

# TELLING YOUR CHILD'S BIRTH PARENT(S) ABOUT A SERIOUS DIAGNOSIS

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS  
AFTER THE ADOPTION PLACEMENT

Whether your adoption is open or semi-open, your child's birth family may appreciate learning about important challenges happening in their child's health.



## Why is this important?

### Transparency Builds Trust

Delivering bad news is never easy, especially when the news is frightening or serious. However, being up-front with your child's birth family is a way to build a foundation of trust as you clear up any fears that may come from learning that their child has received a serious diagnosis.

### The Birth Family is Part of the Adoptee's Family

Long after placement, your adopted child's birth family will continue to care about the health and wellbeing of the child they placed. It's important to inform birth parents when the child experiences a significant illness that could impact their future.

## PLANNING AHEAD TO PREPARE YOUR MESSAGE FOCUS ON EMPATHY

1. Get support from your adoption case team.
2. Don't procrastinate. Birth parents are more likely to appreciate the up-front news, rather than finding out that information was kept hidden.
3. Pick the right setting: private, safe, and in-person, if possible.
4. Practice beforehand with a friend or therapist, and get feedback on how to improve the message.
5. Put yourself in their shoes as you consider what to say.
6. Manage expectations about their response. They could be angry, fearful, or even neutral about the news.
7. Prepare for questions that may come up:
  - + What is the plan and prognosis?
  - + How will this affect our post-adoption contact?
  - + What supports are available for the child during this difficult time?



## FEARS YOUR CHILD'S BIRTH FAMILY MIGHT HAVE

Many birth parents fear that their choices might create future harm to their child. Most of all, they want to know that their child is safe, healthy, and thriving. A significant diagnosis could trigger the birth parent to fear for the child's future or even to blame themselves for somehow causing the illness. They may benefit from reassurance and regular updates on the child's care.

### HOW TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

#### ALLOW SPACE FOR EMOTIONS

1. Use the right tone: gentle, empathetic and understanding.
2. Share the "bottom line" up-front rather than beating around the bush.
3. Be transparent with details that are safe to share, as well as how the diagnosis and treatment might affect agreed-upon openness.
4. Give birth parents a moment or two for the news to sink in.
5. Express empathy through statements like "I imagine you're feeling unsure about what this means for your child's future or our commitment to you."
6. Offer appreciation and reassurance through statements like "This won't affect how much we love [the child] or how often we have contact with you. You're still an important part of our family and that won't change."
7. Allow for an emotional response by checking in: "How are you feeling about this news?"

#### Be realistic about how this might change the relationship with your child's birth family

Before having this conversation, consider the current post-adoption contact agreement and how often updates, photos, texts, calls, or visits are already happening. Ask yourself a few important questions:

- How will treatment appointments impact the time we have available for the post-adoption contact we agreed to?
- Will the child be healthy enough for travel to annual visits?
- How might we increase our typical communication to keep the birth family informed about the child's health?
- How comfortable are we with the birth family visiting the child in the hospital?
- Is there additional information we can ask the birth parent(s) about relevant family medical/mental health history?

**Remember to accurately reflect the child's life experience by including positive developments in the child's life along with medical updates.**