



Parenting International Adoptees: The Restricted Information

By

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If you are the parent of an internationally born child, teen, young adult or adult, chances are you would give your right arm (maybe even your Starbucks latte) to know what they are REALLY thinking and feeling.

It's what my daughter calls "restricted information." "*Why is it restricted?*" I ask, holding on to her every word, listening for clues for what is on HER mind, despite the fact that via my professional work, I've got a pretty good clue. "***Because I don't want to hurt you, or make you feel bad about stuff,***" she replies.

"*But what stuff?*" I ask. "*You know Mom, just stuff.*"

So, this year, our 20th anniversary year, The Ties Program has been on a mission to share the "stuff" we've learned, We are grateful so many international adoptees have shared their hearts with us, and given us permission to share with you.

From the beginning, it was clear that the information at hand is very sensitive, and would require that we communicate it in an environment that allowed for in-person facilitation. In the age of technology, we went out on a limb and decided we would do in-person workshops across the country. It was time to get real people together offline for a **deep look** at the restricted information.

The response has been staggering and fascinating, as if we've touched a nerve, and propelled people back into an environment they've been missing—where real people talk and cry and laugh in person, and help one another through hard times. The workshop we've been doing feels familiar, like the support groups many of us were active in prior to or at the time of our adoptions.

We've quickly learned the title of the workshop has a flaw. The title is "*Teens and Tweens: What I Would Tell You If I Could Find the Words.*" The issue is this—the things we're discussing are not exclusive to teens and tweens. The reality is that "kids" across the ages—little ones and fully grown ones are holding in many of the same thoughts.

A Sampling of Topics We Discuss

Fitting In
Relationship with Adoptive Family
Adoptee Loyalty
Feelings Related to Birth Family and Birth Country
Understanding Background,
Poverty in Birth country
Why? Why? Why? (to a million things)
Abandonment Issues & Control
Self-Worth & Insecurities
Hope

That's because it's not so much about age as it is about the entire life experience of an international adoptee. Different things occur to "kids" at a different ages, and their exposure to information is tangled in the web of online information and social media.

Yes, we've all read the "kids-think-about-these-things-at-this-age" articles, and we don't discount those important developmental markers. But after the pre-school years, our experience has shown us that the lines of thoughts, concerns and feelings blur considerably. And in a world of technology, they are blurring at warp speed.

In the pre-technology era, kids thought about adoption, but if they shared their feelings, it was likely in a "Dear Diary" setting. Now, kids are connected in so many ways that Google tells me there are 668 MILLION websites devoted to helping us understand "how kids connect online."

Kids' minds are opened up to thoughts that might not have occurred to them until much later, if at all. From very early on, their internal thoughts and emotions are intertwined with a huge dose of external input.

And that's a good thing. *Maybe.*

In my mind, feeling alone and isolated with confusing thoughts and emotions can't be healthy. Better that kids are connected (to some extent) and have a shared community with which to work through what is unquestionably some hard and heavy duty "stuff."

CAUTION: The community can have pros and cons. Which brings us back to developmental markers. The community of international adoptees has gained enormous strength in the past 20 years. They are vocal, insightful, thought provoking, compassionate, passionate, pro-adoption, anti-adoption and a million other adjectives. And, their thoughts are not hidden under a mattress or in a diary. They are readily and wonderfully available to read or listen to across the internet.

My only worry (well probably not my ONLY worry) is that kids who have not reached developmental milestones that allow them to read, listen and form their OWN opinions, thoughts and feelings are getting that external input at what may be inappropriate times in their lives.

But that's our reality. It's what we have to work with.

In nearly all the workshops we've done so far, attendees have included primarily parents of teens and tweens, and adoption professionals. But instinctively, parents of both older and younger kids have attended. And quite thankfully, a good number of international adoptees, mostly older, have attended as well. And their presence has been a blessing and their input important.

The workshop focuses on what we've learned from the many international adoptees we've come to know at The Ties Program. For 20 years, we've traveled with kids and their families, creating environments where kids feel safe and that are conducive to kids opening their hearts. As trust is built, it is a natural for us to continue conversation long after the travel experience is over. As an organization, we've provided opportunities for "Ties kids" (and parents) to continue to share through writing, video, music and the arts.

We've been blessed that they have communicated candidly and dropped the wall of "restricted information" on tough topics like fitting in, relationships with their adoptive family, and adoptee loyalty. They have discussed emotions related to birth family, abandonment, insecurities, self worth, and hope. They have brought us to tears, through mountains of deep thought, and led us to profound understanding.

A sample quote from the workshop:

"For most of my life I felt different. I considered myself to be different from everyone else, and I felt that I wasn't worth as much. I would see all these beautiful girls running around with their blond hair, blue eyes, and perfect figure. It seemed that I could not be more out of place. Even in my family it seemed that way. I used to look at family photos and see how much I would stick out. I felt like I didn't belong anywhere. Going to my birth country changed that for me. Everyone looked like me and I belonged. I no longer saw myself as worthless. I was still different but that was not bad. I could finally embrace being different and see that different is still beautiful and worthwhile. I stopped trying to fit the mold for everyone else and was able to be myself. I can now look at a group of people and be able to say that I am beautiful and I belong."

The room becomes still, as we all absorb the enormity of the statement. As the workshop continues, we realize that ALL of the statements are profound, each one giving us increased insight and understanding. We pause frequently, sometimes to discuss, sometimes to allow for needed tears. But in the end, our world has expanded. The "restricted information" has come out in the open and opened our minds.

The work ahead lies in relationship strengthening that has the potential of creating an environment where parents can hear openly from their own children, either directly or via the "village" of family and friends who are part of their lives. Parents who honed the skills of "attachment parenting" may find the work easier. These parents were very intentional about staying physically and emotionally close with their children.

But the vast majority of parents read a few chapters (maybe even several books) on parenting, then got busy parenting the best they knew how. Some of the skills they used served them well. Others not so much. Many families are dealing with the traditional parenting struggles along with a host of other issues impacted by adoption.

We end the workshop by talking about creative ways to strengthen relationships within the family, and being open to hear the restricted information. This discussion often leads to a reminder that **"You don't have to be a perfect parent or child to be a perfect parent or child."** Perfection isn't reality for kids or adults. So, finding ways to understand and communicate with one another given the imperfections becomes the goal.

And, that's attainable.

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