

REACH

Resource • Education • Advocacy • Crisis Intervention • Hope

Adoption Support Services for Fresno County



Hello REACH Families,

We made it through the holidays! Time to take some deep breaths and take care of you a little.

With that in mind, beginning in January, Parent Café will now be meeting on the second Tuesday of each month from 6:30 – 8:00 pm via Zoom. January's Parent Café will be held on Tuesday, January 9th, and the theme will be Cup of Calm. Parent Café uses the Five Protective Factors as a guide for the discussion in the group. Each session will look at two of the protective factors based on parent experiences. We hope to see you there!

Also, take some time to check out the rest of the newsletter with this issue's topic of Birth Families. This is a complicated topic but very important to the adoption constellation. We encourage you to peruse the articles, book review, and activity shared by REACH staff.

Don't forget to check out the Support Groups and Trainings page of this newsletter for REACH services, groups, and trainings for the coming quarter. These offerings are a great way to do a little self-care and share with other parents your experience and knowledge about parenting, as well as learn something from other parents.

We hope you enjoy this issue and learn something new!

Sincerely,

The REACH Team

Fresno County Winter 2024

Inside This Issue

1. Greetings
2. Maintaining Birth Family Relationships
3. Talking to Your Kids about Birth Family and Adoption
4. Book Review
5. Family Activity
6. Support Group Calendar
7. REACH Services

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Maintaining Birth Family Relationships

By Fernando Aquino, MSW

Maintaining birth family relationships can cause some uncertainty in adoptive parents. However, we need to consider the many losses adopted youth have gone through and the ways we can diminish continued loss. Maintaining relationships with birth families or other important people in a youth's life can support them in identity formation and understanding their adoption story. Openness in adoption allows parents and youth to have open conversations and maintain relationships to help bridge any gaps in their history.

Historically, adoption was thought of as a clean slate or new beginning for a child. However, this understanding has changed over time after recognizing the many benefits in helping adoptees understand their history and who they are. With adoption, there may be many people in a youth's history who have helped shaped them. Maintaining relationships can go beyond birth family and can also include former foster families, teachers, friends, or neighbors. Allowing for some contact with these individuals or even asking those who previously cared for youth to write letters sharing about the time they spent together, how they were, and their interests can help youth bridge gaps in their narrative. Other reasons include:

- Help shape identity formation
- Explain physical and personality traits/genetic history
- Create supportive adult relationships
- Create an open discussion of adoption topics
- Foster openness around birth families

In today's age, we have access to virtual and digital modes of communication allowing for openness to include options in addition to in-person contacts. Video calls, text messages, and social media are all forms of communication that can be utilized. For example, creating a private social media page specific to a youth's connection to birth family. During these connections, safety can regularly be assessed and contact revised as needed. The hope is to establish boundaries and rules for connection before considering in-person or supervised visitations.

Remember that loss is at the core of adoption and allowing connection with birth family helps youth formalize their sense of identity. This identity can change over time and their decision to have connections can change along with age and developmental milestones. Making the decision to connect with birth family can be an emotional journey for an adopted youth. It is important that adoptive parents support them in this process and on their journey to piecing together their story. Keep in mind that developing a relationship with birth family and openness happens over the course of time. We encourage adoptive families to create an open flow of communication, ensure safety, and be prepared that a youth may change their mind about connection at any time.

Sources:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/bulletins_maintainrelationships.pdf



Talking to Your Kids about Birth Family and Adoption

By Elizabeth Hanson, MA

The topic of birth family is a very difficult one for many families and is a subject many try to avoid. There is a lot of discussion about whether a family should share information about birth family and adoption with their child, and when it should be shared. Much thought and preparation needs to go into the disclosure that your child or children were adopted. Many parents find this topic difficult to bring up and awkward to discuss.

Most professionals would agree that the sooner this conversation is held, the better. Some of the reasons are that children might have to face questions from their peers about their family or they might overhear family members discussing the adoption.

The discussion of adoption can begin as early as birth to five years old. Children this age are growing and becoming aware of many things, such as differences in skin color and putting the world together piece by piece. Children this age do not really understand “The Talk” on a deep cognitive level. However, they will understand simple things and can be proud they are adopted. They can appreciate you as the parent and where they came from. Keeping things simple is a good way to converse with children in this age range.

Children ages six to twelve years are starting to understand that in order to be part of a family they do not need to be in the family to which they were born. Children this age really want to fit in whether it be at school or home. For parents, it is important to not take a child’s sadness or feelings of loss related to the adoption as their fault. Children are going through many emotions at this stage and have gone through many changes. Some may have had numerous placements prior to adoption and some may be separated from siblings. It helps to be

able to talk to them, share the emotions, hear what they are going through and reassure them that what they have been through is not their fault. Sharing known information about birth family, previous placements and the adoption process can help a child fill gaps in their identity and feel connected to their history. Life books are one way to start and continue discussions on this topic, allowing a child to add to the book what they want to have included.

How do you talk to tweens and teens? Their ability to think more abstractly and at a much higher level has increased. Teens need an honest and understanding approach, a parent who says “I am here and I understand you are going through a lot.” They need to be able to build their trust in you, so offer them your honesty, and understand they are also going through many natural chemical changes in their body with puberty. Teenagers are trying to sort out who they are, as well as where they came from. Information about their past can help them piece together the past, as well as the present, and can give them a better sense of who they are.

Many online resources and books are available for more information regarding this topic:

All About Adoption by Marc Nemiroff and Jane Annunziato

A Place in My Heart by Mary Grossnickle

Teenagers Talk About Adoption by Marion Crook

Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born by Jamie Lee Curtis

Tell Me a Real Adoption Story by Betty Lifton and Claire Nivola

You Be Me, I’ll Be You by Pili Mandlebaum

Spanish:

Adopción hablando con tu hijo por Martinez-Dorner, Patricia, MA, LPC, LMFT

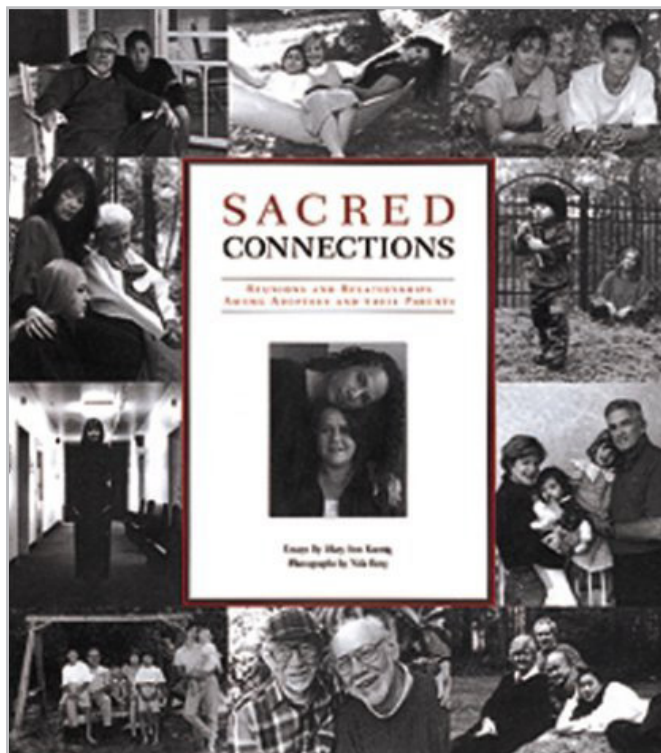
Source: <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/how-to-talk-adoption-tweens-teens/>

Sacred Connections: Stories of Adoption

Essays by Dr. Mary Ann Koenig • Photography by Niki Berg

Book Review by Tara Soria, MA

Sacred Connections: Stories of Adoption is a beautiful collection of essays and photographs featuring 24 stories of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents, as they share personal experiences as members of the adoption triad. In her book's Introduction, Dr. Koenig, a child psychologist and adoptee, wrote: "When I was young, I loved feeling that I was special. After all, most parents had to take what they got, but my adoptive parents chose me over all of the other available babies. By the time I was seven years old, however, another thought occurred to me: in order for me to be chosen, didn't someone have to let me go?" She took this question- and others- about her first (birth) mother, to her parents. With every question, she saw a look on her mother's face she hadn't seen before, which the author described as "maybe fear, maybe hurt." She heard an unspoken message from her mother's reaction and surmised that how she came into the world was shameful and mysterious. These early experiences would go on to shape Dr. Koenig's professional work with adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents, including the two years spent researching and interviewing the individuals featured in her book.



How does an adoptee find the courage to face a birth parent they don't remember? What is the impact of relinquishing a child on a birth mother's life? How can adoptive parents help their adopted children understand what it means to be adopted? These questions, and many more, are explored in this book with people from all over the world who share the experience of finding the sacred connections in their lives. Anyone who is part of an adoptive family, or is contemplating adopting a child, is sure to learn from the circumstanc-

es told in these stories and derive inspiration from the triumphs and insights of these ordinary, but quite extraordinary, relationships.

"This book is a source of honor, respect, love, and joy, and it will help the rest of the world to understand what many already know: Families are extended and loving. Having more than one mother, more than one father, and more than one set of siblings does not confuse who your parents are. It simply validates who your whole family is."
—Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao, fellow author and psychologist



Activity

By Katia Hawkins, BSW, MS

Supporting biological connections can sometimes seem daunting and scary. However, it is important to remember that our kids have two families they can love equally. It is our job to support our children in keeping those safe connections with their biological family. As parents, it is our responsibility to ensure that the relationships our children have are safe and conducive to their happiness. "So how do we help them maintain those bonds?," you ask? That is a great question! Here are a few activities that you can do with your kids to help them better understand their story, along with ways to keep the line of communication and bonding open with the biological family members:

- Create an email address for each child, where the child can communicate with family members, and you have the password.
- Create a private social media page where you can post updates and the families can communicate

- Make a Life Book or Life Box. These are notebooks, scrapbooks or a box, with photos, letters, and anything else you have from their childhood that connects them to their birth family. Let them guide how the book is put together.
- Help them search for family members, whether that is through social media, family and friends, or even an at-home DNA test.
- Allow the children to speak freely about their family. This will let your child know that it is okay to talk about their birth parents; it is okay to have love for them; it is okay to think about them.
- Help your child create a space where they can "talk" to their birth family (i.e. a small flower garden, a journal, etc.).

As the New Year starts, begin by choosing one of these activities and work on them with your kids. There are many other activities that you can do with your kids to honor their birth family and their ties. We encourage you to explore those options and find what works best for you and your family.

Support Groups & Events

January

- 9 Parent Café**
6:30-8:00pm – Zoom
- 23 Parent Support Group in English**
6:00-7:30pm – In Person
- 24 Parent Support Group in Spanish**
9:30-11:00am – Zoom

February

- 13 Parent Café**
6:30-8:00pm – Zoom
- 27 Parent Support Group in English**
6:00-7:30pm – In Person
- 28 Parent Support Group in Spanish**
9:30-11:00am – Zoom

March

- 12 Parent Café**
6:30-8:00pm – Zoom
- 26 Family Bonding Event @ Good Dirt Pottery**
Session 1: 10:00am-12:00pm
Session 2: 6:00-8:00pm
- 27 Parent Support Group in Spanish**
9:30-11:00am – Zoom

REACH Support Groups for Parents

REACH Parent Support Group

6:00-7:30pm - In Person

Designed for adults thinking about adoption through foster care, families awaiting adoptive placement, and new and experienced resource and adoptive parents. Training hours provided. The REACH Parent Support Group is offered on the fourth Tuesday of each month, 6:00-7:30pm. Please join us to share your family's challenges and triumphs. To register, email Fernando Aquino at faquino@aspiranet.org.

Parent Café

10:00-11:30am via Zoom

Based on the Five Protective Factors, Parent Cafe provides an opportunity for parents to explore their strengths and learn from each other's experiences. Training hours provided. Parent Café is offered on the third Thursday of each month, 10:00-11:30am via Zoom. To register for Parent Café, email Fernando Aquino at faquino@aspiranet.org and a link to the meeting will be emailed to you.

REACH Parent Support Group in Spanish

9:30-11:00am via Zoom

Este grupo está diseñado para adultos que piensan en la adopción, padres que esperan colocación adoptiva, y padres de niños adoptados. Horas de entrenamiento impartidas. Los enlaces de Zoom y los recordatorios se enviarán mensualmente. El Grupo de Apoyo para Padres de REACH en Español se ven en el cuarto miércoles del mes. Para registrarse, comuníquese con Fernando Aquino llamando al número 559.222.4969 y preguntar por REACH o mandando email a faquino@aspiranet.org y se le enviara por correo electrónico un enlace a la reunión.



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Aspiranet REACH Adoption Support Services for Fresno County

Educational/Support Groups – Monthly meetings where families are able to receive education/training and meet other adoptive families in the community.

REACH Newsletter – Quarterly newsletters filled with adoption articles, local trainings, book reviews, on-line resources and more.

Educational Workshops and Trainings – A variety of workshops and trainings will be made available.

Lending Library/Resource Directory– The REACH lending library is open and available for book review and check outs for families. A resource directory of local providers is also available to families.

Case Management – Ongoing case management is provided. REACH clients are provided with information, resource referral or other assistance as needed.

Crisis Counseling – Crisis intervention is available. Please contact our REACH staff for this support.