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

Tufts University Adoption and Development Project

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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

| Coparenting status | Two-parent heterosexual | Two-parent both female | Two-parent both male | One-parent
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent ethnicity</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of residence</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent education</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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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 adoption story with their children. Interviews were then coded for the following codes:

- What are parents communicating with their children?
  - Positive spin: 33% vignettes
  - Conveying positively valenced information re-regarding birth mother or adoption story
  - Positive spin: 33% vignettes
  - Parents often use positive spin and conjecture when giving information about the adoption story, particularly when it comes to discussing birth parents.

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 to do so;
  - being open and honest.
- Parents struggle with the difficult aspects of the adoption story, sometimes oversimplifying withholding and conjecture. This runs counter to Brodzinsky's recommendations not to do so.
- There is a struggle to balance honesty and a positive interpretation of the adoption story while acknowledging the complexities, grief and loss involved.
- In helping children prepare to talk about their adoption story, parents' main focus is privacy and there is little acknowledgement of cultural stereotypes that may be encountered.

Sample

- Coparenting status: Two-parent heterosexual, Two-parent both female, Two-parent both male, One-parent
- Parent ethnicity: European American, Female
- Area of residence: Urban, Suburban, Rural
- Parent education: High School, College, Graduate
- Parent gender: Male, Female

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brodzinsky's recommendation</th>
<th>Our Result</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion is a process, not a single event.</td>
<td>Inform child about story: 79% vignettes</td>
<td>&quot;Have a little talk for her that tells her story.&quot;</td>
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| Adoption is a two-way dialogue. | 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."
| Validation and normalization | Normalizing: 17% vignettes | "She knows there are different ways of making a family." |
| Avoid negative judgments about birth parents or children's heritage | Positive spin: 35% vignettes | "She heard the word abandonment and she kind of put two and two together... I said yes but your parents didn't really abandon you. They took you to a place where you would be safe so you can get a safe place and find a family." |
| Foster open and honest discussion | Honesty: 47% parents | "It wasn't anything about her; her birthmother loved her, wished she could've kept her." |
| Disclosure: "Difficult topics" without fear and avoiding being deceptive later. Be developmentally appropriate. | Withholding: 44% parents | "We have never discussed the Chinese policy of one or two children with her. I don't quite feel she is old enough." |

Comparision with Brodzinsky's recommendations

- Parents often resort to conjecture to give the story a positive spin.
- Conjecture: 82% parents
- Parents often resort to conjecture to give the story a positive spin.
- Some parents consciously choose when it is developmentally appropriate to share information. Others avoid difficult topic altogether.

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

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<tr>
<th>Brodzinsky's recommendation</th>
<th>Our Result</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
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| For parent | 4% | "We never used the word 'abandonment'."
| Preparing for others | 6% | "I think it's wonderful way to create a family..."
| Dealing with privacy | 7% | "I practiced talking...when she was too young to understand all I would feel uncomfortable..."
| Normalizing | 17% | "To tell them not only who they are but who they are..."
| Handling unknowns | 21% | "I can tell her..." |
| Positive spin on history | 33% | "And I can tell her...that..."
| Inform child about story | 79% | "we've been talking about it since we got her at 7 ½ months old. And partly because I'm not sure it was 100% positive, or...one extra feature of what they are." |

References

- "we've been talking about it since we got her at 7 ½ months old. And partly..."
- "I can tell her...when she is too young to understand all I would feel uncomfortable..."
- "I practiced talking...when she was too young to understand all I would feel uncomfortable..."
- "I practice talking...she was too small to understand so I would feel uncomfortable..."
- "I practiced talking...when she was too young to understand all I would feel uncomfortable..."
- "we've been very honest about...the fact that there was a birth mother...and there was a birth father..."