

Episode 6: Don't Hide it

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Priya:[00:00] Dear Pari, before we adopted you , one of the constant questions that nanna and I had was how will we tell you about your adoption and when. We also wondered what if you decide to do search for your biological parents. We then read up, researched and got comfortable with the idea of disclosure. We aren't going to wait till you are 15 or 18 to tell you this truth. It won't be dramatic as it was shown very recently in an advertisement of a leading mobile ad either. There is no shame to adoption and you will feel none from us and hopefully from your peers to. We will try and answer all your questions with utmost honesty and we only hope, come what may, you know we are there for you.

Rakesh:[00:48] Welcome to Dear Pari', a ground-breaking podcast series presenting facts, busting myths, and tackling stigma around adoption. It will bring to you varied viewpoints from adoptees, parents, adoption experts & government officials This podcast is being brought to you by Suno India, a podcast platform for issues that matter.

Hi, this is Priya and this is Rakesh, your hosts of Dear Pari

Rakesh:[1:25] This episode deals with the one topic that leaves many parents nervous and anxious- the how to of disclosure. We continue our discussion with Varsha Swamy, an adoption counselor and adoptee herself and Saras Bhaskar, a well-known adoption counselor from Chennai. You will hear from Supriya, a single mother on how she disclosed to her young daughter.

One common misconception that many people have especially extended family and friends is that a child should not be told about their adoption until they are of a certain age. Others believe that it shouldn't be revealed at all. Let me tell you a story. Growing up, I had found out that one of my closest friend was adopted and i found out about this through another common friend and for the longest time, all of us around her knew this but she didn't. Many years later, she chose to isolate herself and cut herself from all of us, I presume it is because she found out she was adopted just before she was married and perhaps felt a range of things- from betrayal to confusion. I think of her often these days and wonder how different things would have been if she had known about it This definitely influenced our decision to be honest about Pari's adoption. We acknowledge The stigma is still there but there is hope too. Despite reluctance and discomfort around the topic, some parents have chosen to inform their children. Many a times, parents reveal to their children using books, movies or other tools in an age appropriate manner. Some may choose to tell their child very young; in some cases the child may ask questions like any other child on "where they came from". All these are good conduits to start a conversation about their adoption.

Priya:[3:12] We asked Varsha about what parents need to do and keep in mind when answering questions about their child's adoption story.

Varsha:[3:20] I specifically want to address 5 areas with respect to this question because I think all 5 together can definitely help parents when it comes to answering questions and talking to their child about anything related to their adoption. The first is forming an open environment so that the child can feel comfortable to come and ask anything to their parents and one of the biggest ways a parent can do

that is by using non-judgemental responses. It could be in non-verbal form by if their shoulders are shrugged and the arms are crossed and they have a frown on their face or they have a big you know question mark or like a big shock when they hear what their child is asking that automatically sends a signal to the child that my parent is uncomfortable my parent is you know unhappy or you know whatever and children are so in tune with these feelings, these emotions that they immediately decide to shut off because children are they are so beautiful in that way they want to protect their parent and they want to make sure their parents are not feeling hurt in any way they stop asking questions, they stop bringing things up and they keep it within themselves. So it is very important for them for parents to recognize that the responses need to be non-judgements

The second thing I recommend that parents do is, if you don't know an answer to something your child is saying you can buy time or honestly tell them hey let me figure out because I want to get this answer to you and it is so important to be honest with them and it is so important to give them the right information so if you don't know read please read about it or join forums where people can provide you the resources that you need to be able to answer your child's questions.

The third thing is to ask open ended questions one to be able to find out what the child is going through? so that is because if you assume and just keep talking or lecturing or asking close ended questions to give more information. A close ended question is something that ends with the answer of one word may be a yes or no. An open ended question is how do you feel? so that way a child has to open up and answer the question so you get more information to be able to help them. The second reason it's important to ask these open ended questions is to find out what do you need what can I help you with? how are you dealing with this? And, of course according to the age of the child it has to be age appropriate so you will handle a four year old differently than you handle a ten year old differently than you handle an eighteen year old.

The difficulty is not only on the child, parents, adoptive parents go through so much. They go through their own insecurities, their own questions, their own difficulties, their own you know anything and everything and if it is if they are a couple if it is two people who have adopted I think it is very important for them to vent to each other, lean on each other and be able to share with each other and protect the child from anything that you are going through because again as I mentioned in the beginning the child is going to literally clam up and stop talking to you in the name of protecting you. And, I personally and professionally feel it is very important for the parents to protect the child in that instance and to use either a partner or maybe even your parents or a close friend who can help you or a therapist who can help you with going through and not put that on the child

And the last thing I would like to you know suggest that parents do is to educate extended family members on adoption inclusion, adoption culture and adoption language. Apart from just one parent who has adopted or two parents who have adopted or maybe they have a nuclear family that also includes siblings of various forms. The extended family plays a very big role in forming that identity, forming that inclusion that the adoptive child needs and deserves. So I think that parents can assume that the extended family would automatically do their own reading or automatically know how to deal with these various aspects so i think apart from what

they talk about directly with their child they can indirectly also help by educating the extended family members.

Rakesh:[8:14] Another concern that many parents have is if their child's decision to begin a search for their biological roots is a form of rejection. Varsha says that this isn't the case at all and if anything it only points out towards a secure attachment the parents and child have formed.

Varsha:[8:30] More than anything it screams about the secure attachment or the insecure attachment that the child has with their adoptive parents. In many cases you will find that there is an insecure attachment what happens is the because of the insecurity the adoptive parent has I am not saying that it is wrong i will also put that forward it is not wrong to be insecure because when you love someone so much you don't you might be scared what if they get hurt? what if they don't find what they are looking for ? what if they find what they are looking for? what if they find what they are looking for and what if i am not enough? what if they wanna leave me and go you know back to their biological parents if once they found them and these are really really difficult things to give. So the insecurity is probably you can almost use the word justified. However, just because you have an insecurity doesn't really mean you just live with it you need to figure out how to turn that insecure attachment or insecure feeling into a secure attachment so that you provide that comfortable environment for your child to be able to share with you what they are going through? how they feel? what questions they have? what feelings they have towards their biological family? and if they choose to go for the search it is because it is part of them that they want to explore further. It could be a part that helps them with their identity, it could be a part that helps them fix a little puzzle piece that went missing, so ultimately what I am saying is whatever is trying to help the child fix it might be completely to do with the child or the biological parent and not necessarily reflection of something that you are not providing them as adoptive parents. It could be that they are completely happy with you, completely secure with you but there is still something they just have to do in their life. And, I honestly feel that the more adoptive parents learn how to be on board with that the more smooth the process would be for everybody involved.

Priya:[10:35] We spoke to Supriya, a professional in analytics and a mother of 6-year-old daughter on this topic. After she adopted, Supriya joined online groups to discuss and understand certain aspects of adoption, like many of us parents do. It was in one of these groups that she says she first heard and participated in discussions linked to disclosure. She says she understood the importance of naturalising the word adoption. Two years ago, she told her daughter that she was adopted.

Supriya:[11:02] Word naturalisation means a lot so I was very open about it but was not very specific about her. When she was around four, I decided to explicitly tell her so the way I told her was I weaved it into a story, a family story; so I had four stories- one was my dad, the second was my mom, the third was me and the fourth was one was her. She got lot of questions so she did ask me once am I born from your tummy then I said no so what I realised is in those questions is that you need to be as factual and calm as possible.

Rakesh:[11:52] Supriya also says that the insecurity among parents is often the main cause for them not wanting to disclose

Supriya:[11:58] There are many things from where the reluctance stems from. The first thing being it's a child-how will a child understand such a big reality. The second thing is primarily the insecurities that creep in; the insecurity about losing your child; insecurity about the child not accepting you; insecurity not being able to support your child if the child breaks down.

Rakesh:[12:36] She strongly believes it's the adoptee's right to know the truth of their adoption and the parents' responsibility to be there for them at all costs.

Supriya:[12:45] To be honest, even i was nervous about it. I was very anxious about it. When I disclosed it to her lot of people why you did this so early on. And i was looking for signs because yes it took a lot of time for her to accept it; it still; she has a lot of burning questions about it so much so that she wanted to go back from where i bought her and she wanted to see the place but one day i dont know i was thinking through philosophically and i just thought to myself why am i being scared of something which has not yet happened and there is nothing that i can do about it thats a part of her past to which she is entitled as a person; an independent person to know the truth about; and who am i to hide it from her or lie about it. And when the time comes i will be there to support her and make her achieve the peace she should get. Whatever be the decision she makes.

Rakesh:[14:00] During our conversation with Saras Bhaskar, we learnt that the sooner a child is informed about their adoption, the better it is for them. In cases, where children have been adopted at an older age, Saras advises that parents seek professional help. She gave us insights into the kind of cases that come to her:

Saras:[14:19] Currently i am offering services to a girl who was adopted when she was 3 years old and the parents chose to reveal to her only last year. she's now 16 years old and they revealed to her on her 15th birthday i think and life has become a hell for all of them since then until then the child knew that her parents are much older compared to her age but when it was confirmed by the parents it was almost like why did you remove me from the place where i was in ? i would have been happier there you know; here i don't resemble you, you are from South India and i am not from South you know all those coming to know about it now has caused a lot of trauma. its like an identity crisis you know and that is the crucial age when they individuality and identity develops for children in their teenage years and unfortunately the parents chose wrong time to reveal ideally.

Priya:[15:24] Currently, the teenager is undergoing counselling with Saras and is on anti-anxiety medicines.. We asked Saras if there is an ideal time to disclose

Saras:[15:33] The research findings in the past and current have pointed towards telling it right from day one whether it's a 3 month old baby or a 3 year old baby because the fundamental connection between parent and child is love and trust. Now, if the trust need to be strengthened the child would rather hear it from the parents rather from outsiders in that sense tell it from day 1. As a psychologist, I have been encouraging parents to tell the child right from day one age appropriately in the story form, question and answer form when they ask questions you don't volunteer information but don't shut them up when they ask questions spend that time invest that time because those are the ones that are going to strengthen the trust factor.

Priya:[16:28] She also told us about another case she is handling where the parents are taking her help in deciding how and when to tell the child. We asked her how parents, who are yet to reveal, should do it-especially if the child is a teenager?

Saras:[16:40] I have another set of parents who have come to me and their daughter is about 16 years old. They are going through the teenage tantrums and they have not revealed to her and so they wanted to know if they can reveal now so they were very confused and we had to sit down and discuss about it. First, choose the time that is not going to have an impact and we decided may be during summer vacation because there is nothing to focus on academic performance at that time and not having the peers because with the trauma and then knowing it and then going to school and meeting friends so we kind of chose summer vacation as the time. We all understood that the child is more comfortable with the father so we decided it will be the father who will be sharing the news. What happened in their case she had some menstrual cycle problem they had taken her to a gynaecologist. The gynaecologist was asking details about the mother and the mother was getting uncomfortable because there is no genetic coding there. So she just answered all the questions and when she came out she said not necessarily you will have the same thing that I have. So I said this is the time when you choose to tell the child when it is a natural process; when the child is asking these questions you know what this is something we have been waiting to talk to you to speak to you about and you can let the child open up an avenue and then you jump into it. And, it has to be done in a very very gentle way sensitive, sensible and a gentle way.

Couples have come to me and they said we have not told and now she is of marriageable age and we want to we are seeking alliances shall we go ahead and reveal to the you know prospective proposals? And, that's when I said you don't reveal to the prospective proposals first, you reveal to your child first and then to the prospective proposals

Priya:[18:42] Conclusion: For many, disclosure is a big mountain to climb. Not many even adopt because of this fear. And others simply chose to hide it forever. We believe that it is important to think from the perspective of our child and be empathetic. Like Varsha said, creating an environment of trust and love and being supportive to the kid is what parents can do best. The last thing you want is for them to know accidentally.

And it is only natural that some children will be curious to know their story. But what if you and your child will never find those answers? What if closure is not as you expected it to be? These are questions that are always at the back of our minds. India follows closed adoption systems which means there is absolutely no information for adopted families about biological and vice versa. However, the new CARA guidelines claim that if and when the adoptee wants to search, then they will assist. But, ground reality is far from that. With paperwork yet to be digitised and files not even properly maintained, I wonder if my daughter and many like hers will ever get the answers they deserve as a matter of right.

In a country and a system which is still flawed, where trafficking is rampant, what then is the role of parents like us who chose to adopt? Do we question a flawed system or do we simply accept it for what it is- highly parent-centric & one which

commodifies children. We discuss this and more in our next episode 'Flipping the Coin'.

Rakesh:[20:24] In September, Suno India organised a Flash Fiction writing contest. We invited submissions on the themes of patience, revelation and rebirth as part of this contest. Our jury included Deepa Balsavar, an award-winning children's author and Sumitra Raghavan, lead, content development at Flintobox. You will now hear the second winning entry 'Mukti ' written by Sara Siddiqui read by Sumitra Raghavan. You can also read the story on our website.

Sumitra:[20:53] Sumitra Raghavan reading the flash fiction runner up story. You can read the story 'Mukti' here.

Priya:[24:43] As independent producers we rely a lot on you to spread the word. If you like our podcast, please take time and let your friends and family know about it. It's taken a lot of time and money to get you these episodes. If you appreciate it and have found them useful, then help us get you more such engaging and well-researched content. You can head to <https://www.patreon.com/sunoindia> and help us produce this content from just \$2 a month. If you can spare a little more there's all sorts of bonus content available along with additional benefits at the 5 dollars and upwards tiers. Your contributions will help us stay independent and bring to you unbiased and well-researched content. If you believe that knowledge is power like we do, please do consider contributing to us at <https://www.patreon.com/sunoindia>. You can also find this link on our website. We really, really appreciate your enthusiasm and support you've all shown us since we started, and we hope to be able to continue to provide you with such engaging content in days and months to come. And yes don't forget to share this episode on social media with #DearPari

Priya:[25:49] Thank you for listening to this episode of Dear Pari. You can send in your comments or voice notes to hello@sunoindia.in. Also, we are partnering with The Logical Indian to raise awareness about adoption. If you would like to contribute please let us know. You can reach out to Suno India by facebook, twitter or instagram.

Rakesh:[26:08] We also welcome you to subscribe for free on our website sunoindia.in. Subscribers will receive the episodes as soon as they are released and will also have access to bonus tracks in coming days. You can also find us on apple podcasts, Soundcloud or any other podcasting app of our choice.

Priya:[26:28] We would like to thank Nikhil Rao of Indian Ocean for original music, Priyanka Kumar for artwork, Tarun Nirwan, our digital lead & Kunika Balhotra, our communication officer

Pari:[26:53] Amma Nanna Pari