



# Your Child's Adoption Life Story

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Kevin, a tall, handsome adolescent with a winning smile and matching personality, always looked forward to family Thanksgiving gatherings. It was a time when his home overflowed with people, noise, and food for three days. This year was not going to be any different—or so he thought. However, by the end of Thanksgiving weekend, Kevin’s realization of who he is and the circumstances surrounding his adoption would be forever changed.

Kevin had always known he was adopted. When he was 18 months old, he had entered foster care because his mother had died from an undisclosed illness and his father, in distress, left Kevin with a neighbor and never came back. He was adopted by his foster parents a year later, the youngest of three children in the family.

Late Thanksgiving evening, Kevin and his cousin were playing Ping-Pong in the basement. He stood shell-shocked as his cousin told him the truth about his birth parents. Kevin’s mother did not die from an undisclosed illness. She died a drug addict and his father did not leave, at least not voluntarily; he was in prison.

Kevin was devastated by the words of his cousin and broken by what he felt was his parents’ betrayal, though he never mentioned it to them. Before long, he began to withdraw from them and become increasingly angry and sullen. His parents were dumbfounded. What was going on? Was it a problem with school? With friends? No, Kevin was angry because he was hurt knowing that his parents had kept important information from him. Why did they not tell him the truth about his birth parents?

So much damage can be done when the truth is concealed—even if it’s an attempt to protect someone’s feelings. This *Handbook on Thriving as an Adoptive Family* “bonus” chapter explores sharing an adopted child’s story with him—the whole truth. We will examine the power of keeping secrets, why children need to know their story, five principles to follow in telling the story, a practical tool for telling the story, and God’s message about your child’s life story.

## **The Power of Family Secrets**

Secrets are powerful tools often used to hide a family’s potentially embarrassing or shameful event. But when discovered, family secrets can destroy the love and trust the family has fought so hard to build. What else can secrets do?

### ***Secrets Alter Reality***

Katie was adopted as an infant and everyone knew that except Katie. One afternoon, when she was 11 years old, a friend at school asked her a casual question: “Do you know your birth mother’s name?” Katie didn’t know what to say.



“Birthmother? What are you talking about?” Her friend went on to tell her that her mother had said Katie was adopted and had another mother somewhere. Katie didn’t know how to answer. But she did know how she felt—shocked and scared. Her world had changed. She did not know what to do with her feelings and this new reality. Secrets not only alter reality but they can create exclusion and division.

### ***Secrets Create Exclusion and Division***

Keeping a secret can divide family members—those who know the secret and those who do not. To keep a secret, according to Harriet Webster in *Family Secrets*, the secret-keeper must carefully guard all communication with others close to him. This defense mode often leads to distance, anxiety, and awkwardness in relationships with others.<sup>i</sup> When there is exclusion from the truth, there will be division. Where there is division the probability of mutual caring, mutual understanding, and mutual honesty is diminished.<sup>ii</sup>

## **Why Children Need to Know Their Adoption Story**

Experts cite four compelling reasons why children need to know their adoption story.

### ***To Know the Truth, Not Fantasy***

When children join their families through adoption and do not hear their story, they sometimes fill the vacuum with fantasy. Jonathan, age 10, imagined that his birthmother lived in a beautiful home near the ocean and when he was older, he would visit her. The problem? Jonathan’s mother was in prison and would be for a long time. Jonathan walked on the quicksand created by fantasy instead of truth.

### ***To Build a Connection from the Past to Present and to the Future***

Whether children enter adoptive homes as infants or older children, they bring a past with them. Having little or no information about the people in the past and the circumstances that led to adoption can leave those who are adopted with deep and pervasive feelings of being disconnected. A child’s story is the bridge that connects the past to the present and beyond.

### ***To Build Trust in Parents and Other Important People***

One of the most important issues for those who are adopted is trust. A major task for adoptive parents is to create an environment where adoption can be discussed freely, openly, and honestly.

A longtime expert in the field of adoption, Dr. Randolph Severson, commented that when adopted persons find out the secret(s), they state that they have suspected it, but have never admitted that. Severson explains, “There were probably subtle hints along the way, such as lack of pictures during pregnancy or coming home from the hospital. There were probably no stories unless they were fabricated. Some have resurrected memories of whispers at family gatherings. As the truth emerges, there is a rhythm of shock, anger and relief.”<sup>iii</sup>



***To Have the Need to Know Validated and Affirmed***

When adopted children grow up in an environment where no one talks of the past or mentions their birth family, they receive a message: Do not ask. Dr. Severson illustrates the subtlety of this message. “Think back to growing up. Did you have a pet that died? Did you have a pet that disappeared? Which one was more difficult to get over? The pet that died or the one that disappeared? The answer is the pet that disappeared. With death comes closure. With disappearance, one is sentenced to a lifetime of wondering.”<sup>iv</sup>

For adopted children, having no ability to know what happened to the significant people in their lives sentences them to a lifetime of wondering. One adopted teen commented, “I know I have a birth family out there somewhere. Some days I actually look into crowds hoping maybe to see someone that looks like me.”

**Principles for Telling a Child’s Life Story**

Adoptive parents face a unique task. They need to share their child’s adoption story with them, while demonstrating compassion and cultural sensitivity. Following are five principles for sharing the story:

***Tell the Truth***

When you share your child’s adoption story, adapt it so that it is developmentally appropriate. Honesty is the foundation of healthy communication.

***Use Positive, Accurate Adoption Language***

Words are powerful because they have meaning. Too often when talking about adoption, adults tend to use words that give a negative impression. An example of this is the phrase “Why were you put up for adoption?” This leads the adoptee to feel like a piece of merchandise marketed to the highest bidder. Other words such as “adopted out” or “given away” or “real parent” do not accurately describe the adoption experience. Therefore, we must use words and phrases that define adoption positively.

By using positive and accurate language, we educate others about adoption. We choose emotionally “correct” words over emotionally-laden words. We speak and write in appropriate adoption language with the hopes of influencing others so that this language will someday be the norm.<sup>v</sup>

<i>Accurate Language</i>	<i>Less Accurate Language</i>
Birthparent	Real parent, natural parent
My child	Adopted child; own child
Choosing an adoption plan	Giving away, giving up your child
Finding a family to parent your child	Putting your child up for adoption
Deciding to parent the child	Keeping your baby
Person/Individual who was adopted	Adoptee
To parent	To keep
Child in need of a family	Adoptable child; available child



Parent	Adoptive parent
International or inter-country adoption	Foreign adoption
Child who has special needs	Handicapped child, hard to place
Child from another country	Foreign child
Was adopted	Is adopted
Birth relative	Blood relative

***Remember the Child Knows More Than You Think***

It is important to know, specifically for older adopted children, what the abuse or neglect was— because it happened to them. We should talk about life experiences they lived through. They may have been pre-verbal when it happened, but it does not mean they do not remember. Children can also be good detectives, interviewing others (siblings or other relatives) and/or looking through parents’ papers to find information. They may also remember more than parents realize. Failing to provide an atmosphere where a child can ask difficult questions is like allowing an elephant to live in the middle of the family living room. There is always a sense that something is not being talked about. Children learn early on from the open or closed communication environment just how they are to handle sensitive issues—whether to tiptoe around them or deal with them directly.

***Do Not Place Value Judgments on the Child’s Story***

The realities of a child’s life should not be withheld. However, some of these truths should be shared with demonstrated compassion toward the child who may have been neglected, abused, or abandoned. There are probably no parents who ever, as children, dreamed of becoming drug addicts or felons. Yet they did. Sometimes people become entangled in horrendous life circumstances in which they make choices that would be different if their lives had taken other paths. Poor choices do not justify wrong actions, but perhaps a truthful but compassionate perspective will lead a child to understand and maybe one day forgive her birth parents.

***Don’t Forget, It Is the Child’s Story***

A child should have control over his or her own story. Of course, parents love to share the story of how their child came to them. That is good. They love to share stories of an anecdotal nature. That’s good as well. However, what should be kept for only the child to tell when he chooses are the difficult parts of the story. Those things remain private.

It is not the adult’s responsibility or choice to share the story of a child’s past physical, emotional or sexual abuse, abandonment, or trauma. It is not the adult’s responsibility to fill in all the gaps in the child’s story to those outside the family. Once a parent does that, the child has lost control of information that is only his to tell when he is ready, wants to, or needs to.

The child should be told that his adoption story is for him to tell.<sup>vi</sup>



## A Tool for Telling a Child's Life Story

There are many creative ways for adoptive parents to share their child's adoption story. Telling the story should not be a one-time event but an ongoing process as the child grows. An effective tool for doing just that is the life story book.

### ***Developing a Child's Life Story Book***

Much like a child's baby book, the life story book captures and preserves the details of a child's past before she entered the adoptive family. It connects the past to the present and provides continuity of the child's life story.

If a child enters her adoptive home as an infant, she will probably have no memory of the people in the past. This is also true for toddlers or older children. The adoptive parents' task is to become the child's memory storehouse and to fill in memory gaps with any information they can gather.

*Children will ask the questions they feel they have the permission to ask. They have to be grounded enough and whole enough to ask questions they feel they don't have permission to ask.*

— Jane Hoyt-Oliver, LISW, Ph.D., Chair of Social Work Program, Malone College

### ***What Goes Inside the Life Story Book?***

The following information, if available, can be written into a child's life book:

- **Birth information:** such as birth certificate, height, weight, time of birth, all the usual information that would be included in a baby book.
- **Why the adoption occurred:** This can be written as a story and over time can be completed in a way to meet the child's developmental needs. The reasons for placement and the places the child lived before adoption can be woven into the story. Letters and pictures from birth parents and/or former caregivers should also be included if available.
- **Developmental information:** significant milestones of development. If children were previously in foster care before being adopted, this information may have been recorded by foster parents, who are often encouraged to create life story books for children in their care.
- **Adoption information:** this information will bring the life story book up-to-date with the arrival of the child into the family. Pictures of the court finalization, adoption party pictures, and any special mementos should be included.

If the child is older at the time of placement, the following will expand the basic information listed above:

- **Expanded pre-adoptive placement information:** In addition to the information listed above, these things should be added if available: names and pictures of people the child was close to, including friends from school, church, scout troops, ball teams, neighborhood friends, even pets. Other things



that are important are letters, correspondence from birth family or friends, names and addresses of siblings, and mementos of special events.

- **Educational information:** If a child has moved a lot within the foster care system prior to adoption, memories of schools, teachers, and peers can be easily lost in the maze of transitions. This section of the life story book might contain such information as schools attended with dates, names, addresses, and photos (if possible) of classmates, teachers and other important adults, copies of report cards, samples of homework, special projects, pictures, and mementos of special events, awards, achievements, and certificates<sup>vii</sup>

According to Betsy Keefer Smalley of the Institute for Human Services in Columbus, Ohio, “Teens, who have spent any amount of time in foster care and enter adoption or independent living, have probably lost track of the important details of their lives. They probably do not have many mementos of their past—little or no birth information or pictures. They do not have a record of where they lived and the people with whom they lived, the schools they attended, and the achievements they obtained. Putting a life book together for a young teen requires investigative work and perseverance. However, it may be the youngster’s only link from a confusing and disjointed past to a more stable future. The life book for the teen should include as much information from birth, medical, and developmental records that can be traced.”<sup>viii</sup>

### ***Where to Find This Information***

Finding this information can be challenging. Parents should take a proactive role in gathering information. The following are suggested places to look:

- Bureau of Vital Statistics
- Case records and social/medical hospital records
- WIC clinic, hospital records
- Birth parents, extended family
- Court records, intake worker, caseworker, previous caretakers
- School teachers, counselors, adult leaders, ministers
- School personnel, teachers, yearbooks, school and community newspapers, coaches, school records, band/music directors, drama teachers<sup>ix</sup>
- Library
- City directories (including census records)
- Phone books
- Obituaries
- Genealogy web sites
- Mormon temples

### ***How and When To Use the Life Story Book***

The life story book should always be readily available to the child. However, it is highly recommended that parents keep the original life story book and make a colored copy for the child to keep. Because the life story



book is so valuable for the child, preserving it should be a high priority. Occasionally, a child may become angry and destructive, and as a result, destroy the life story book.

Bringing up the life story book and its contents to a child can be a sensitive subject. Often, birthdays and holidays are emotional triggers for loss issues. These would be good times to mention the life story book and offer to sit down with the child to go over it again.

### God's Message about Your Child's Life Story

Every adopted child has a story and that story will influence others. Some of the events of a child's life prior to adoption are not difficult to communicate. Yet for other children, their life events and stories speak of horrific physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect, trauma, abandonment, and more. The beautiful truth for adoptive parents is that God has placed children in their families for healing and redemption. The word redemption means to "restore dignity to." As God embraced us as His children to restore our dignity, in that same way, adoptive parents embrace their children.

Many children who have experienced difficult life situations come to believe that they are not worth anything and that they do not deserve good things. An adoptive parent's lifelong message to his child comes from God's Word. God's powerful truth is this:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

That message can be lived out every day as parents communicate unconditional love and acceptance, communicate belonging in the family, and picture a future of hope and promise with that child.

An enthusiastic supporter of families formed by adoption or foster care, **Jayne Schooler** currently serves as a trainer, consultant, and curriculum writer with the Institute for Human Services in Columbus, Ohio. Since 1989, Jayne has been a keynote speaker and workshop presenter on family life issues as well as foster and adoptive parent issues on state and national levels for both families and professionals. Throughout her vast experience, Jayne has authored and co-authored a number of books including *The Whole Life Adoption Book*, *Searching for a Past*, *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*, *Journeys after Adoption*, and *"Mom, Dad, I'm Pregnant" When Your Daughter or Son Faces an Unplanned Pregnancy*. Her newest book, *Embracing a Love Like No Other: Understanding the Impact of Parenting Traumatized Children on Adoptive Parents*, is due out Summer 2009.



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<sup>i</sup> Harriet Webster, *Family Secrets: How Telling and Not Telling Affects Our Children, Our Relationships and Our Lives,* (Reading: Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1991), 11.

<sup>ii</sup> Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler, *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child,* (Westport, CT: Begin and Garvey Publishers, 2000), 10.

<sup>iii</sup> Jayne E. Schooler and Betsie L. Norris, *Journeys After Adoption,* (Westport, CT: Begin and Garvey Publishers, 2002), 51.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Accurate vs. Less Accurate Language is taken from NFCA's Consider the Possibilities IAATP Training Curriculum, 2007

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Accurate vs. Less Accurate Language is taken from NFCA's Consider the Possibilities IAATP Training Curriculum, 2007

<sup>viii</sup> Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler, *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child,* (Westport, CT: Begin and Garvey Publishers, 2000), 119.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, pp. 118-20