

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR PAST



Tips for foster and adoptive parents

One of the hardest parts about being a foster and/or adoptive parent is having to process trauma with kiddos who are often too young in our eyes to even know what drugs, sex, alcohol, and violence are. Our little children (even the 16 year old ones) must deal with very grown up hurts and problems. Why didn't my parents take care of me? Does my mom love me? Why did my dad hit my mom? Foster parents are fortunate in that children learn to trust them with very difficult topics. At the same time, sometimes we're caught off guard when children decide that they're ready to share. Here are six brief tips about how to approach the conversation.



BE PRESENT

Make sure that you are focused on the child and the child's needs in that moment. Turn the TV off, put your phone down, sit with the child and make sure that you connect. Sometimes all the child wants to share is a sentence. Other times, the child might have more to say if you're willing to listen. If you're doing something together, keep doing it. If your child begins to fidget, feel free to give him/her something to doodle or fidget with. Let the child guide the conversation and use a few prompting words.

REFLECT

Do not bombard the child with questions. Allow the child to share what they have to say and reflect it back to them.

This may look like:

Child: "My dad would hit my mom while my brother and I played in our room."

Parent: "You were playing in your room when your dad hit your mom?"

Child: "Yea, and then he would leave when he was done."

It's not so much a question as giving the information back to the child and allowing him/her to digest it again. Avoid asking the child leading questions. This may confuse the child and transitions the conversation from one of processing to one of fact gathering.

NAME FEELINGS

Our children must cope with very hard situations. When we add the fact that they often don't have the vocabulary or the tools to do so, it is understandable why situations can feel overwhelming for them. Name feelings in your conversations with the child: "That sounds like it might have been scary." "Your face looks kinda sad right now." "You love your mom a lot." This empowers the child to have this conversation in the moment and also allows them to continue the conversation into the future. It also normalizes the feelings they may experience. They see that others might feel the same way and that their feelings are okay.

USE THE TERMS "SAFE" AND "UNSAFE"

It is important to center conversations about the child's past and family around being safe and not safe. Often, children have conflicting views about their parents, their families, and their home life. Even though it wasn't perfect, lots of children miss their homes and want to return. As a result, we do not want to say that people are "good" or "bad" because that reflects on the child's identity. We also do not want to use "good" or "bad" because this may cause the child to think that their "goodness" or "badness" had something to do with the situation. Instead, if we focus on what about the situation is "safe" or "unsafe" we can teach the child a valuable life skill and allow the child to keep the connection that he/she may have with the biological parent.

COME FROM A PLACE OF HEALING

Often times, when children talk about their hurts it causes us to remember our own hurts. It is important that we come from a place of healing and wholeness when caring for children from hard places. This doesn't mean we're perfect or that we don't have problems—it just means that when a child brings up his/her past, the focus must be the child. If a child discloses abuse or neglect and this causes a big reaction from the caregiver, it makes the child second-guess the disclosure. The child begins to wonder if he/she should have shared and whether it was his/her fault that the caregiver is now very sad/stressed/angry.

EMPHASIZE ABUSE WAS NOT THEIR FAULT

Most people know this, but there is something incredibly powerful about audibly hearing "It was not your fault and that was not okay." This is very healing and freeing for children (and grown ups!). It is easy for kids to think that they're being punished by being sent to a strangers home—especially if their outcry resulted in a removal. Affirming over and over that the abuse/neglect was not the child's fault is very important for the child to truly believe it.

When a child discloses abuse or neglect to you, it is best to write it down as soon as possible and then call your case manager. There is a chance that a report must be made and writing the information allows you to remember it more clearly than having to recall the information later. It also ensures that the child does not have to tell the story over and over again for clarification's sake.