

## **‘Adoption Conversations’ should be used creatively**

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**By: Michelle Klunder**

Author Renée Wolfs, an adoptive mother herself, found that she had many questions about the development of her adopted children. Whilst studying for a Dutch language degree, her subsidiary subject was ‘developmental psychology’. Therefore she already had some knowledge of the emotional and cognitive development of children. In addition to this however, she began to question what exactly children should be told about their adoption story, and at what age?

“I began to search for as much information about this subject as I could”, says Renée Wolfs. “In America many books have been published about ‘openness in adoption’. But most of these books were mainly focussed on psychological problems of adoptees. I also came across a number of practical books that discussed the ages and stages at which children can (or can’t) understand their background. Of course every child is different, but there are sequential steps in their development that can be identified. For example, when children reach the age of about seven or eight, they begin to understand the difference between right and wrong. As a result, the fact that they have been given up for adoption also becomes a different concept. Up until this point their adoption story may have been a fact that they were proud of: ‘I come from China and my parents travelled by plane to collect me’. Until this age, the adoption has mostly been an optimistic story about becoming a family. But the deeper meaning behind it all, namely, that the child was relinquished by his birth parents, only comes into play at around this age.”

“I think that eventually all adoptees will go through some kind of adoption related grief. This is in fact crucial in being able to move forward. It is therefore necessary that every adoptive parent recognises that being open and honest about the adoption is of vital importance. Another aspect to consider, of course, is when exactly a child is emotionally mature enough to face feelings of such great pain. With one child that may be at the age of six, yet with another it may not be until he is twelve. Extremely sensitive children may even block such feelings entirely. In such cases the grieving process will begin only when they are emotionally mature enough, or not at all. As a rule, I think that it is important that a child is told the entire story by the time he reaches the age of twelve. After this age, the child reaches puberty and he then has a whole different set of issues with which to deal. I am planning to write a sequel to ‘Adoption Conversations’ for parents with adopted teenagers.”

### **Love**

“I think parents should realise that the pain experienced by adoptive children will always remain with them. Parents are not doing anything ‘wrong’ if the grief of their adopted children do not pass. As a parent, you cannot take away that pain. The one thing you can do is to offer support to your child; not by drying the tears and buying a new bicycle, but by being prepared to deal with the grief and talk about it. Feeling sorrow really has a lot to do with love. The child has to dare to

acknowledge that he has lost something of such tremendous value. In order for the adoptee to come to terms with this, he must be allowed to reflect on this periodically.”

“I have read a lot about grief. Every person experiences loss. I have had to confront two great losses myself. Twice I was forced to work through intense pain and anger. I am no longer afraid of these emotions, not even in my children. I think that in writing this book I have been able to use not only my knowledge of the subject and my experiences as an adoptive mother, but also my personal life experiences.”

“The first draft of ‘Adoption Conversations’ was written in only nine months. After that I asked a number of people to proof read it. Adoption counsellor Nelleke Polderman and, at a later stage, Professor of Adoption Femmie Juffer, provided the necessary expertise. Besides them, some adoption parents and an adoptee read the manuscript. In total it took me a year and a half to complete the book. One aspect that I felt was particularly important while writing, was that there should be no ‘absolute truths’ in the book; All parents are unique and all children are unique. There are no firm rules, just global developments. In the book I deliberately give no explicit answers to questions. Parents should interpret what I have written creatively, they should use it according to their own insights.”

“I do advise people to read the entire book before beginning to put the ideas in it to practical use. It is not intended that, having read only a part of the book, parents begin to tell their seven year old daughter her entire adoption story without first realising what the consequences of this may be. The child may enter a grieving process, and then it is good to know how to respond to the emotions that may follow. Parents too, can experience strong emotions themselves in reading the book. Some of the adoptive parents who read the draft began to realise the enormous sorrow their young children carried with them, and that the time would inevitably come that they would have to confront it. The subject of grief itself can also call up an individual’s own, as yet unprocessed grief. This is by no means a bad thing, but it is good to know beforehand. Eventually everyone who works through a grieving process, emerges as a stronger person.”