

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

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 life.



## 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 will experience a significant stressor within their family.

### 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 life experiences and emotional wellbeing of the child they placed. It's important to inform birth parents when the child experiences a troubling issue that could impact their future.

## PLANNING AHEAD TO PREPARE YOUR MESSAGE FOCUS ON EMPATHY

1. Take time to process the news yourself, before reaching out to the birth family. A serious diagnosis will be a lot for your family to process.
2. Get support from your adoption case team.
3. It may be difficult to include birth parents in your private life in this way; consider what private health information you are comfortable disclosing and which details should remain private.
4. Pick the right setting: private, safe, and in-person, if possible.
5. Practice beforehand with a friend or therapist, and get feedback, if this would be helpful.
6. Manage expectations about their response. They could be fearful, sad, 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 may already have fears about their child's future wellbeing. Most of all, they want to know that their child is safe, healthy, and thriving. A significant diagnosis may make them worry about what will happen to their child if one or both adoptive parents can no longer provide safe, loving care. They may benefit from reassurance and regular updates on the family.

### 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 [the child]'s future or our commitment to you."
6. Offer reassurance through statements like "This won't affect how much we love [the child]." Consider sharing who your supports are and who may be helping care for the child, when assistance is needed.
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 impact the time we have available for the post-adoption contact we agreed to?
- Will the ill adoptive parent be healthy enough for travel to annual visits?
- If our ability to travel for visits changes, are there alternatives, such as virtual visits?
- How might we increase our typical communication to keep the birth family informed about the child's wellbeing during this difficult time?
- Who will take up the post-adoption communication if that was typically done by the parent who is ill?

**Remember to accurately reflect the child's lived experience by including positive details along with updates regarding the family's situation.**