

School and Adoption—Answering Adoption-Related Questions: Adoptees and Brothers and Sisters Need Responses!

As school gets in motion across the country, many adoptive parents wonder about the potential for adoption-related issues to arise in the classroom and on the playground. Of particular concern is how the adoptee should respond when questioned about his or her adoptive status. Questions like, “Why don’t you look like your mom or dad?” “What happened to your ‘real’ mother?” “Where are you from?” “Why were you adopted?” — and many more will crop up! Adopted children need to be prepared with answers.

Yet, so do their siblings! Brothers and sisters receive the same types of queries, “Where is your sister from?” “Why doesn’t your brother look like the rest of your family?” “Why was your sister adopted?” “Where are your brother’s ‘real’ mom and dad?” “How come your sister had to be adopted?” “Why did your family adopt?” “What is adoption?” “Is Sally your ‘real’ sister?”

In cases in which the adoptee with a history of trauma displays negative behavior in the school setting, brothers and sisters also receive additional questions,

Abigail entered the family at age 9. She and her typically-developing sibling, John, attended the same school. One day, Abigail was found eating food off of girls’ lavatory floor. A preceding student had apparently dropped it. The news of this behavior passed through the school quickly. At recess, numerous fellow classmates asked John, “What is wrong with your sister?”

Randy’s family adopted Sean when he was 6 years old. Randy and Sean attended the same school. Randy was four years older than Sean. Each day, Sean struggled with emotional regulation. The school’s response was to have Randy come to Sean’s class to assist in calming him down. This interrupted Randy’s education as well as it caused his class-mates to wonder what was going on. “Where was Randy going every day?” “What is the problem with his brother?” It wasn’t long before questions were posed to Randy about his brother’s behavior.

These are but two of the many examples that could be presented! Troubled adoptees often steal from fellow classmates or rummage through the other students’ lunches for extra snacks. In one case I worked, a young adoptee exposed himself —frequently—on the kickball field. Comments flew all over in this situation. His sister heard, “Your brother is a pervert” over and over again!

Parents need to help all their children respond to the wide array of questions that may be posed. Below are some ideas and resources for Moms and Dads to utilize.

Helping Brothers and Sisters Respond to Behavioral Related Questions

School should be a time of learning, making friends and having a ton of fun! Yet, for some brothers and sisters in adoption, there may be trying times if their adopted sibling acts poorly during the school day. Parents express many valid concerns about the impact of these negative behaviors on their typical children. (Of course, there are concerns for the adoptee as well.)

Overall, *parents want to encourage communication.* Moms and Dads want to know what types of questions and comments are being put forth. This isn’t for the purpose of “tattling.” This is to help the son or daughter field the queries or remarks. This is to prevent a build-up of resentment. We also want to process the embarrassment as well! Of course, it is embarrassing

that your sister is eating off the bathroom floor, or that your brother displays his penis in front of peers! Pent up feelings spill out in the home via hurtful shouts, “I wish we didn’t adopt you!” “I wish you would go back to China!”

Rather, *parents want to make statements containing feelings* once informed of situations. “I get mad and embarrassed by your brother’s _____ (insert behavior) as well. It is so difficult at times. Let’s sit down and talk about how this makes you feel.”

Parents will often need to be proactive in opening the lines of communication. Typical siblings frequently harbor their thoughts and feelings pertaining to their adopted sibling. They believe a positive attitude is to be expected—“He didn’t have life as good as I have.” However, even when parents are happy to assist, some siblings will keep their questions and concerns to themselves. These resident children feel their parent is too stressed or saddened by the adopted child’s needs. So, they keep quiet in order to try to be helpful to their parents.

Once communication is flowing, and feelings are validated, *Moms and Dads want to offer some guidelines for responding to the questions peers pose.* Children often feel they need to answer questions. They need permission to say, “I would rather not talk about that.” “Please ask my mom to explain that.” Such answers can be followed with a change of subject. “Did you win your soccer game yesterday?” “How do you think you did on the Social Studies test? I thought it was hard!” This allows for a natural and smooth transition away from the more troubling matter.

Consider role-playing the potential responses. This will ensure children have heard and understand their possible solutions, and practice lends to confidence in the delivery phase!

At times, parents need to intervene and resolve such situations. Parents will help discern what is acceptable for the child to handle and what matters require parental intervention.

So, the coping skill of most importance for children to learn is to rely on parents!

For further consideration, our previous post, *Where are the Support Groups for Typical Children* lends to the need for typical siblings in adoptive families to have access to the same types of supports that parents and adoptees find beneficial.

Helping All the Kids Respond to Adoption-Related Questions

Resources that help kids respond to adoption-related questions are mostly geared for the adopted kids. Yet, because the questions are similar for the typical kids, these workbooks can easily be adapted to fit the needs of all the kids in your family!

[W.I.S.E. Up Powerbook](#)

The Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) puts forth this 28-page workbook. It is designed for parents and adopted kids to complete jointly. Again, the text can be easily adapted for the brothers and sisters as well. The letters, “W”, “I”, “S” and “E”, each stand for a way adopted children can respond to a peer queries like, “Where are you from?” Your son or daughter may opt to respond with an “S” response — “Share Something” “I’m an American, but I am originally from China. We read in class that lots of Americans came from other countries.” The workbook covers an assortment of the more common questions adoptees face once in the

academic setting, and it offers ways to respond using each letter of “W.I.S.E.” “Wise up” your child today! Give him or her the power to choose how to talk about adoption with others!

[Adoption Awareness: Handling Awkward Adoption Questions and Comments](#)

Christine Mitchell offers us this 18-page booklet. This resource covers basic questions that most adopted children must field throughout their academic years, as well as queries resulting from transcultural adoption status, remarks that arise out of sibling rivalry and the ever prominent topic in today’s school age—bullying! She also offers four choices of responses: gain more time to decide how to respond, decline to answer the question, deflect the question to an adult and explain that the comment is hurtful.

Christine gives parents guidance about how to start a dialogue with your sons or daughters, and how to help your child decide what to share and what to keep private.

This point of privacy is crucial. It is quite common that brothers and sisters—related by birth to the adoptee or not—are privy to personal facts about the adoptee’s pre-adoptive history. Thus, each child with knowledge needs to know what information is private and should stay in the family. (Certainly, many family matters besides adoption are private. Often, children are familiar with this concept.) This is not because there should be embarrassment about what happened to the adoptee that experienced trauma, and this is not because there is something “wrong” with or “bad” about the adoptee because of his or her pre-adoptive experiences. It is because the adoptee’s history is a private family matter—this may be especially true when relationships in the school setting can be effected.

Let’s look at an example,

Dolores and Rob adopted two siblings, Eric and Rhonda, when they were 10 and 9 respectively. The family acquired therapy shortly after the adoption was finalized and during this course of therapy, Rhonda revealed much sexual abuse. As this abuse was processed, both Eric and Rhonda began to make significant gains in functioning. Rhonda made friends for the first time in her life.

At a sleepover, she spontaneously told the other girls about the sexual abuse—in detail. These 12-year-old peers had no idea how to react to this news. Some changed the subject and some decided to go to bed early. Rhonda was perplexed. As Rhonda and Dolores were driving home from the sleepover, she told Dolores what had happened. Dolores helped her understand that her friends were only beginning to learn about sexual matters and so they lacked the knowledge to respond to her. She encouraged Rhonda to keep her past private. This talk helped Rhonda rebound from the events of the sleepover quickly.

However, on Monday morning when school resumed, some of her friends were polite but distant. It took several weeks for them to move beyond Rhonda’s disclosures and resume their friendship with her. Worse yet, Rhonda’s friends shared the information with other friends. In short order, one of Eric’s peers started referring to Eric as “gay.” Eric’s sexual abuse included that his birthmother let men have anal intercourse with Eric in return for payment. Eric was devastated. Over the next few months, his behavior deteriorated. One day in therapy he stated, “Every time I walk down the hall at school, I wonder who knows what happened to me and what they think about me. Every day I see the memories of the sexual abuse in my head. I can’t stop

thinking about what happened to me now. I feel different from all of the other kids. I don't belong anymore."

Eric's story helps us understand why conversations about privacy are essential. Privacy contains an element of control over the information. Privacy allows that children are protected from rude and hurtful remarks, lack of understanding or the pity of others. In Eric's case, this control was lost. Eric was profoundly affected.

We need to help all of the children in the family develop a "cover story" to ensure that privacy is protected. Parents and children can put together a story that covers the need to provide some information without revealing facts that could prove to hurt the adoptee.

In conclusion, being prepared gives kids the confidence necessary to navigate the world while away from their parents. If you haven't tackled this area of questions and comments, go ahead and get started today! Our "Readings and Resources" (right) offer more suggestions so you can create just the right responses or "cover story" to meet your family's needs!