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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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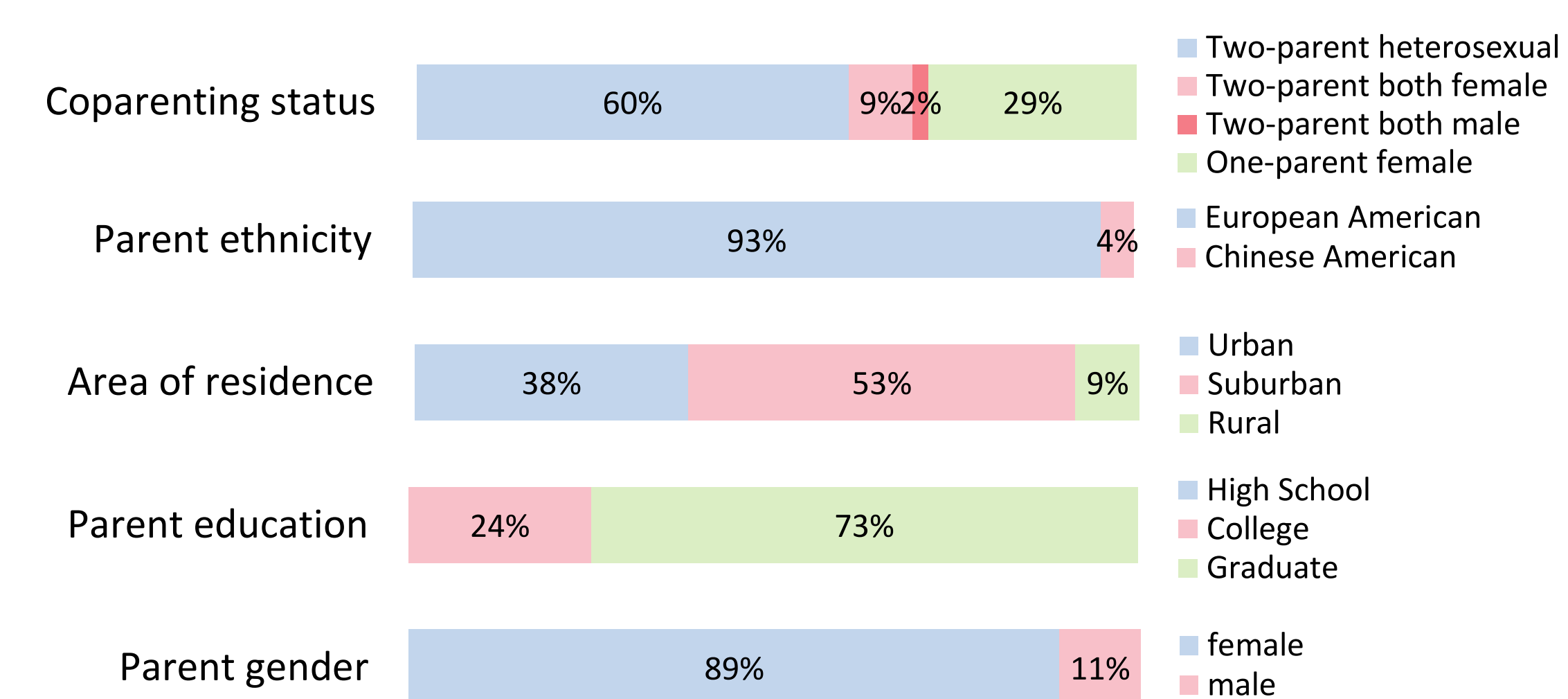
Introduction

- 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



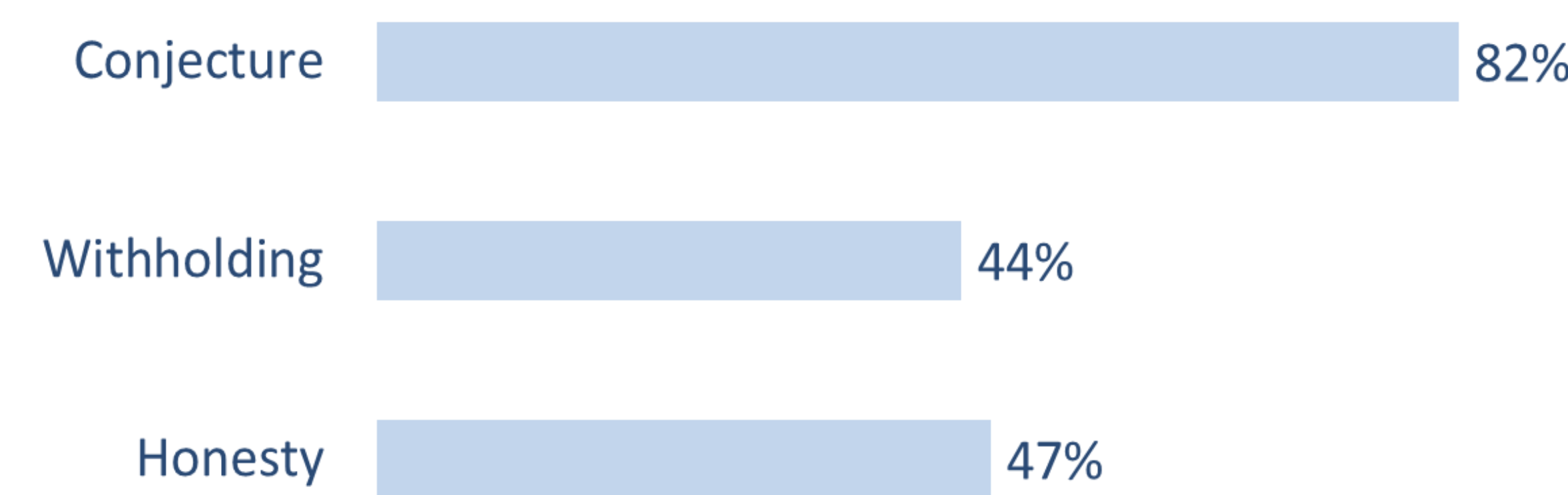
Method

A grounded theory approach 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 child. Interviews were then coded for the following codes:

Code	Definition	Example
What are parents communicating with their children		
Inform about story	Sharing details, whether true or false, about the birth mother or adoption story	"She was with [her birthparents] until she was two and half years old"
Positive spin	Conveying positively valenced information regarding the birth parents or adoption story	"[your birth mother] knew you would be adopted by... a family that can take better care of you than she could."
Unknowns	Acknowledging unknown information regarding the adoption story, and/or guidance on how to deal with unknowns	"I've told them 'No one knows who really left you.'"
Normalizing/Diversity	Emphasizing the diverse nature of family systems, and/or the similarity of the child's adoption story with others' stories	"There's no difference in her being part of our family than any of the other kids"
Privacy	Teaching their child about privacy or managing privacy on behalf their child	"I tell her to just tell people it's private. It's her own story."
Prep for others	Preparing their child for the challenges that she may face with others because of her adoptive status	"I was trying to go over with her possible potential responses she could give to questions that come up"
For parent	Conveying that discussion functioned to meet the parent's own needs	"I practiced talking...when she was too small to understand so I would feel comfortable"
How are parents communicating with their children		
Honesty	Reporting (to interviewer) their choice to communicate fully/truthfully	"I try to be open... tell them as much as I can"
Conjecture	Conveying information as fact that they have no way of verifying	"[your birth mother] knew that you would be found right away."
Withholding	Choosing not to share information/not to use particular terminology with their child	"I didn't want to bring up... this one child policy thing."

Results

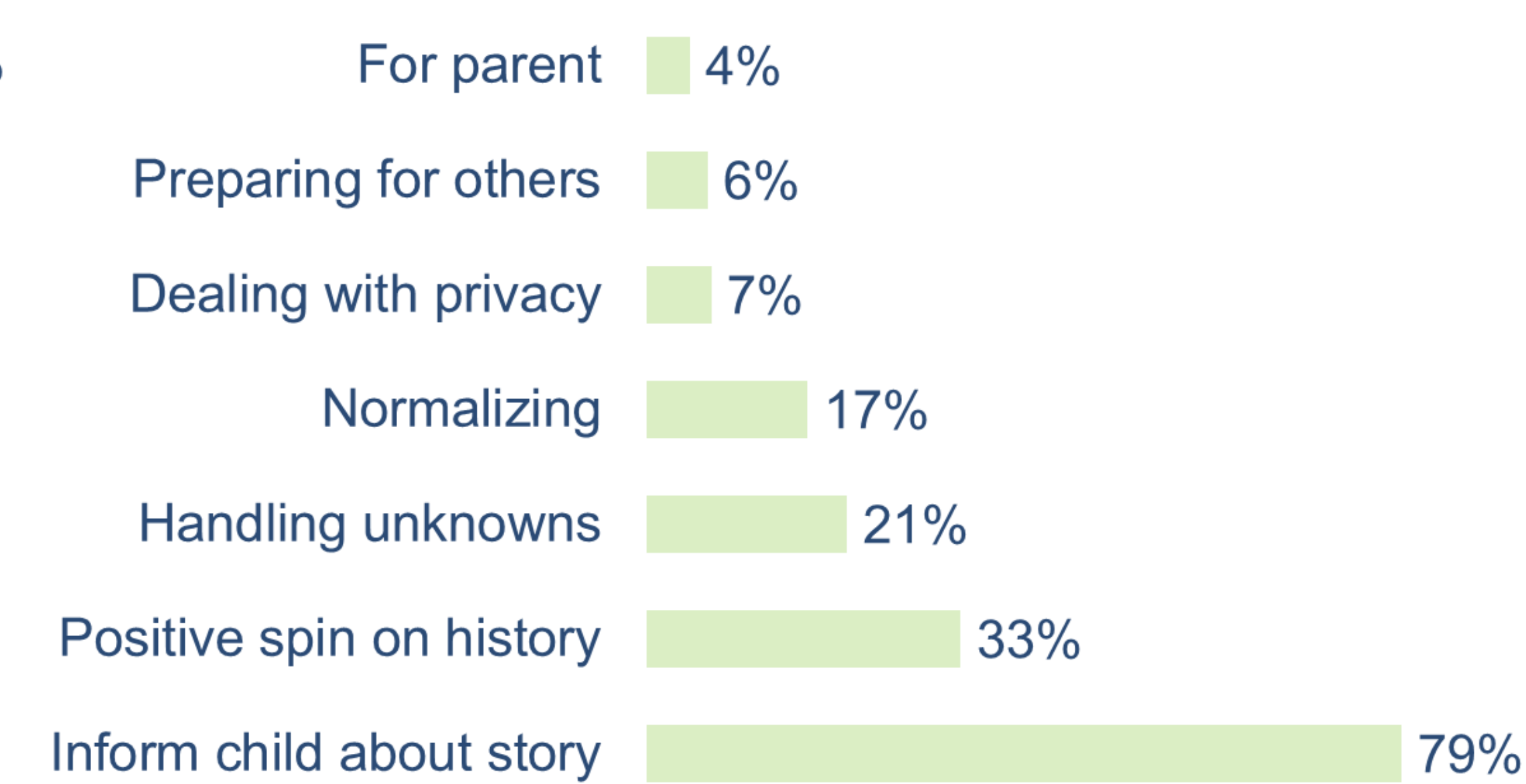
Fig. 2: How parents talk about the adoption story (N=45 parents)



Parents:-

- repeatedly talk with children about birth parents and adoption: mostly giving information and answering questions (79% of vignettes).
- often give a positive spin to the story (33% of vignettes), particularly when discussing birth family. Positive spin is usually achieved partly through conjecture.
- explain and handle unknown aspects of the story (21% of vignettes) and attempt to normalize the child's experience (17%).
- 47% of parents make a conscious effort to be honest, 82% were assessed by the researchers to be using conjecture and 44% mentioned withholding aspects of the story or avoiding certain terminology.

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



Comparison with Brodzinsky's recommendations

Brodzinsky's recommendation	Our Result	Example Quotes
Discussing adoption is a process, not a single event.	Inform child about story: 79% vignettes	"I have a life book for her that tells her story." "We used to have as part of our bedtime ritual our China stories...One of these Chinese stories was how I adopted her."
Adoption revelation 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."
Validate and normalize	Normalizing: 17% vignettes	"She knows there are different ways of making a family." "I want them to feel that it's just part of being a normal person...one extra feature of what they are." "It's a wonderful way to create a family."
Avoid negative judgments about birth parents or child's heritage	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.	"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 to a safe place and find a family" "It wasn't anything about her. Her birthmother loved her, wished she could've kept her."
Foster open and honest discussion	Honesty: 47% parents Many parents make a concerted effort to be open, even though many of them also use conjecture and withholding.	"so I try to be open...[and] tell them as much as I can, whenever they ask or even if they don't ask..." "Personally we've been very open about it...the fact that there was...a birth mother...and there was a birth father..." "I think she's very comfortable and I think it's always because we've been very honest with her. We've never lied to her. She has a whole album of her pictures from [the orphanage]."
Discuss 'difficult topics' without lying or denying and then revealing later. Be developmentally appropriate.	Withholding: 44% parents Some parents consciously choose when it is developmentally appropriate to share information. Others avoid difficult topics altogether.	"We have never discussed the Chinese policy of one or two children with her. I don't quite feel she is old enough." "We don't use the word 'abandonment'" "I may not say as much as I want to about her orphanage experience because I'm not sure it was 100% positive, or there were the experiences of some other children that we know that were definitely damaging...so I may not say as much about those things that I know, if she's around."
	Conjecture: 82% parents Parents often resort to conjecture to give the story a positive spin.	"And I can tell her...that her foster family must have loved her very much because babies need love in order to love..." "She would love to know specifically why her birth family couldn't raise her. And I can give her ideas about that..." "Your birth mom was very poor and...wanted you to have a better life."
Be aware of own feelings when discussing story	For parents: 4% vignettes Parents mention awareness of needing to deal with their feelings at times.	"I think it's our need for her to feel that she was loved there." "we've been talking about it since we got her at 7 1/2 months old. And partly... I did it for me. So I didn't start weeping if...if I started talking about something like her birth parents or something and I start weeping. So, I did it for myself..."

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
 - striving for openness and honesty.
- Parents struggle with the difficult aspects of the adoption story, sometimes overusing withholding and conjecture. This runs counter to Brodzinsky's recommendations not to lie or deny information.
- There is a struggle to balance honesty and a positive interpretation of the adoption story while acknowledging the complexity, grief and loss involved.
- In helping children prepare to talk to others about their adoption story, parents' main focus is privacy and there is little acknowledgement of cultural stereotypes that may be encountered.
- Sample has no information about birth parents and a remote chance of tracing them in future. This may partly explain the extent of conjecture and positive spin seen – conjecture fills the information gap and has little risk of being disproved.
- Pre-placement training for adoptive parents typically occurs years before parents face challenging conversations about adoption. Parents need ongoing support as their child develops; they usually seek this from mental health professionals.

Study Limitations

- Representativeness 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 intents and use positive spin/conjecture in a way that minimizes the risk of later disillusionment/loss of trust
 - ways to acknowledge grief and loss the child may experience and handle the parents' accompanying discomfort.

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