

Differently the same

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Does an adopted child need special attention? was a question posed to Mrs. Sheela Ramakrishnan, educator, entrepreneur, teacher-trainer and an adoptive parent herself. She was addressing educators at a workshop "Adoption and Education" recently organised by SuDatta Adoptive Families' Support Group in Bangalore.

Sheela explained that many students in Indian schools come from differently composed families such as single-parent, grand-parent-only, step-parent and adoptive families. There is an emerging openness around these "differences". Educators must be aware of a child's family composition because having a 'non-traditional' family may cause emotional turmoil for a child.

The core issue

What's different about a child who was adopted?
It's what happened before adoption that is at the root of a child's emotional issues. A child takes time to understand and process her life story.

Children who were adopted may have a heightened sensitivity to rejection. They are constantly searching for acceptance, approval and identity, because they feel that the first adults in their lives "gave

them away". This may impact their self-esteem, and consequently academic performance and behaviour. They need support to build their self-esteem.

Adoptive parents may be vulnerable as well; constantly challenged by questions from society and the child himself. They must cope with tricky situations when the issue of their child's adoption is dealt with in an insensitive manner by others.

Adoption in school

What is the role of an educator in the life of a child who was adopted?

A child interacts with an extended community of relatives, friends, teachers and neighbours. Our schooling system focuses on the use of the child's hand and mind, and ignores the role his heart and emotions play in the learning process.

A child who was adopted is usually intelligent, along with extra sensitivity and deeper thinking. He may over-perform or under-perform because he periodically grapples with emotional issues.

She tends to have good relationships with most people, but friendships with only a few. He may hide creative talents to avoid the spotlight.



Sheela Ramakrishnan making her presentation.

A booklet "Talking about Adoption with Educators: Experiences from Families and Classrooms in India" was released by Mrs. Vanditha Sharma, Principal Secretary, Education, Government of Karnataka. The booklet showcases incidents where educators had to handle this sensitive topic in the classroom.

Questions and statements made in class have caught teachers off guard and inspired "tough" questions and comments:

- "I have two mummies and daddies, can I put them all on my family tree?"
- "I was adopted at the age of 4; I can't bring my baby photo."
- "How can I trace my genetic inheritance? I don't know my birth parents' genetics."

The workshop stressed on the need for a proactive partnership between parents and educators.

Openness and comfort levels

How an educator handles the topic of adoption depends partly on the parents' openness and comfort. Many parents tell their child early in life about her adoption; they are open to a dialogue with her and with other people also, including the school. The family is fully empowered.

Some parents are open with their child but not with the community. Consequently the school does not know. This is a one-sided empowerment. The child, is often the one to "spill the beans" in school, while telling her friends what's special about her.

Awkward situations arise when the child herself is not informed, but everyone else knows and is extra careful.

The last category is the toughest to deal with; only the parents know. The burden of secrecy sabotages an honest relationship with their child. Ironically, counsellors called in to handle difficult situations concerning these children are often told, *I know I'm adopted, I'm just waiting for my parents to tell me.*

Why tell the child early in life and then keep talking about it?

A successful relationship is built on an honest and open communication. Children's curiosity about their own life must not be suppressed. Sheela took educators through adoption issues at different ages.

The pre-school and primary years

Educators and parents can handle questions with



relative ease during these years. Children may be asked why they look different, or relate their adoption story with as much pride as any child tells his birth story.

Gradually, he grasps that he was first born to another woman and then brought up by his present family. He becomes conscious of the losses involved; of his lineage, birth family history and some early records of his life. Indian adoption laws seal all records about the birth parents' identity.

The middle years

The child begins to understand her life story better. It also becomes a more private matter for her. She prioritises her acceptance by peers. She may also express a desire to search for her birth parents.

Parents and educators are challenged to give detailed, age-appropriate and sensitive answers. What is said is not as important as saying it with love, genuine empathy and understanding. The child's feelings must be honoured and validated.

Secondary years

These are tricky years. The adolescent has an

extensive understanding of his life story, and the possibility that his birth may have happened under socially unacceptable circumstances.

Adolescents are building their social, familial and sexual identity. Young women struggle with society's morality in relation to their birth mother's situation. Young men feel let down since the first male in their lives (the birth father) is not anywhere near a role model. Raging hormones, peer pressure and parental expectations peak in high school, coinciding with tremendous academic pressure. The child has to use her hand and head while her heart and emotions are in turmoil.

The adults in their lives need to reassure them that they are loved and accepted regardless of their birth.

Some helpful strategies

Sheela concluded with strategies for educators to handle emotional issues about a differently composed family. The acronym TOAD is useful to remember:

Think on your feet in an unexpected situation
Offer individual attention

Ask for information from the parents, school and your student

Do not be judgmental

When planning classroom assignments or lessons, an educator must look out for:

1. Stereotypes
2. Black and White areas
3. Judgments of any kind
4. Insensitive language. Positive Adoption Language is introduced in the booklet released at the workshop.

With increased awareness and experience, educators will get a feel for handling situations with sensitivity.

Participants said the workshop was an eye-opener for them and suggested that more schools and educators can increase their awareness about adoption through similar workshops.

For more details on SuDatta and the work they are doing visit www.sudatta.org

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