



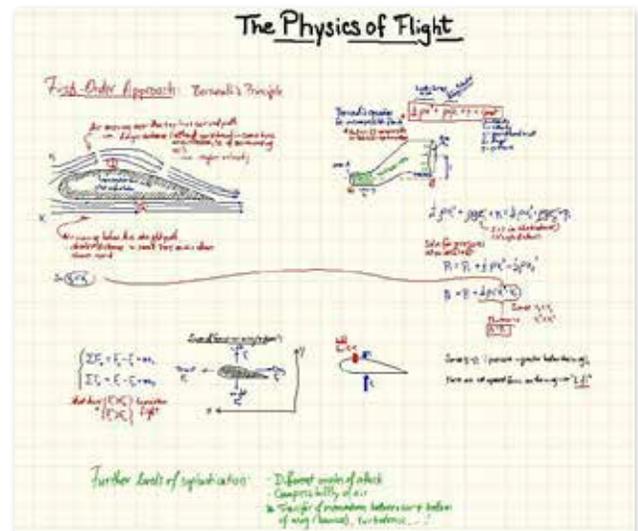
TALKING WITH FAMILIES ABOUT ADOPTION, FOSTER CARE, & KINSHIP CARE IN THE PEDIATRICIAN'S OFFICE

Author: Sarah Springer, MD, FAAP, on behalf of the Council on Foster Care, Adoption, & Kinship Care

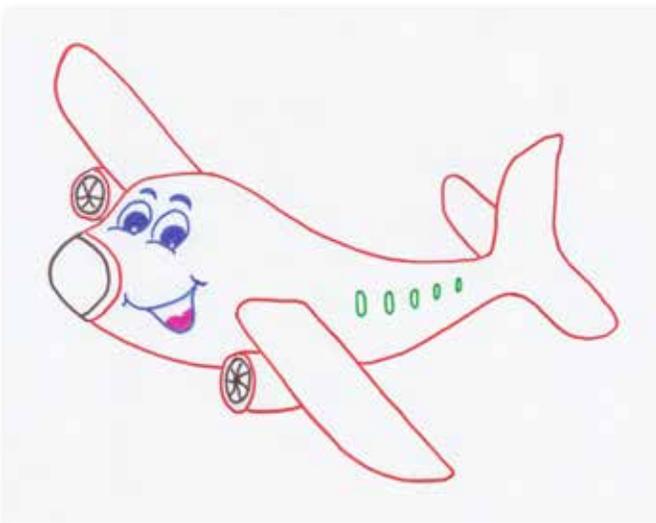
Why should pediatricians talk with children and families about adoption, foster care, and kinship care?

- Helping children understand their life stories matters to their long-term well-being, even when those stories are difficult or have missing pieces.
- Talking about those stories does not always come easily or intuitively to parents or caregivers, so they need anticipatory guidance on how to discuss these issues just as they do for other sensitive topics.
- Adoption, foster care, and kinship care happen in the context of everything else occurring in a child's life; each experience influences other experiences.

Children's understanding of complicated topics including complex family structures occurs gradually over time. For example, a child cannot understand how an airplane flies with this diagram on the physics of flight:



INSTEAD, A CHILD FIRST NEEDS TO KNOW WHAT AN AIRPLANE LOOKS LIKE WITH AN IMAGE LIKE THIS:



Starting with the simple and moving to the complex is also a way for pediatricians to help parents and caregivers explain complicated family situations to their young patients who are adopted or in foster care.

- Pediatricians need to challenge the notion that "We'll talk about that later when she's old enough to understand." They should lay the groundwork for understanding the details of the adoption when children are infants and toddlers to prepare them for more complexity later.
- Starting early gives parents a chance to practice language skills on topics that are often not easy to discuss.

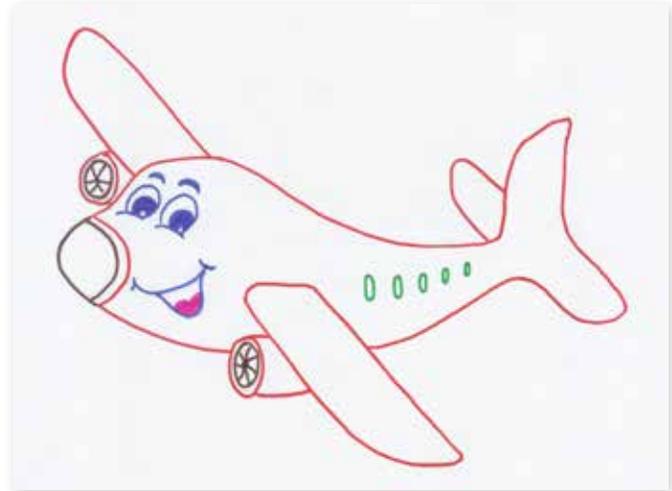




TODDLERS ASK, “WHAT?”

- Toddlers are curious about what they see and physically experience. Parents can say:
 - ♥ “Families happen in all sorts of ways.”
 - ♥ “Your birth parents could not take care of a baby.”
 - ♥ “We wanted a child to love.”
 - ♥ “The judge said that I could be the one to take care of you.”
- Parents should look for opportunities to positively reinforce their child’s story. Parents can say:
 - ♥ “Wow, look at that tiny baby! You were that small when we first met you in China, but look at you now!”
 - ♥ “Your toes are brown because your birth mother has beautiful brown skin like you do. My toes are pink like Grandma’s toes.”

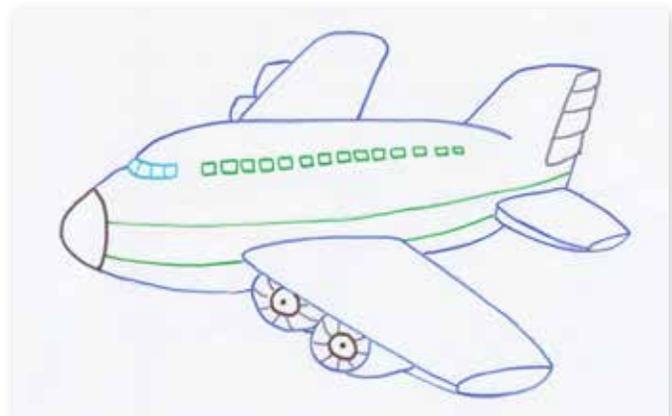
Children’s books can begin to become an important resource at this age. The American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) *Finding the Right Book for Every Child* fact sheet



(www.aap.org/en-us/literacy/Literacy/For-Professionals/Finding-The-Right-Book-For-Every-Child/booksbuildconnections_findingtherightbookforeverychild.pdf), part of the AAP’s Books Build Connections Toolkit, lists a few of the more popular books on the basics of adoption.

PRESCHOOLERS ASK, “WHY?”

- As preschoolers start to understand some of the details of their lives, parents can offer explanations like this:
 - ♥ Your birth parents were having hard problems of their own and could not take care of a baby when you were born.
 - ♥ Sometimes people in the country where you were born have very hard problems that make it impossible to take care of a baby. They made sure that you were with people who would take care of you and find you a family.
- They are very self-centered—the world is all about them. Answers to questions should involve their story in some way.
- They need to understand that placement away from their birth parents was not their fault; they were not a bad baby.
- Children whose birth and adoptive families have ongoing contact can start to understand different relationship roles.
- They have no sense of timing or privacy, so parents and caregivers need to help preschoolers learn what to share publicly and what to talk about at home.



- Preschoolers love endless repetition, so parents should be prepared to repeat stories. Parents can:
 - ♥ Make “telling our family’s story” a cherished family event.
 - ♥ Create a “life book” with pictures and stories of important phases, events, and transitions to help children understand their experiences and expand the story with more details as they grow older. A “life book” can be a three-ring binder that allows for pages to be added as children learn more about the complexities of their lives.





SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN WANT DETAILS.

- Parents can start to introduce difficult topics.
 - ♥ This is the ideal age to start introducing children to difficult details of their histories, such as abuse, trauma, rape, incest, and substance abuse. Children at this age can understand the facts without it negatively impacting their own identity.
 - ♥ As opportunities present themselves, parents should add details over multiple conversations.
- Good and bad peer groups start to influence the children's perceptions.
 - ♥ Their peers may ask questions about adoption.
 - ♥ Sometimes children are teased or bullied about being adopted or about racial or other physical differences.
 - ♥ Parents may need to work with schools to teach respectful language and behaviors, complete



assignments that ask for family histories, or address racism, bullying, and generally bad behaviors.

- ♥ Children need help deciding when and with whom to share information.
- Children adopted at this age may still learn the simple versions of their story to lay the groundwork for understanding more complex details.

ADOLESCENTS HAVE THE DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF SEPARATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION.

- Parents may find that their teen thinks that they are very out of touch, but the teen still values their input.
- Many teens struggle to incorporate components of both their birth family and their adoptive family into their emerging identity.
 - ♥ They may "try on" behaviors or attributes known or imagined about their birth parents.
 - ♥ They may look to media, culture, or peers for an identity that "fits."
- Their experiences may be positive or negative; parents need to recognize and reinforce those that are positive.
- Those who joined their families as older children or teens have the challenging task of developing strong attachments while simultaneously creating a self-identity.



- ♥ Parents can help by talking through the topics of earlier developmental stages (eg, why birth parents could not take care the youth), in addition to teen topics.
- ♥ Creating a "life book" at this age can be particularly helpful!

