loss and grief wondering if they will lose another set of parents. Reassure child of belonging to adoptive family

12 - 15 years

- Children may express anger as an attempt to exert their independence and separation
- Allow child to make decisions and thus have some control in setting the pace of contact with birth families
- Often an increase curiosity about other birth family members, such as birth father, birth grandparents, and other children. Provide clarity in relationships and roles. A child may have two sets of parents, and two sets of relatives, but with very different roles
- In relating to birth parent, the child may cope using rejection or denial. Encourage birth parent to continue with contact to demonstrate their continued care and concern for the child and to facilitate grief processing

15 - 19 years

- Moving toward independence may bring about new sense of loss and perhaps depression
- Communicate that the child may remain at home after graduation to ease the transition
- Assist child in taking ownership over the relationship with birth family
- Be prepared for overreactions when relationships fail, such as if birth family members become less involved

Adapted from: Keefer, B., & Schooler, J. E. (2000). *Telling the truth to your adopted or foster child*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey; Dorner, P. M., & Silber, K. (1990). *Children of open adoption*. San Antonio, TX: Corona Publishing Company; Melina, L. R., & Roszia, S. K. (1993). *The open adoption experience*. New York: HarperPerennial.