Oregon Department of Human Services
CHILD WELFARE

Common Feelings Associated with Being Adopted
Just-In-Time Training

Application: Bringing It Home

1. Children who were adopted often struggle with feelings around loyalty because they worry that talking about their birth parents will upset their adoptive parents. Identify three ways that you can talk about positive characteristics in your child that came fromtheir birth parents/family and therefore will underscore your support of not only themnow but the family from which they came.

2. Think about how you have communicated to your child that you want them to feel comfortable exploring their feelings and/or relationships with birth family members.

3. Thinking about the "pebble technique," make a list of three statements that you can make to encourage conversation with your child about their adoption story in a waythat allows them to have control around how to respond.

4. Do you have some family members that do not seem to understand the complexity of your child's feelings about being adopted. Make a plan for how you could help educatethem so that your child won't feel alone is struggling with their assumptions about adoption.

5. Work with your child to make sure they understand that you don't believe they should feel more grateful than non-adopted children for being in your family and work with them (or on your own if not age appropriate) on developing a response that either you or they can use when family or friends make comments about your child feeling gratefulto be adopted.

6. Make a list of the birth family members who are important to your child. What is the child's contact with these family members like currently? Consider if the connections tothese individuals can be strengthened in any way and develop a plan to make this happen. If you don't know any birth family, then consider helping your child write a letter or make a picture about them or what they might like to say to them if/when theyare able to find or meet them.

7. All children in adoptive families, especially those who are different races and/or ethnicities than their parents, often struggle with feeling different from their families. How are you communicating to your child that you embrace differences instead of minimizing or not noticing them. Help your child make a list of all the ways that your family members are similar to each other; be sure to acknowledge racial differences, gender differences as well as personality and temperament differences. Next work on a

list of the unique qualities of each family member. Talk with your child about how bothsimilarities and differences in families are important.

8. Think about your child's adoption story. What is your level of comfort in telling your child about his/her story? Think about some of the aspects of your child's history that are more difficult for you to talk about. Write out ways to tell these more challenging parts of the story at an age-appropriate level, in a truthful way, and using respectful adoption language. Then you can plan for how you will add information to your child'sstory as they age.

COMMON FEELINGS ASSOCIATED WITH BEING ADOPTED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question 1: Starting conversations about adoption with children can feel uncomfortable and difficult. What can parents do to "open the door?"

Parents who have adopted a child need to look for "natural" opportunities to talk with the child about adoption. For many parents, special days such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays and holidays seem like natural times to bring up the subject. Often parents will try to start a conversation with the child by asking questions. Too often, however, these questions receive only a "Yes" or a "No" response that shuts down the conversation.

Parents who want to open what might be a difficult conversation can use "the pebble technique" suggested in the book Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child by Holly Van Gulden and Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb. In the pebble technique, a parent mentions adoption and adoption-related matters as simple statements (the "pebbles") that the parent casually throws out and allows to cause ripples (like tossing a pebble into a pond) until the child is ready to pick up the verbal "pebble" and to talk about adoption. Remember to adapt this approach so that it is age appropriate. The pebble technique works better than asking questions because the statements invite the child to talk without putting any pressure on the child to respond. For example, instead of asking a "Yes" or "No" question such as "Do you think about your birth mom on your birthday?" a parent who has adopted the child might use the pebble technique by saying something like one of the statements below:

- "I always think about your birth mom when we celebrate your birthday. This year I would like to create a new family tradition to celebrate that she gave life to you."
- "If it's okay with you, I'd like to light a special candle in honor of your birth parents."
- "I imagine that you have lots of memories of birthdays with the parents you had in foster care. How were the birthdays celebrated?" (If the child was in foster care before being adopted)

Make sure to let the child know that the child did nothing that led to the adoption. It was about the challenges the parents had that interfered with their ability to parent effectively.

Other natural opportunities to discuss adoption might come through news stories or when you and the child are reading adoption-themed books or watching adoption-themed movies or television shows. Remember that these opportunities also can include talking about misrepresentations or myths about adoption that you know to be wrong. Although parents can't control the news, they always need to read the book or to watch the movie or TV show either beforehand or with the child to ensure that the content is appropriate for the child's age

and developmental level and to create the opportunity to discuss both the positives and the negatives in the content. Even books and movies with questionable, inaccurate or troubling messages about adoption and families that adopt can be used to open conversations that draw out a child's thoughts and feelings about the child's own experiences. Of course, positive, accurate stories about adoption can help children to feel "validated" (That is, assured that their feelings are "normal" and that they are not alone in having these feelings.). This assurance can help to ease feelings of loneliness and being "different" often experienced by children who have been in foster care or have been adopted.

Be careful not to assume that children don't want more information unless they ask for it. Often children who have been adopted or in foster care go underground with their feelings during their middle school years. That doesn't mean that they are not thinking about their birth families and their life journeys. Silence about adoption and foster care often is interpreted by children, especially those who already are feeling different or uncertain about where they belong, as tacit agreement with the statements and beliefs they hear in the media. This means that if you don't talk with your child about adoption, the child is at risk of feeling shame, guilt and the loyalty dilemmas.

Besides making pebble statements, ask "smart questions" that can't be answered with "Yes" or "No" responses. For example, after reading a book about children who have been adopted, you might ask questions such as:

- "What did you like or not like about the story?"
- "What did you think was true or not true about children who were adopted?"
- "What did you think was true or not true about the families who were fostering?"
- "Was there anything that you found surprising or upsetting?"

Knowing the common feelings that young children and teens have about adoption can make it easier for the parents who have adopted them to recognize natural opportunities to start conversations. Often the best times, those that feel safest to children, are when you are doing regular activities such as driving in a car, folding laundry together or just hanging out. Then your child doesn't feel on the spot. You can say:

- "I've learned that some children who have been adopted feel as if they are being disloyal or could make the parents who adopted them angry because the kids love and miss their birth parents. I want you to know that I love you, and I will never feel threatened or angry because of your feelings for your birth family."
- "I hope you know that you always can talk with me about your birth family or anything else. I can't take away your pain, but I can let you know that you are not alone. I am always here to listen to you and to give you a hug."
- "It's okay if you want to continue to have contact with your birth parents and/or your extended family or to learn about them. They always will be part of who you are."
- "Sometimes I find myself wondering what your birth mother is like. I think she must have been [Fill in a statement here – such as "empathetic" or "a great dancer" -- that is

true for your child and not necessarily typical in your family, so that it must have come from the child's genetic family.] because you are."
- "You know, I was thinking about your birth family (or could be country where you were born or family that was fostering you) today, and I just want you to know that it is okay with me if you love them and miss them and/or miss your home country."

Question 2: How should parents respond when a child they have adopted in their home asks questions or expresses feelings about the child's birth parents or adoption story?

With all the things that parents have to do, it is easy for them to miss clues that a child needs to talk about feelings or experiences. Some children will try to start a conversation with a parent by asking questions or making statements. It's important for parents to be prepared for these situations by learning how to be good listeners. Instead of giving a quick answer and ending the conversation, a parent not only needs to listen carefully to what the child says, but also to look for other clues such as vocal tone and body language. Using good listening skills keeps the conversation open and encourages the child to express feelings.

When using these skills, the parent reflects and validates the child's thoughts and feelings. Reflecting your child's feelings is a good way to make sure that you have picked up the right message and really are hearing the child. For example, if the child says, "Why is my life so messed up? It's not my fault, but I'm the one who gets stuck with this family!" then you might respond with, "What I hear you saying is that you're feeling angry about the choices your birth parents made and that you have to deal with the consequences of their decisions. Is that right?" Validating the child's thoughts and feelings lets the child know it's okay to feel or to think that way and that the child is not the only person to have those feelings. For example, "I understand that you feel as if your life is messed up, and I see how your adoption story might make you feel this way…..You're right. It's not your fault that the actions of adults have resulted in your being here. Is there something we can do together so that you are able to make choices?"

Here's another example:

Child: "Do I have to tell people at my new school that I'm adopted?"

Parent: "I hear you saying that telling others that you have been adopted makes you feel uncomfortable. Is that right? I don't know what it feels like to be adopted, but I know what it feels like to be different from my friends. Sometimes feeling different makes me feel as if I don't belong and makes me sad. What does it feel like for you?"

When children ask questions about difficult aspects of their life stories, it is important to tell them the truth. However, you need to limit the information to what is appropriate for the child's age and developmental level. For example, it may be enough to tell a young child that the child's birth parents were not able to take care of the child. A teen is going to want more

information about the situation and to know why those parents couldn't provide the care that the child needed. You need to embrace the belief that a child's adoption history and story belong to that child. This means that eventually the child will be entitled to know everything in the child's history, even the hard stuff.

To accomplish this goal, it often helps parents to develop a plan that lays out when they need to tell certain information to the child they have adopted. Some parents say that their children can wait to learn difficult information until the children become adults (18-21 years old), but it is important to remember that teens can be impatient and often want this information much sooner. Some adoption experts believe it is best to tell children at least the outlines of all the "hard" parts of their stories by age 12, so that they don't have to hear or to discover these facts during the teen years, which are often volatile.

Be sure to distinguish between postponing the telling because of your own fears versus waiting until the child is ready to process this information. Be careful not to judge the child's birth parent(s) as being "bad people" but rather as persons who were not able to provide a safe environment due to many circumstances. It is important not to shut down or to dismiss the child's questions or expressed feelings about the child's birth parents or adoption story. The child needs to feel comfortable bringing up the subject when the child is ready and to feel comfortable talking about it as often as the child thinks necessary. Many books are available that provide information and practice scenes to help parents learn skills for responding to children's questions about their birth parents and adoption stories.

Question 3: What can parents who have adopted a child do when the child is very upset or expressing strong feelings about the child's adoption story or birth parents?

It is important for parents to accept whatever their child is feeling. Show that you understand and empathize with the child's pain or anger. For example, you can say, "It must be so hard to feel that way" or "I can understand why you feel that way." Never try to talk a child out of feelings. If the child is very upset, you first need to use calming and soothing behaviors to help the child calm down and control emotions. This means that you need to do less talking and to be more of a calm presence. Later, when the child is calm, talk about the child's feelings by using open-ended questions or statements such as:

- "Can you tell me more about what you were feeling?"
- "Tell me more about what made you angry."
- "When you feel really upset, what do you need?"

This strategy can create an opportunity for you to comfort and to reassure your child about the child's feelings. You also need to help the child recognize body clues that indicate the child is feeling upset (such as the heart beating faster, the face feeling hot) and learn how to cope with strong feelings. Parents can teach children coping skills and strategies to calm themselves, such as coming to a parent for comfort, writing in a journal, using breath control techniques or drawing a picture and then sharing the picture with the parent. Make sure that your child knows it is okay to have strong feelings and that the child can work through those feelings safely.

Question 4: Is it ever appropriate for parents to express their own feelings about the adoption to a child or teen they have adopted?

Yes! It is appropriate and often quite helpful for parents to share their own feelings about the adoption. In addition, parents sharing their feelings sometimes will help their children to understand and to deal with the children's own feelings about adoption. Children often have questions and feelings about why their new parents have chosen to adopt them. For example, they may have thoughts such as:

- The parents experienced loss and grief because of infertility or miscarriages.
- A parent decided to become a single parent after not finding an appropriate partner.
- The parents chose not to have biological children because of the possibility of passing on inherited conditions from one or both parents.

Sharing your own life journey can be helpful if you let your child know how you have handled your feelings of disappointment, loss and grief. If you can describe how you got help, that may encourage your child to feel more open to getting help as well. It is critically important that you also put to rest the child's worries about being a "second choice." You can do this by reassuring your child that you wouldn't change anything about your journey because it has led you to the child.

When your child expresses difficult feelings that might bring you some hurt or pain,

you can acknowledge your pain while being careful to validate that you support your child's expression of feelings. For example, you can say, "When you say that you feel like we aren't a real family, I feel sad that you feel that way; but I am always glad that you let me know what you are feeling. I don't want you to struggle alone." It is also important to remind your child frequently how much you love your child and what the child means to you, especially when the child is rejecting or ignoring you. When a child is acting out or showing especially difficult behavior and is aware that this behavior is hard on the family or the parents, the child needs reassurance that the parents who adopted the child won't abandon the child for being "bad." This doesn't mean that the parents don't feel angry, sad, overwhelmed or frustrated but that their feelings need to be managed and taken care of later. Parents need to let their child know that the love and commitment they feel for the child are steadfast and that they have unending appreciation for having the child in their family. They need to show the child that no matter what, they as parents always will recover from their hard feelings. In fact, this can help the child to learn that eventually the child will become able to handle hard feelings as well.

Question 5: What are some of the common feelings that children who have been adopted may experience?

Some feelings about adoption can be complicated because they are not clear-cut and can have multiple interpretations. For example, feelings of loss and grief are complicated in adoption because these feelings can change over time. How a child reacts to loss depends on the child's personality traits, temperament and genetic makeup plus a variety of other factors, such as:

- the child's experiences before birth and pre-adoption (for example, trauma history, exposure to drugs or alcohol while in the womb),
- early childhood experiences of neglect or abuse,
- the reason for entering foster care or adoption,
- a history of multiple caregivers or moves,
- transition to a home with parents who are adopting, and
- age at placement.

Parents who are adopting can have a big impact, depending on how the parents encourage children to name their own feelings and to learn that they can navigate hard feelings with help and love from supportive adults.

At each developmental stage, children who have been adopted often experience a common set of emotions and feelings.

- Young preschool children might feel sad that the mothers who adopted them didn't give birth to them. They also are likely to notice if they don't have two parents, one of each gender, not because that is bad but because they are learning where babies come from. They also notice visible differences in their family, particularly if they are a different race or ethnicity than other members of the family that adopted them.

• School-age children who are able to understand what adoption means (That is, that they are not being raised by their birth parents.) might struggle with feelings of being rejected or abandoned by their birth parents. When children realize that being part of a family that has adopted them also means that they have lost significant people in their lives, this realization can lead to feelings of loss and grief. This is a time when children will go underground with their feelings unless their parents or other caregivers work hard to make sure that the children acknowledge not only the gains but also the losses inherent in adoption. Remember that children can have an attachment to their birth families even if their birth families were not always taking care of them and that such an attachment is normal and okay.

• School-age children and teens often struggle with feeling "different." In particular, children placed at older ages report feeling guilty or responsible for the breakup of their birth families. They may think that their behavior might have been "bad" or too difficult for their parents; or they may worry that they didn't try hard enough to help their

troubled parents, leading to the adoption. Even children placed at birth with families that adopted them can struggle with some of these feelings. Older children and teens also wonder whether developing emotional bonds with the families that adopted them might mean that they are "cheating on" or being disloyal to their birth families.

• As children grow, they go through or process the whole range of emotions and feelings about adoption. Teens will reprocess all of their feelings processed during childhood, but with a more sophisticated understanding. In fact, this will continue throughout their lives. Teens often want deeper, more detailed answers to their questions. Teens are likely to experience feelings of loss and grief with more intensity than younger children. For example, school-age children might feel sad about the loss of their birth families, but teens might feel extreme anger as they process their loss and grief. Teens often struggle with identity issues, including as they explore racial, gender-fluid and other oppressed identities. These teens have to figure out how to incorporate two sets of parents who might be very different from one another at the same time that the teens are trying to make sense of who they themselves are as individuals. Help a teen whom you have adopted to stay connected to the culture or interests of the birth family. It's okay for the teen to have both sets of identities. Support your teen in exploring ways to reconnect to the teen's culture.

Children who have been adopted often struggle with worries about the stability of the families that adopted them and whether their adoption will be permanent. These concerns are especially strong among children who have experienced multiple moves. They might think, "I lost my parents once. My parents didn't want me. Could that happen to me again?" It is common for children who have been adopted to have worries related to the breakdown of their birth families. As a result, they often

will feel frustrated, angry or sad about missing details or the lack of information available to them about their birth families. Children who are fearful may act out in ways that they think will validate these feelings. Acknowledge their feelings, and stay steady in your acceptance of and support for them.

It is important for parents to understand that children who have been adopted almost always experience mixed feelings about their adoption. These ambivalent feelings – known as “double- dip” feelings – are two feelings that seem to be opposites but occur at the same time, such as feeling both happy and sad. A child who has been adopted might feel happy to be with the family that adopted the child but sad about not being able to be raised by the birth family. A child might have these feelings even if the child never lived with nor knew the birth parents.

Children and teens need parents who understand and accept their feelings. Parents need to know how to respond to their child’s show of emotions in ways that encourage the child always to feel free to express feelings. An encouraging response also lets the child (or teen) know that the child does not have to carry the burden of these feelings alone. Parents also need to know that it “takes a village.” It is important to the child’s well-being as well as the parent’s well- being for the parent to look for other sources of support. These can include support groups for

children and teens who have been adopted or professional assistance, such as counselors or therapists, if needed. Parents who have adopted a child need to have their own support networks to deal with their own feelings. You don’t have to be perfect either.

Question 6: Is it possible for children who have been adopted at birth to experience loss and grief related to adoption?

Researchers have found that newborns who are separated from their birth parents—for whatever reason— experience the separation as a trauma. This is an emotional wound or shock that often has long-lasting effects. In the case of infants, this trauma is preverbal; that can make processing the trauma harder than if the child were old enough to understand what is happening and why. Of course, different children can be impacted by this trauma more or less profoundly. These differences depend on each child’s temperament, personality or genetic makeup, not on the child’s connection to the family that has adopted the child or the quality of parenting that the child has received.

Parents who are adopting need to understand that all adoptions involve loss and grief. Just because a child (or teen) who has been adopted might never have known the birth parents doesn’t mean that the child won’t experience a profound sense of loss that comes when the child realizes there has been no lived connection with the parents who gave the child life. Even in open adoptions, in which a child has ongoing contact with a birth parent, the child still has lost the relationship of being parented by the parent who gave the child birth.

Some of the feelings that may surface in children, particularly in teens, include:

- feeling rejected or abandoned,
- feeling “different,”
- feeling as if loving the parents who have adopted them is a betrayal of their birth parents (or vice versa),
- identity issues (including but not limited to racial, ethnic and gender identity, which can be intensified for children placed transracially),and
- worries about the permanence of the family that has adopted them. (“What will happen when I become an adult? Will I still be a member of the family that adopted me then?”)

These common feelings can surface at any point in time and can be challenging to handle for the children as well as the parents who have adopted them. Parents can prepare themselves by learning skills to help children or teens express, understand and cope with difficult emotions and feelings.