

Openness is irreversible and has more consequences than I anticipated

In: *'Wereldkinderen magazine'*, September 2005

By Renée Wolfs

Nowadays most parents of adopted children are aware of the importance of openness. Author Renée Wolfs is a mother of three adopted children from China, aged three, four and six years old. They never avoid complex topics of conversation, whether these are related to adoption or not. In this article she describes some of her personal experiences in relation to this.

With three Chinese children it has become impossible to remain anonymous in public. Adoption has therefore become a topic that our family is used to addressing. My children frequently raise questions and make comments about their history and their cultural and genetic identity. Why are they smaller than other children? Why do the trousers made in Holland never seem to fit? Is China even further away than The Hague or France? When will we revisit China?

Of course, the conversations about their backgrounds are not always 'easy'. Sometimes the subject triggers difficult emotions. But one fact stands; since I initiated the discussion about their adoption history, there is no way of going back. Openness is irreversible, and it has more consequences than I initially anticipated. The most important thing, therefore, is that I am well prepared and that I take my lead from the children.

Finding Places

Thus I remember a moment that took place in our bathroom a year ago. We were busy brushing teeth, as the children were getting ready to go to bed. "Mummy, can I drink from your breasts?" asks my (then) five-year-old, daughter. I rock her like a baby and she pretends to drink milk from my breasts. "I did this with my China mummy as well, didn't I?" she says. I hesitate, as I don't want to confirm this carelessly. "Maybe," I say, "but we don't know for sure because you were found very soon after you were born."

We talk for a little while about the moment at which she was abandoned. That her China mummy had probably dressed her in very warm clothes, and that she was left in a crowded place, so that her birthparents knew that she would be found quickly. She nods, knows this story off by heart. It is a secure, intimate moment and I decide to add a new fact to her story. "Would you like to know the place where you were found?" "Yes!" she says, with an eagerness that I don't recognise in her. My heart misses a beat. For a moment I delay. Then I tell her, as calmly as I possibly can. My daughter just continues to brush her teeth. "And me, Mum?" asks my younger daughter, who is just four years old, "where was I found?" As I can see that the children have remained calm, I become so too. She also has her question answered, and at my daughters' request I also share with them the finding place of their little brother.

*That which has been told
can never be taken back again*

For some time hereafter, I don't hear any more from them about their finding places. So, after about four months, I casually ask my eldest daughter: "Can you still remember where you were found?" Her eyes light up with recognition, and a split second later, without a moment's hesitation she names the place where she was found, thus convincing me that being open is irreversible. That which has been told can never be taken back again.

Birds and Bees

In the same period another fairly complex dialogue developed between my eldest daughter and I. A dialogue that, perhaps, transcends the theme of adoption, but one that was probably a result of the fact that we have been so open about the children's backgrounds. "Mum, Eva says that I'm not allowed to marry my little brother". I smile, and explain to her that in this special circumstance it would be possible. After all, they have both come from the tummies of different China mummies. At this she asks "Would I also be able to marry a girl when I grow up?" I confirm that here in the Netherlands this is also possible, but that she then wouldn't be able to grow a baby in her tummy because two women would have eggs but no seeds. At this answer, my daughter becomes quiet, she fiddles a little with the bracelet she is wearing. Then she continues, "Then I'll marry a boy after all because I do want to look after a baby". I explain to her that she could also adopt a child; but at the same time, I don't want to force this idea upon her. I suddenly think of a boy in her class, who has two mothers, and I say, "But if you marry or live with a girl, you can always borrow seeds from a boy". My daughter now has an anxious look in her eyes and fidgets in her seat. "But what if the boy I ask doesn't want to, and the next boy I ask doesn't want to either?" I reassure her that there will always be boys who are prepared to help her out. She stares at the table, pulls at her bracelet and sighs: " I think I'll just marry my brother after all."

I would never have guessed at the outset, that I would have been able to have such a complex discussion with my five- year-old daughter in such a straightforward manner. Since we initiated the discussion about her adoption story, it appears that her brain has been activated in various ways; she continues to ask questions, again and again.

True Love

How different is the communication with our four- year -old daughter, who prefers to resolve complicated issues through humour and play. We had, for example, some reservations about her starting pre-school, especially because she was still so fond of 'being the little one' and 'sitting on mummy's lap'. However, when we collected her at the end of her first day, we were looking into the eyes of a radiant girl, sitting comfortably on her new teacher's lap. Apparently it was love at first sight, and the feeling was mutual!

During those first few weeks she loved to spend as much time as possible on the lap of her wonderful new teacher. Appealing to her sense of humour, I'd sometimes tease her: "Are you going back to your new teacher again? Won't you stay here with me, for one day please?" She shook her head firmly and said: "I'm going back to cuddle my new teacher!". And she'd look at me in a teasing manner. "No, no", I'd plead, "You should cuddle *me*, not your teacher!" "But I'm going to cuddle *her*!" she answered, with a twinkle in her eye.

My daughter enjoyed this game so much, that from the second week on we played it every day. Every time she left the house she commanded: "Mum you've got to say: don't cuddle your teacher!". So I'd say it, and then she'd giggle out loud and exclaim that *of course* she was going to cuddle her teacher. I enjoyed all this as much as she did. Occasionally I'd asked "But who do you love more, your teacher or me?" And she'd happily call out "My teacher!" At this she frequently ordered me to start crying very loudly, at which she would begin to laugh even more and would then come to comfort me, because, after all, she loved me very much as well (she said...).

I was moved by her inventive play. In this way she taught herself that she was allowed to love others too, whilst simultaneously being assured that I love her tremendously, and that we have such a unique bond that I will *never* let her go.

Journey of Discovery

Of course, I am not suggesting that every family will talk in this way about adoption or other subjects. Being open brings a unique dynamic to every child and every parent and eventually each person will talk about adoption in his very own way. However, being open is also something that unites adoptive families nowadays. We are all searching for the most truthful way. A way that no previous generation has trodden so consciously.

For me 'being open' has become a journey of personal discovery. My children regularly take me by the hand to let me know what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. One of them wants to understand the facts whilst the other is searching for the boundaries of love and loyalty. Each child shows me a different way, but they also show me that I have no need to be afraid or hesitant. As long as I am honest and I observe them carefully, I can make everything accessible at a level suitable for them. However, this is achieved step by step, so that at regular intervals a small detail can be added to their world.

Renée Wolfs is the author of 'Adoption Conversations'. In this book she describes, amongst other things, the age at which a child is mature enough to understand particular information about his or her background. She also describes in detail what adoption related grief is, and how to respond to this as a parent. The book is intended for adoptive parents of children from 0 – 12 years. She is currently working on a second book about adopted teenagers.