



The **TIP-TOP** Program

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THE CENTER
FOR FAMILY
BUILDING

ADOPTION IS NO LONGER UNUSUAL

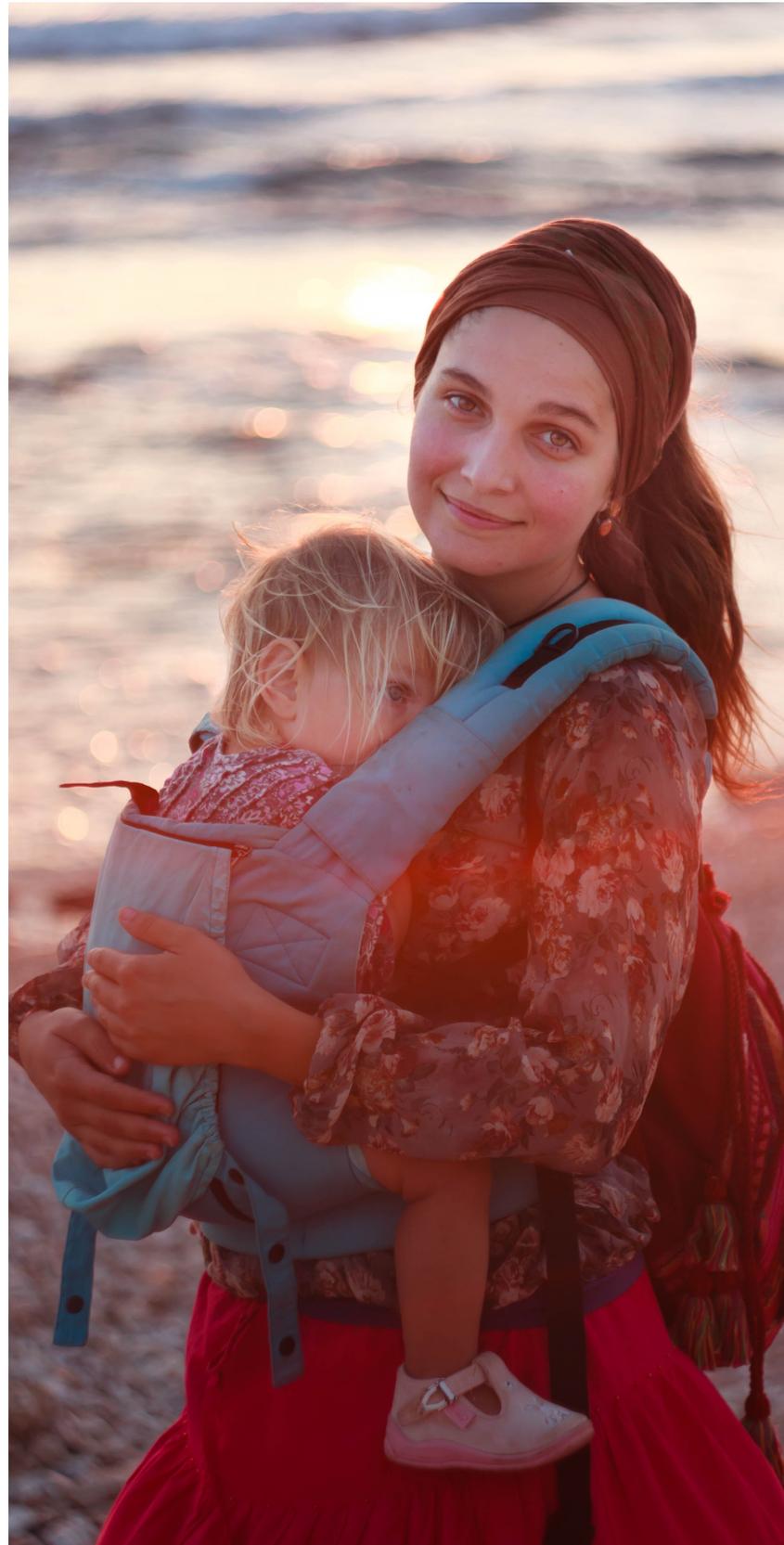
There was a time when adoption was kept in the closet. Adoptive families were seen as “different” or “less than” “natural” families. Shame and secrecy followed these families. Consequently, many children were never told that they were adopted. Fortunately, much of this has changed. Today, adoption is seen simply as one of many ways to build a family.

We have decades of research showing us that children who joined their families through adoption want to feel good about themselves and have a warm, open, and honest relationship with their parents and siblings. To varying degrees, they also want to know about their origins. Like adults, these children also have different temperaments. Some want to know about their biological origins and birth stories. Some are less interested. Some may not be interested at all.

One thing all children who joined their families through adoption have in common is that they want to feel good about their beginnings. They may feel that their birth families have contributed very little to who they are or they may feel that their identity was significantly influenced by their families of origin. Regardless of how much they attribute their personae to their birth parents, children who joined their families through adoption want to feel good about themselves.

Children who were adopted also want to feel comfortable disclosing their adoption information to others, when they feel ready to do so. They may want to share facts or their feelings about joining their families through adoption. Either way, they need to possess the tools to discuss their origins before feeling comfortable deciding with whom they want to disclose and what they want to disclose.

You may have thoughts about how your children should manage their adoption information. Like most adoptive parents, you probably thought a great deal about





disclosure while going through the adoption process. Most likely you read books or spoke with professionals as part of your homestudy.

You also had personal experience with disclosure. When you brought your child home, you needed to decide how to tell others about your adoption story. Through the years, you may have experienced positive and negative responses from others and adjusted your story accordingly based on the audience and your interest in disclosing.

You have also likely had many thoughts and feelings about adoption related issues, such as: who will your child grow up to be, worries about how your child will feel about being adopted, and thoughts about your child searching, or being curious about his genetics. You may also wonder how much to tell the pediatrician, teacher, and neighbors about your child's origin and birthparents. It is likely you fielded many inappropriate questions and felt worried about how your child would manage similar experiences.

It is never too early or too late to prepare your child to cope with these disclosure concerns. Helping your child develop these coping skills not only prepares her for situations she will encounter throughout her life, but may also help you stay connected to each other.

The **TIP-TOP** program helps your child cope with his feelings about being adopted and gives him a roadmap for deciding when and with whom he wants to disclose information. Fortunately, the world is a different place than it was decades ago. So although disclosure issues are no longer stigmatized, they are still a choice over which your child should have control. Preparing your child for those experiences is a valuable gift. It communicates that your love and concern for him overrides any anxiety you have about adoption issues.

Parents often worry about how their children will receive information about their origins. They also worry about how their children will be seen by others and, sometimes, they worry that their children may love them less if they help them explore their feelings about their genetic history. In families where the decision to adopt was not a result of infertility, such as with LGBTQ or single individuals, disclosure is sometimes less problematic. However, with all adoptive families, there may be concerns about how children will receive and use the information in the outside world.

LET'S BEGIN BY ADDRESSING YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS

The feelings that your child will have about adoption varies as much as the children themselves. Your child may have feelings that are very different from yours and/or your partner's. You and/or your partner may share the dream of having the same genetics as your

child, you may share curiosities about the birthparents, and you may wonder about your child's genetically-related siblings. Or you may not share these curiosities and feelings. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that your child is a separate person. Your child needs you to be curious about her feelings and empathic about her concerns, rather than your own.

If your child was adopted domestically, you will have the advantage of putting a face to his genetic make-up. Yet, that does not necessarily mean it is easier. International adoption also comes with its own challenges.

There may be times when you fear your child may think of her birthparents as parents. In fact, when your child is a teen she may try to convince you of this.

Remember, it is a teen's job to find ways to separate from you and often children do this by being hurtful. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that your child no longer loves you. You are her parent for the rest of her life and your child may need to be reminded of this many times. These reminders are stabilizing and reassuring to a child at any age.

Parents may be concerned about how their children will feel about joining their family through adoption and children may worry that their parents may feel disappointed by their inability to have biological offspring. It is common for parents and children to have many thoughts about adoption and birth families. Talking to children about their origins can promote closeness and help to alleviate anxiety.



Although a child's temperament may remain consistent for an extended period of time, it may also change as the child goes through different life stages. It is important to revisit the **TIP-TOP** skills at various times during your child's life as he passes through different developmental stages. Your child may have no interest in discussing his adoption at ten years of age, think it is "dumb" at fourteen, and become interested in it at age sixteen.

It is possible that your child may under- or over- estimate his feelings and share too much, or regret not sharing more. Like most experiences in childhood relationships, this is part of growth and another opportunity for your child to understand himself.

If you implement this program, you are dropping a seed into rich soil. During various points in your children's development, they will take to it or not. But even when they don't, you are educating them and encouraging them to feel good about who they are and keeping the door open for more communication in the future.

Your timing may not always be perfect, and it's important to be respectful of your child's need for space and privacy. Simply offering the opportunity to discuss adoption issues will communicate your openness and love. It will also demonstrate that you are not intimidated or threatened by the birth family.

Embrace the way your family was built. Some families have two moms, some have one dad, some have one child and others have ten. Your family is beautiful the way it is. There will be times when the topic of adoption arises, and perhaps, on some level, it makes you feel different. It is understandable to struggle with your inner conflicts. This is your personal issue to resolve on your own, and it may take some time. It does not mean you love your child any less.

As parents, we perform many functions. We care for and educate our children in ways that are obvious and in ways that are not. We teach our children to brush their teeth and tie their shoes, but we also teach them through our family traditions, habits, and ways we deal with the world. The **TIP-TOP** program will help you to help your children by teaching them how to manage their personal information in a way that works for them.

The TIP-TOP program is taught by direct instruction and by assisting the child in self-exploration. The program also has the benefit of placing you as your child's ally. As their support system in this process, you can help them feel confident as they work to better understand their personalities and their genetic information.

Finally, positive adoption language is essential. Language communicates intention and feeling. It is important to remember that your child's birthparents gave you the most wonderful gift one human being can give another. It was an act of courage and selflessness, but the birth parents are not your child's parents and they should be referred to by name or as the birth-mother or birthfather. They will not parent your child. Their birthparents' generosity, however, helped to build your family and this should be celebrated. You also participated in creating this child, by giving her a family to belong to.



Once your child understands her feelings, the third step will be to help her understand her temperament. Does she like to talk about her feelings or does she prefer to keep her innermost feelings private? Is your child curious, and asks questions about things she doesn't understand, or does she take life as it comes without anticipating too much? You can simply reflect back to her what you see, such as, "I love how you share your feelings so openly", or "I can see how you like to share your feelings with special friends like Amy, it's great that you feel so close to her."

STRATEGIES

You love your child and want to help him, and that is why you are interested in **TIP-TOP**. So once you have digested positive ways to talk about your child's origins, we can begin to look at the following steps:

First, we will give your child the opportunity to interact with children who share similar stories. Having this support can be powerful for your child, so if you are unable to attend a **TIP-TOP** workshop, search for other ways your child can connect with other donor conceived children,

Second, she will be given a feelings vocabulary. Even older children often cannot identify their feelings. Therefore, your children will begin to learn that they may feel a lump in their throat when they are sad, their hearts may race when they are excited or their bodies may feel relaxed when they feel warmly towards a friend or family member.

Fourth, your children will learn the strategy we use to help them put this all together. This technique will help them assess situations they will be faced with throughout their lives. We call it **The Rules We Hold DEAR**, which are:

Deep Breath

Emotion Check

Audience Check

Response Choice

Fifth, we will give them the six response options they can use. These are our **TIP TOP** choices:

Turn Away

To politely leave the conversation when they are uncomfortable or something hurtful is said

Interested

They may want to know more about the situation or questions posed to them

Protect My Privacy

They can say: "That is private"

Teach The Facts

They may want to educate the listener

Opinion

They may want to share their opinion of adoption

Personal Story

They may want to share their personal story

Lastly, we practice these steps with your children so that they are comfortable when they are confronted with comments or questions about adoption. This program prepares them for situations where they need to decide to disclose or not disclose information about their histories.

You can use this model at home to help your child deal with the outside world and to foster conversations between family members. It is important to listen to and honor your child's perceptions, even when those perceptions differ from yours. Your adoption information is your child's information to share or not to share. Your children need to know that you are empowering them to make choices that are right for them and that it is okay if those perspectives change over time. Your children will continue to grow and explore their stories over time. They will want you by their side.