

Whether it's rape, suicide, drug abuse, mental health, prostitution, or robbing banks — if it involved the birth parent, then it's part of the child's story. So do you create a lifebook page detailing the grown-up situation and then read it to your child?

Heck No!

You may have known about "this part" of the birth parents' history. Ugh. How do you tell your child or a child on your caseload? At what age do you tell them, and what words do you use?

Take a deep breath.

One Step at a Time...



First just plant the seed of the story.

Step 1. Start with age-appropriate discussion outside of the lifebook. Build the foundation by helping them understand the topic — just not as it relates to them. Instead, raise the topic *impersonally*. Then perhaps a teaching moment will occur.

Maybe a bank was robbed in a nearby town, and your son's bio dad was a bank robber. This gives you an opening to talk about robbing banks. You can wonder out loud, "Gee, I wonder what would make someone decide to do something like that." Perhaps think out loud if there is some grown-up problem like drug abuse or gambling that might bring a person to do something so dangerous.

Step 2. Then talk about the bank robber as a person: "That person made a really bad decision that could change his life or his family's life. But making a bad decision doesn't make him a bad person. Maybe his parents didn't teach him about right and wrong. Maybe they taught him how to steal."

Stop at whatever point feels right and you have planted the seed. If your child was placed at a young age, then you'll have a number of years to build and work on the foundation. You are not trying to explain suicide/criminal activities/drug abuse, etc. all in one breath. By the time you feel the child is ready and able to hear this on a more personal level, then you can add the lifebook page in more detail, assuming your child is older and not planning to share with the general public.



Let's review:

The best way to start discussion on tough topics is by:

- Defining and discussing the topic completely separate from the child's life.
- Educating them about, for example, drugs, mental health, poverty, or whatever relates to their personal life story.

Next level: Get the rest of the story ready.

1. Fact Check: Before you go ahead and present a situation as the child's truth, make sure you investigate. Locate other sources (if, for example, only the birth mother reported the situation). Can you talk with other birth relatives to verify? Is there a social worker or court official who might know some unwritten details? What about a police report?

2. Google It: Google your child's birth name. Google the bio parents and sibling names, if known. If it was a front page news story, locate what is on the Internet. Assume your child or their friend is an avid Googler and they could find this information on their own; it's better for you to find it first so you can present it on your terms.



3. Who else knows what? If you want your child to trust you, the last thing you want is for them to learn important history from someone else. If the adoptees' birth circumstances is well known (for whatever reason) in your family or the community, then you want to stay ahead of the information. You might be sharing information younger than you had planned.

4. What is the right age? My simple, not-knowing-your-child answer, is that you lay the foundation starting when they enter school, around 1st grade. It's time to get specific around age 9 or 10, or even as young as 8. *I know, this is not easy.* I started

tough talks with my daughter when she was around 8. The topic had to be revisited and eventually became just another piece of life. I repeat: It is not easy, but there are huge benefits to avoiding secrets!

5. For U.S. Fost-Adopt Families: At age 18, they can read their own case records. Yes, parts are redacted, but they will have enough information to clearly see what happened. That would b a lonely way to learn about one's life's beginnings. Help them find the truth before they turn 18.

In summary:

I recommend that you make sure what you say is true, as much as possible. Search for relevant names and events on a regular basis. Rethink who in your family might have information that could leak to the younger generation. Does everyone you know, or who the child knows, already have this part of their story? Then arm your child with information.

As for age, I told my child hard truths around age 8 and then reworked and revisited the conversation over time. I recommend no later than age 9 or 10. I don't think it's a good idea to wait until they are about to turn 13, even 12.

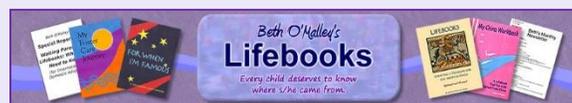
Kids know more than we think.



Beth O'Malley, M.Ed. is a lifebook expert, adoptee, adoptive mom and professional in the field of adoption. With a Masters in Counseling, she relies on her instincts and experiences as an adult adoptee and as much as her professional skills when writing and working on lifebooks.

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Beth O'Malley: 1-800-469-9666 or lifebooks@earthlink.net