

# Introduction

Adoptive parents today find it very difficult to understand that in past generations many adopted children learned of their adoption only late in life. Yet twenty or thirty years ago, being open about adoption was not the norm, as it is today. Generations of adoptive families could probably write many books about their experiences.

Times have changed for the better. Nowadays, parents are much more aware of the importance of openness. In the past decade, there has been an accumulation of knowledge relating to the significance of adoption for children, birth parents and adoptive parents. With this knowledge, adoption organisations and therapists are better equipped to focus their attention on the specific post-adoption problems of everyone involved. Adoptive families now have many more opportunities to ask for professional support in bringing up their adopted child. There are also a number of specialised courses for adoptive parents, and parent groups where they can meet to share experiences with each other. Additionally, with the arrival of the internet, adoptive parents today can exchange experiences with each other wherever they are, in a hitherto unprecedented way.

As a result of these changing circumstances, a new generation of

adoptive parents has developed. A generation of parents who are no longer isolated and required to rely only on their own insights into raising their adopted children. A generation of parents who are now able to pool their experiences and advice with other adoptive parents to help raise their children.

When we adopted our first child, I registered myself with various email discussion groups. Since then, I have exchanged many valuable experiences with other adoptive families. Consequently, I have never felt alone during the responsible, complicated task of raising my young adopted children. The questions we ask each other are often related to openness and to the backgrounds of our children:

**When do I begin to discuss the adoption? At what age is my child ready to hear specific information? Should I tell my child that her birth mother was a drug addict? Is it normal that my child does not want to talk about the adoption? How do I find out what my child is really going through inside? What do I do if my child is angry and says that we are not his real parents? What do I do if my child asks a question that I can't answer directly? How do I handle hurtful comments made by my child's friends or other adults? What do I do if my child says that she did not want to be adopted at all? How do I maintain good communication between myself and my child? Is it normal that my child feels so sad about the adoption? Do all adopted children feel sad? At what stage should I ask for help from an adoption specialist?**

Although most parents in the email groups are very willing to be open with their child about his or her background, in practice it seems very difficult to do so, and often, you can be caught by surprise. For example, you're in your car at a busy intersection with your children and suddenly one of them asks: 'Mum, why couldn't my mother care for me?' Or you're in a busy shop and your son says: 'You bought me, Dad, is that right?'

Even with the best of intentions, at that moment you simply don't know what to say. The reason may be that it is not the right time to provide an explanation, or perhaps parents are shocked because the question was so direct and too complicated to discuss at that moment. In other cases, parents are unsure about how much they should tell their child at that specific age, or they feel uncomfortable because the question may be closely related to their own grief about not being able to have birth children of their own.

Although these uncertainties are understandable at these moments, it is nevertheless important that adopted children are able to ask questions at any time and parents should respond in a realistic and open way. Otherwise, there is a chance that the child will feel that his parents are not comfortable talking about adoption and, as a result, instinctively come to the conclusion that questions about his background should not be asked. This could result in the child creating a fantasy world in which he makes up the answers to these questions himself. This fantasising activity can affect the development of the child's own identity in the teen years, with possible difficult consequences.

It is also important that adoptive parents teach their child to talk about their past before they start attending high school. If the child learns at a very early age (between three and seven years old) not to be afraid to talk and share fantasies about her birth parents, culture and the reasons why she was given up for adoption, she will have the best chance to further develop her self-confidence and to put her adoption into perspective.

I searched for information about "openness and communication in adoption" and gathered advice about raising adopted children from some Dutch publications. These books and brochures covered important topics, but none of them focused on communication between parents and their adopted children.

I continued my search on the internet and discovered a number of recent and practical books in the USA about "openness and

adoption". Most of these books were written by experienced, leading adoption therapists. I read a lot about the importance of openness and about the complex feelings that adoptive parents and adopted children have. Spread over many pages, I found good advice about how I could react in specific situations. However, I could still not find any adoption literature where the central focus was on "the quality of the communication".

Because I am convinced that communication between parents and their adopted child is of utmost importance, I decided that I would write a book about openness and communication in adoption to supplement the current literature. *Adoption Conversations* is the result, and has become a practical guide in which I have tried to answer the most important questions about adoption that parents may be faced with while raising their child.

While writing this guide, I became even more aware of the complex tasks parents are faced with while raising their adopted children. As adoptive parents, we need to be equipped with more effective ways to communicate with our children about certain issues, in comparison with parents who have birth children.

- We need to be more aware of our patterns of behaviour, and be able to recognise, realise and/or accept our own prejudices and fears. In this way, we have a much smaller chance of transferring our unresolved emotions to our adopted children.
- We have to learn more about the emotional and cognitive development of our children at various stages of life. By doing this, we can relate better to what our children are going through and then reach out to them, understand them and support them during various development stages. We can also better interpret specific questions regarding their adoption and their insecure feelings as a result of being separated from their birth parents.
- We should ideally establish a form of communication that stimulates bonding. For adopted children, this builds more self-confidence, which automatically leads to more openness on the part of the child during conversations.

- We must immerse ourselves in the grieving process that our children experience as a result of their adoption. This offers support for our children during periods when they are feeling anxious, sad or angry about their adoption.

It is easy to treat the theories in this book as "absolute truths". However, this is not my intention. Each child and each parent is different. It is not a given that 'by definition all children of a certain age experience the same problems' or that 'at specific ages, they should be told certain things about their past'. My book is focused on providing practical, communication guidelines; one parent might feel challenged by some of the advice offered, another parent may not. Hopefully, this book will provide insights into adoption topics that you may be faced with periodically and give you tools which you can use to guide your child.

I would also like to emphasise here that I do not wish to stigmatise adopted children in any way. It is true that this book is about the problematic issues you may be faced with while raising your adopted child, but of course it is not the case that you will be dealing with these issues on a daily basis. Adopted children are different, but also belong to the family in a normal way. Although this book covers the differences, it does not imply that adopted children are always "different". What is important is that adopted children receive the message from their parents that they belong to them, but at the same time should be given the space to experience and cope with being "different".

In her book, *Adopted Children: Raising and bonding in the family*, Femmie Juffer (Professor of Adoption Studies at the Center for Child & Family Studies, Leiden University, The Netherlands) writes:

**Adopted children benefit the most from parents who do not reject the difference, but who also do not exaggerate it, but accept it. These parents are giving their children the following message: 'Even with your other past, you belong with us, fully and for good'.**

These children can establish themselves in their adoptive family, they can feel at home because the parent does not continuously emphasise their “being different”. On the contrary, these parents emphasise the underlying togetherness and belonging. At the same time, the child is given the space to think and to talk about where he comes from, his culture and appearance.

(1999, p. 117)

I hope that you do not read this book with the view that it focuses only on problems. I wrote this book out of love for all adopted children and for all the parents who raise these beautiful children. It is specifically intended to provide you and your child with support during moments of doubt or insecurity. The chapters have been written in such a way that they can also be read independently. Therefore, you can refer to a specific chapter if your child is experiencing a particular issue.

There is a reason for restricting the content of this book to children up to and including 12 years old. By this age, conversations about their adoption should have become common between parents and children. Learning to deal with adopted adolescents and the specific problems relating to adoption that may follow is, to a certain extent, a more complicated task and deserves a book of its own.

For ease of reading and in order not to do injustice to or render invisible either sex, I have chosen to refer to each sex in each alternate chapter.