What parents are doing when they discuss birth parents and the adoption story with their children

Tufts University Adoption and Development Project

Susanne Agerbak, Loey Bromberg, Melissa Philips, Amanda Young, Paul Cernasov, Ellen E. Pinderhughes

Introduction

- International adoption creates additional challenges for discussing adoption.
- Brodzinsky (2011) suggests the two most important challenges for parents are to:
  - decide how to share adoption information with their children and
  - how to help children of different ages understand the meaning and implications of being adopted.
- He suggests 12 guidelines to give to parents, including being honest, developmentally appropriate, normalizing child feelings, and avoiding negative judgments.
- This study looked at what parents appear to be doing when they discuss the adoption story with their children and explored whether parents seemed to be acting in line with Brodzinsky's recommendations.

Sample

- Community sample (New England) of 45 families with children adopted from China.
- Parent mean age 51 years; child mean age at interview 7.4 years; child mean age at adoption 16 months.

Fig. 1: Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coparenting status</th>
<th>Parent ethnicity</th>
<th>Parent gender</th>
<th>Area of residence</th>
<th>Parent education</th>
<th>Parent gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two-parent heterosexual</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-parent both female</td>
<td>American European</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-parent both male</td>
<td>Chinese American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method

A grounded theory with semi-structured parent interviews was used to identify the practices parents employed as they discuss birth parents and their child’s story with their child. Interviews were then coded for the following codes:

- Parent gender
- Parent education
- Parent ethnicity
- Parent age
- Parent gender
- Coparenting status

What are parents communicating with their children?

- Releasing story
- Sharing birth information or facts about the birth mother or adoption story
- She was two and half years old

Withholding

- Conveying positive information regarding the birth parents or adoption story
- "your birth mother" know how you would be adopted?
- a family that can take care of you so you could be comfortable

Results

Fig. 2: How parents talk about the adoption story (N=45 parents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conjecture</th>
<th>Withholding</th>
<th>Honesty</th>
<th>Silencing and normalizing</th>
<th>Withholding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 3: What parents are doing when they talk to their children about their adoption story (N=268 vignettes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conjecture</th>
<th>For parent</th>
<th>Preparing for others</th>
<th>Dealing with privacy</th>
<th>Normalizing</th>
<th>Handling unknowns</th>
<th>Positive spin on history</th>
<th>Inform child about story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison with Brodzinsky’s recommendations

- Brodzinsky’s recommendation | Our Result | Example Quotes |
  - Inform child about story: 79% vignettes |
  - Parents have repeated conversations and often encourage questions. |
  - She knows the step by step, and she knows through photos what it was like for us in China to get her. |
  - Normalizing: 17% vignettes |
  - She knows there are different ways of making a family. |
  - “It's a wonderful way to create a family.” |

Discussion

- Many parents are acting in line with Brodzinsky’s (2011) recommendations for discussing adoption with children, by:
  - having ongoing, two-way discussions of adoption;
  - avoiding negative judgments about birth parents or the child’s heritage;
  - trying to be developmentally appropriate, although there is uncertainty on how

Studied Limitations

- Representatives of sample: parent-child discussions may show different characteristics when parents have more information about the birth family and circumstances.
- Data collection: secondary analysis means interview questions were more geared to the content of adoption story discussions, than their focus and approach.
- Cross-sectional study: a longitudinal study would offer insight into changes in how parents discuss adoption story at different ages and the later repercussions of particular approaches.

Recommendations

- More consistent training for mental health professionals so that they can support parents on:
  - how to discuss the difficult aspects of orphanages and abandonment and how to prepare the child for these ideas in our culture
  - what concepts and level of detail are developmentally appropriate at what stage;
  - when to bring in more complexity
  - how much to stress the birth parents’ positive intent and use positive spin/conjecture in a way that minimizes the risk of later disinformation/loss of trust
  - ways to acknowledge grief and loss the child may experience and handle the parents accompanying discomfort.

References


Tufts University Adoption and Development Project
adoptionproject@tufts.edu