

Helping Children Understand Their Story

Presented by

Dr. Chaitra Wirta-Leiker & The Adoption Exchange

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Children in foster care and adoption systems often have complex histories. Their stories can be difficult to hear as caregivers, and difficult to explain to them in developmentally appropriate ways, even when we understand they have a right to know the details of their history. This webinar will help you navigate the language to assist them in understanding the details of their story at various ages, compassionately support them in sharing their story with people they trust, and manage your own emotional needs when listening to a child share the difficult aspects of their story.

Why Do Children Need to Know Their Story?

- Trust
- Confidence
- Identity formation
- Making sense of intuition
& implicit memories



Caregiver Perspective

“We waited and waited for you, and were so excited to meet you and hug you for the first time! We were so happy to finally be with you, and we loved playing with you! You didn’t like the food we made for you at first, you would make faces and spit it out. You also had a hard time sleeping in your new bed. You would wake up a lot at night crying. It got better as you got to know us and felt safer.”

Child Perspective

“All of a sudden, I was with new people – strangers – and they were hugging me and smiling and laughing, and I felt so confused and scared. I didn’t know where they were taking me. They told me to eat weird-smelling things, and they put me in a dark room all by myself and told me to sleep. Sometimes it felt like I was dreaming or floating and it wasn’t real. Other times I wanted to cry and scream and run away because I missed everyone I knew before.”

Start By Asking the Right Questions

- Look through photo albums or paperwork from when your child was younger or first adopted – instead of telling about events from your perspective, ask them to consider what they may have been:
 - Feeling
 - Thinking
 - Wondering
 - Expecting
 - Wishing

Sentence Stem Guidance

- “I was born/found...”
- “My first mom/dad...”
- “I look like/I hope I look like...”
- “I could not live with my first family because...”
- “In my orphanage/foster family, I liked/disliked...”
- “I was adopted because...”
- “When I first met my adoptive family...”
- “I wish I knew/could remember...”
- “I remember feeling/I probably felt...”
- “I feel happy/sad/worried when...”
- “If I could make things different, I would...”
- “I wish people would stop asking me about...”

The Fundamentals of “Tough Talks”

- IF YOUR CHILD IS ASKING, THEY ARE READY FOR THE ANSWER!
- Initiate the conversation, do not wait for your child to ask the “right” questions
- Be honest in developmentally appropriate ways & let your child’s questions guide you
- Never lie or fabricate the truth with your own beliefs
- Give your child explicit permission to express their emotions & be present as they do so without imposing your own emotions or judgments
- Ask questions as often as you answer them
- Frame as a continuing dialogue
- Be clear that your child has full control over when & how their story is shared with others
- Consider your level of trauma & the need for support

THESE STATEMENTS ARE EXAMPLES ONLY & ARE NOT MEANT TO BE SHARED WORD-FOR-WORD – ADJUST THE LANGUAGE TO COMPASSIONATELY FIT YOUR CHILD’S SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES

Sample Language: Preschool Age

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Alcohol

“Alcohol, like beer or wine, is only for grown-ups. Even grown-ups have to be careful not too have too much, because your brain can have a hard time making good decisions, and you can’t control your body anymore. Your first daddy would sometimes drink a lot of beer and have a hard time remembering what to do, like making meals or putting on your warm clothes in the winter. That wasn’t safe or fair to you.”
- Illegal Drugs

“Some medicines come from the doctor, and some are not from the doctor – they’re called drugs. Drugs can be dangerous, and when your first mommy used these, she couldn’t take care of anyone or make safe decisions for you or anyone else. That was not your fault.”
- Prescription Medication

“When a doctor gives us medicine, we have to be sure to take the right amount. If we don’t, it hurts us and we can’t make good decisions. When your first mommy would take too much medicine, she would get very sleepy, and she couldn’t wake up to take care of anyone. You deserve to be taken care of by grown-ups.”

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Sample Language: Elementary Age

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Alcohol

“When your first mom felt sad or worried, she would drink alcohol because she thought it made her feel better. But really, it just made her feel more sad and more worried, because she didn’t know how to stop drinking it, and it didn’t solve her problems, it often made them worse. She forgot how to take care of herself or anyone else when she was drinking, and it was not your responsibility to take care of her. You are a kid, and grown-ups are supposed to take care of you.”

- Illegal Drugs/Prescription Medication

“When your first dad was younger, someone called a drug dealer convinced him to take drugs to feel better if he was upset. That person wanted to make money by selling the drugs to him, but they didn’t care about how the drugs would hurt him. His brain got so used to using drugs, it didn’t know how to stop. That meant he couldn’t safely take care of anyone, because the drugs only helped him make unsafe decisions.”

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Sample Language: Middle School Age

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Alcohol/Illegal Drugs

“Your first parents had a hard time making safe decisions sometimes. They listened to people who were trying to take advantage of them, instead of people who wanted to take care of them. They got hooked on drugs and alcohol because they thought it would make their lives better, but we both know it made their lives harder. It made your life harder, too. What do you remember about that time? What are the things you are still wondering about?”

- Prescription Medication

“A lot of people think that just because a medication comes from their doctor, it’s safe to take as much as they want. But there’s a reason that a doctor has to give a prescription – because a certain amount of medication needs to be taken, and if too much is taken, it causes harm. Your first mom had a hard time taking the right amount, and by the time she realized it, she was already addicted to the medication, and didn’t have help to stop using it. I know you remember times when you couldn’t wake her up for hours and it was really scary for you. You can talk to me about what you remember and what you’re feeling any time.”

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Sample Language: Preschool Age

ABUSE/NEGLECT/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Neglect

“Parents are supposed to try their best to give their kids all the things they need to grow up healthy & strong. Sometimes your first parents had a hard time choosing to get healthy things for you, so you didn’t get everything you needed to be strong, and that wasn’t fair to you.”

- Physical Abuse/DV

“Parents are supposed to try to keep children safe, & your first parents were not able to do that. No one taught them how to show their anger or other feelings in safe ways, & instead they showed how they felt by hitting & hurting others. You deserve to be safe.”

- Sexual Abuse

“Some grown-ups have a hard time knowing how to be in charge safely, & instead they scare & hurt kids, like what happened with your first dad sometimes. You deserve to always feel safe & be in charge of your body.”

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Sample Language: Elementary Age

ABUSE/NEGLECT/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Neglect

“Your first parents had a hard time between choosing things they wanted to do for fun & taking care of their responsibilities. Sometimes you were the one who didn’t get what you needed because they were having grown-up fun. You deserved to have grown-ups keeping an eye on you to make sure you were safe.”

- Physical Abuse/DV

“Your first parents never learned how to handle their anger in safe ways & they would let out their frustration or anger with their body instead of their words. They would injure you & one another, & you never deserved that.”

- Sexual Abuse

“Your first parents did not always show love in healthy ways. They touched your body in ways that made you feel scared & sad. You always deserve to be in charge of who touches your body & it should never make you feel unsafe.”

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Sample Language: Middle School Age

ABUSE/NEGLECT/DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Neglect
“Do you ever feel like you want to blow off your chores & do something more exciting? That’s how your first parents acted sometimes – they would go to a party & leave you in your crib, because they were focused on fun, instead of thinking about what was best for a child. They didn’t understand how unsafe it was & you deserved to be safe & have a grown up looking out for you.”
- Physical Abuse/DV
“You know how sometimes you feel really angry & wish you could hit someone? Your first parents felt that way, too, except that they never learned how to stop themselves from hitting, so they would hurt you & each other.”
- Sexual Abuse
“You know how sometimes you really want to be in charge, even if it means putting other people down? When your first parents would touch your private parts, that was their way of wanting to be in charge. It was wrong because you deserve to keep your body safe.”

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Sample Language: Preschool Age

SEXUAL ASSAULT/PROSTITUTION

- Rape

“You were made from a mommy and a daddy. We know that your mommy is named Tammy and she lives in Virginia, and we know that your daddy is named Jack, and he lives in California. They don’t see each other any more because Jack was not nice to Tammy sometimes.”

- Prostitution

“You were made from a mommy and a daddy. We know that your mommy is named Jessica, but we don’t know your daddy’s name. He and Jessica did not know each other very well.”

- Incest

“You were made from a mommy and a daddy. We know that your mommy is named Rita, and your daddy was her uncle Garrett. He was not always very nice to Tammy.”

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Sample Language: Elementary Age

SEXUAL ASSAULT/PROSTITUTION

- Rape

“Your mommy Tammy and your daddy Jack do not see each other any more, because Jack would hurt Tammy sometimes and make her feel sad and scared. One of the good things that came from their relationship was you.”

- Prostitution

“Your mommy Jessica and your daddy did not know each other very well. They only met one time, and it was not a happy time for Jessica. The happy part that came out of it was that they made you.”

- Incest

“Your mommy Rita had an uncle named Garrett, and he was your daddy. Family members are supposed to love each other, but the way they show love is supposed to be different than the way a mommy and daddy show love to each other. Uncle Garrett had a hard time doing that.”

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Sample Language: Middle School Age

SEXUAL ASSAULT/PROSTITUTION

- Rape

“Your dad Jack had sex with your mom Tammy when she didn’t want to. It was a scary time for her, and he really struggled to make safe choices. Tammy wanted you to have a happy life, but it was hard for her to remember her time with Jack. You deserve a happy life, & to know that you will not make choices like Jack’s. How are you feeling as we talk about this?”

- Prostitution

“Your mom Jessica had a hard life. A lot of people took advantage of her and tried to make her feel like she belonged, & they weren’t always nice people – one was her pimp, who would make her have sex with men for money. It was not right or fair to her, & she did not want you to live a life where you had to worry about that. What are you wondering as we talk about this?”

- Incest

“When your mom’s uncle Garrett had sex with her, he was making a wrong choice. He didn’t know how to show love in a healthy way & he was trying to feel in charge. It was not safe for Rita. She didn’t want you to have to go through what she did. I wonder what you’re thinking about this?”

High School Age

- By the teen years, every child should know their entire story (if it is developmentally appropriate)
- You should be able to dialogue about your child's history with them in a similar manner to an adult conversation
- Your emphasis should be on listening to & validating their questions, thoughts & feelings

Reducing Negative Internalizations

- Emphasize your child's right to safety & nurturance
- Do not try to “fix” your child's distress, instead validate all of their emotions & the unfairness of the situation
- Use “any/all children” language over “you” language whenever possible
- Highlight choices & actions over personality & identity
- Identify unhealthy contextual patterns & how they are being diverted in your child's life (i.e. genetics vs. socioeconomics of substance abuse)
- Try to find “passed down positives” that reinforce biological identity & self-worth

Parent Self-Care

- Remember your child's strengths, resourcefulness & resilience
- Give permission & space for unfiltered emotional reactions when you are not with your child
- Build a trusted group of adoptive parent friends
- Vent to & process your reactions with people you trust
- Self-reflect on how your own triggers, relationships & childhood dynamics influence your interactions with your child
- Recognize the value of your own trauma therapy work

Always Remember Who Owns the Story

- An adoptive child's story may be the only thing they have consistently owned throughout their entire life
- They are the sole owners of their story & should be empowered to only share it in ways that feel comfortable to them
- Children are in charge of deciding:
 - Who they want to share their story with
 - When & why they want to share their story
 - How much of their story to share
- Children are not old enough to give permission for their stories to be shared publicly because they do not yet understand the long-term implications & are influenced by their caregivers' wishes

Thank you for joining the webinar!

Questions?

For more resources visit

The Adoption Exchange website:

<https://www.adoptex.org/>

Dr. Chaitra Wirta-Leiker's website:

<https://www.growbeyondwords.com>