

The TRUTH

“The Truth and Nothing but the Truth”

by Jayne Schooler, 1996



Sharing with Children about Their Unpleasant Past: The Adoptive Parents' Challenging Task

“If we aren’t straight with our children about their past, they will pick up on it and fantasize something that may be much worse.” Carol Williams, University of North Carolina

Why is it difficult to do?

Sharing with a child about an unpleasant past is difficult for both workers and parents. The details seem far too painful. Yet, according to Claudia Jewitt, the missing pieces are often those pieces that make sense to the child and fill in the blanks.

“The information is a relief for these children,” Jewitt says, “because it takes the responsibility for what happened off the child. They need to know that they weren’t placed for adoption because of something they did.”¹

Knowing that it is the right thing to do and knowing just how to do it are two different things. Just how does a worker or parent carry out this an unpleasant task?

Sharing about Abandonment

Adults abandon children when life circumstances become overwhelming. One thing a parent can point out, according to Jewitt, is to ask the child, “Have you ever had a real hard thing to do? Did you get frustrated? What did you want to do?” “Leave it” is generally the answer. The child perhaps can relate to the emotion of frustration.

Points parents and workers can make:

- People abandoned children out of fear, confusion, and frustration.
- Children are hard to care for and some people can not handle the responsibility.
- A child’s behavior is not the cause of abandonment.

- Adoptive parents will not abandon the child in tough times.

Sharing about Physical Abuse

A child is not slapped, screamed at, or hit because he is a bad child. He is treated that way because the adults in his life are out of control.

In helping a child to understand parental anger, Jewitt suggests to ask the child, “When you are angry, do you feel like hitting someone?” This question will help a child understand in a small way why people hit when they are angry, even though they know it is wrong.

Points parents and workers can make:

- When children are hit, the adult is out of control.
- Parents, often frustrated by life circumstances, take their anger out on their children, even when they know it is wrong.
- It is possible that their parents experienced the same trauma of abuse growing up, and it is the only way they know to handle their anger.
- What the parent does is not the child’s fault.

Sharing about Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is a type of abuse that causes children to feel partially responsible. Perhaps the abuser indicated this to the child. An abuser perhaps told the child he wanted to be close to him in a special way, yet he knew it was wrong. The child often suffers with fear by keeping the secret and guilt after releasing the truth. Both those emotions must be recognized by parents and workers and addressed.

Points parents and workers can make:

- Sexual abuse is never the fault of the child.
- The abuser touched you in ways that were not right, and he is totally responsible for his actions.
- The child was completely right in disclosing the abuse, even if the non-offending parent expressed anger or unbelief.
- The child may have feelings of anger and confusion that he/she should feel safe to express.

Sharing about Substance Abuse

Children who were placed for adoption may have vivid or vague memories of what life was like living with someone who abuses alcohol or drugs. Children need to have the opportunity to talk about their memories of not having food to eat, not having clean clothes to wear, or a clean bed to sleep in. Children need to share their fears of the chronically absent, abusive, or “spaced-out” parent.

Points parents and workers can make:

- You did not cause your parent’s drinking or drug problem.
- Your parent acted like they did toward you because he/she was taking drugs or drinking too much.
- They did not have control over their problem, and you needed to be in a safe and secure place to finish growing up.

Sharing about Mental Illness

Claudia Jewitt says, “*Children who are placed for adoption because of a parent’s mental illness can be helped to remember or understand behavior that was not consistent with appropriate parenting. Perhaps the child remembers the parent being depressed...or observed rapid mood changes, making it hard to know what to do*”. Jewitt encourages adoptive parents or workers to help the child make the connection with their life experiences. “They may have been afraid of something other people told them not to fear, or they

may have had difficulty knowing if they were dreaming or awake.”ⁱⁱ

Points parents and workers can make:

- Your parent was very upset in his feelings, and that kept him/her very confused. They couldn’t make good decisions on how to take care of you.
- It was important that you could finish growing up in a safe home.
- Your parent had this problem before you were born.
- You didn’t cause your parent’s condition.

Sharing about Lawbreaking

Occasionally, children enter into the system, and eventually foster care and adoption, because their parent is incarcerated. Although this knowledge casts a shadow over the child’s perception of his parent, it is important he knows the truth.

Children need to understand that sometimes adults make bad decisions that have long term consequences. When the parent chose to break the law (name the offense age-appropriately), he/she will suffer long term consequences.

Points parents and workers can make:

- Your parent chose to break the law because he/she thought it would help him/her solve her problems. It did not.
- Your parent’s decision resulted in his/her being sent to jail for a long time.
- Because they will be in jail for a long time, the court decided that it would be too long a time for you to be without a family.

Whatever the situation regarding a child’s history, the truth is paramount. One adult adoptee, in learning of the criminal past of her parents said. “It is not a pretty truth, but at least it is the truth. Now I can go on with my life without the make-believe.”

Quoted from *The Adopted Child*, June, 1985. 2 Ibid.