

Adoption Conversations: What, When and How To Tell
Renée Wolfs, BAAF, 2008; ISBN 9781905664351, £12.95

For adoptive parents, opening the dialogue to 'talk adoption' with our kids can pose problems. Our own emotions, our desire to protect our children from past hurts, and even our own baggage about our children's lives pre-adoption' can get in the way. Renée Wolfs' new book is therefore a most desirable tool for our adoption parenting toolbox, covering just about every age, stage and type of adoption conversation we need to cover with our children – and which, implicitly or explicitly, our children ask us to join. A huge and refreshing plus is that the book can be used by both domestic and intercountry adoptive families, widening the scope of its use.

Wolfs is a communicator by profession - and an experienced adoptive mother of children adopted from abroad. Her book is a comprehensive distillation of the work of many adoption experts, yet very much presents her own overview of the key areas to cover when looking at the questions to be asked and answered in adoption conversation with our kids... For those concerned that a book written 'simply' by an adoptive parent for adoptive parents may be light on research, not only does Wolfs include a useful bibliography, but the book has been approved by recognised adoption workers and academics. The source materials are sound.

Wolfs suggests that initially the whole book should be read – but beyond that it's designed as a guide to pull out when parenting round adoption conversations leaves parents gasping for a friendly hand. There are eight major chapters - on parent experience and child experience of adoption, on 'telling', on handling difficult information, conversation techniques ways to talk about adoption, how to respond to questions and adoption grief. Within these Wolfs attends to the fact that children process adoption questions at different levels of understanding depending on age and gives age-banded (3-5, 5-8, 8-12+) attention to a huge range of 'conversations'. Issues at school, visits to birthcountry, dealing with birthparents' social and medical problems, managing hurtful and invasive questions, feeling insecure in the adoption, how that may manifest and how to deal with it – all are covered. We're shown how to use lifebooks, lifestory work, photos and other ways to open the dialogue with sensitivity all the while keeping the child secure in the present. What to call birthparents, grief for birthparents and what's been lost, and how the kids may manifest this grief are given comprehensive cover. This is an excellent parent manual.

Points of criticism? Minor. First, while the book has excellent coverage of its subject matter, provision of an Index would be most useful for harassed parents wishing to identify quick solutions to problems. Second, although advocating openness and truth about adoption matters, Wolfs rather oddly suggests that birthmothers should always be referred to as 'nice'. This jars; adoptive parents who dress 'what-ifs' as truths may find that their child loses faith in them should the truth be found out. Third, this book deals with conversations and solutions which are heavily verbal. Disappointingly Wolfs doesn't offer more on non-verbal behavioural issues and concomitant strategies which she glancingly references in Video Home Training; see the chapter on Conversation Techniques. This is an area which most certainly needs exploration especially for 'conversations' that parents of

intercountry adopted children may have before the child becomes proficient in their new first language. But - minor criticisms aside, this book is important. It provides key tools in opening the dialogue on adoption, keeping adoption 'on the table', helping maintain the parent/child bond through early and middle childhood - and developing a real sense of security and openness in adoptive families.

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**‘Adoption Conversations,
what, when and how to tell’,
by Renée Wolfs**

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Most adoption literature is written from a theoretical point of view, which often does little to enhance its readability. ‘The Adoption Dialogue’ has been written by an adoptive parent for adoptive parents. The book describes in a very practical way how you can discuss the known (or unknown) aspects of your adopted child’s past. The approach to this can be seen as falling into two distinct parts: Renée Wolfs discusses not only the contents of adoption dialogues but also the discussion techniques that can be employed in them. Beginning with the latter, the author gives advice as to how to react to your child in a sensitive and responsive manner, and provides suggestions about how to move such discussions forward. The themes that are addressed in the book are: the adoption experience for parents and child, telling the adoption story, talking about painful events in your child’s past, responding to questions, and adoption-related grief. The book is aimed at parents of children up to twelve years old, and is further divided into three sub-categories: 0 – 3 years, 3 – 7 years, and 7 – 12 years. Renée Wolfs naturally assumes that the vast majority of the adoption story should have been told by the age of twelve.

Both through her personal experiences and through the experiences of other adoptive parents, the author is able to discuss topics parents may be concerned with as their children grow and develop. She manages to do this in such a practical and enthusiastic manner that I had to suppress the urge to attempt her techniques before reading to the end of the book. In fact adoption counsellor Nelleke Polderman addresses this issue in her foreword. She suggests that it is advisable to read the entire book first, so that you are also aware of how to respond to the emotions that some of the subjects addressed can arouse in young children. ‘The Adoption Dialogue’ gives simultaneous advice about the age at which to address a particular topic and the best way in which to approach it. In this way, parents are able to determine their own thoughts and attitudes. For example, I have always found the word ‘foundling’ difficult to use, but the author specifically advises the use of certain words from toddler hood on. In this way, she suggests, children become accustomed to such words before they become emotionally laden.

The book also gives discussion points as to how to react in certain situations, such as, for example, questions that are asked whilst you are waiting in the line at the supermarket checkout. Every adoptive parent will recognise these: the unwelcome questions and comments from total strangers that our children are witness to. The book gives advice about how and why to respond to such comments; it emphasises the fact that, in these situations, it is the inner world of the child which is the most important. If they notice that their parents are unsure or reserved in their responses, children can perceive this as: ‘this topic is not open for discussion’. In particular, it is the first hand experiences of various adoptive parents that make the situations in the book recognisable and mean that ideas can be adapted to the readers’ individual situations.

The book contains many concrete, practical tips and examples, however every parent and child has their own way in which to talk about the past. Parents should therefore allow themselves the space to adapt the ideas in the book to their own situation, and they should not be put off by suggestions of scenarios that they might have to face in the future. However, despite the fact that my own children are still too young to ask many questions themselves, the reading of this book has given me the confidence to feel that I am able to answer their future questions in a responsible manner. No doubt I will still be surprised by unexpected questions at inappropriate times though.

Initially I read the book from cover to cover without putting it down and I have subsequently re-read relevant chapters. The fact that I read it first from cover to cover says a lot about its readability; the subject matter is covered in a clear and concise manner. The book is definitely a guide and reference worth consulting when sharing your child's adoption story with her. It also complements existing literature very well.