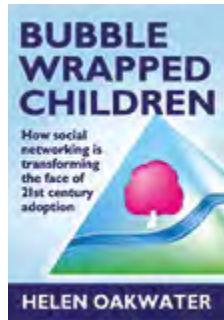


Jigsaw of truth: why, what and how

Helen Oakwater is an experienced adoptive parent, trainer and coach and is the author of Bubble Wrapped Children, a book about the impact on adoption of social media. She writes about the importance of truth telling in helping adopted children to develop a deep understanding of their life story.

Our kids often believe they were responsible for their hurt and their removal from their birth family. Words will not change that thinking: evidenced reframing will.

You don't know what your child thinks, believes, or remembers, about their past, members of their birth family or the reasons they were removed. Being told repeatedly does not equal comprehension or integration. Much bubbles around inside their heads and their bodies, invisible to you.



The full picture needs to be shared in digestible chunks. With age appropriate 100 percent truth telling, the picture is consistent and fleshes out details over time. Metaphorically it's giving a 25-piece jigsaw puzzle to a five year-old, 120 pieces to a 13 year-old, 1,000 pieces to an adult. The same picture gradually deepens into granular detail, as benefits child development stages and cognitive ability.

Even when material is contradictory, the child has a right to know conflicting data exists, for example if court records differ from other documents or anecdotes told by foster carers. This should ideally be evidenced. Children can then construct their coherent narrative, incorporating the contradictions. Knowing that aspects of their life history are messy helps them accept all parts of themselves.

Somatic Memory v Told Story

Do the stories they have been told over years, by a multitude of people, each with their own agenda, match their somatic (body) memories? Or has your kid just been talked at?

The frequent mismatch between their physiological experiences, memories, photos etc and the stories they have heard, creates internal conflict for the child. Should they trust their bodies or the secondhand stories? With significant differences they will trust neither. If you don't feel safe in your body, you won't feel safe anywhere and this leads to a dysregulated nervous system evidenced by fight/flight/freeze behaviours.

The past lives in the body until it is resolved.

To provide children with a deep, consistent understanding, we must help them join the dots between their felt experience, fragmented memories, distorted beliefs, created fantasy and warped evidence. They need a robust, coherent narrative that stands the test of time, hence the need for 100 percent truth telling in an age-appropriate way.

Jigsaw Pieces: Good, Bad and Ugly

Our kids have a history incorporating the good, the bad, and the ugly. They require all three, balanced appropriately. No demonising, but no glorifying. "Birth Mum was funny, good at gymnastics and music. Bad at managing money, time keeping and house cleaning. She lied to social services, forgot about you when drunk, and failed to protect you from dangerous people".

Theory is fine, but how do you do that?

1. Separate the behaviour from the person. Don't demonise either the birth family or the child. Use hindsight wisdom and "I wonder ..." curiosity.
2. Create an environment that avoids shame, encourages emotional honesty (model it yourself) and enables flexible thinking including the concept of choice.
3. Create a visual vocabulary with metaphors, diagrams and timelines.
4. Calibrate using a scale of 0-10. Use this in normal life, then map across to the tough stuff. You could calibrate how much something might hurt, for example a broken arm is 7, an injection 2 or how long until the weekend, bedtime or a holiday. Another calibration could be made using distance and gestures. A teeny bad choice like putting on smelly socks is 1cm, deliberately throwing juice at the wall is 10cm, hitting your brother is 50cm, but deliberate behaviour from an adult that causes hurt, that's a long car journey or flight to another continent. Teach these useful gradation and incremental skills. Then you can contextualise them and apply them to level of distress (or pleasure) and duration.

The jigsaw of truth offers your child the powerful reframe "it was not my fault".

To find out more about Helen's work take a look at her website www.FABparents.co.uk

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