The adoption process in our country traditionally has been designed to safeguard the rights of adoptive parents, insure the solidarity of the adoptive family, and preserve the anonymity of the natural parents. To accomplish this, when adoptions are finalized, the original birth certificate is "sealed" and a new certificate is issued in the name of the adoptive parents. Once sealed, the laws of most states specify that the original record can be opened only by court order and for "just cause." A few states have provisions for opening of the records on demand of the adoptee when that person becomes an adult. This provision often turns out to be true in theory but not in practice, and the definition of "just cause" has varied greatly from court to court.

Most adoptive parents have warm and loving relationships with their adoptive children. Most try to pass on to them, at appropriate times, as much of the birth information as they know and are able to provide. Most adoptees have a warm and loving and truly bonded relationship with their adoptive parents. In spite of this, and regardless of their attachment to the adoptive parents, some adoptees, as they reach maturity, have a compelling desire to learn of their natural parent or parents.

Many adult adoptees and adoption specialists see this search as essential to the establishment of a sense of identity. Most reports of reunions indicate that adoptees have been pleased with the meeting and that their ties to their adoptive parents have been strengthened thereby. Third, there is the purely legal issue, the growing body of law which has spoken to the right of people to know the content of various records kept about them.

The Child Welfare League of America recently reviewed data from 163 adoptive agencies and found over 3,000 adult adoptees returned to these agencies in 1975. Two fifths of these persons wished to learn the identity or locate their biological family. Three fifths desired identifying information only. In 1975, approximately 1,500 biological parents requested information about the relinquished child.

The Adoption Committee recognizes the strong feelings and arguments to support each side of this multifaceted problem. We feel that a careful exploration of options is in order, often tailored to each adoptee-adoptive parents-natural parent complex. If an adult adoptee requests information, we suggest an orderly exploration with that person to find out what it is he or she really wants to know, and how his or her needs can best be satisfied, particularly with a view to preserving the feelings and rights of the adoptive parents and the biological parents at the same time.

More specifically, the pediatrician is in a unique position to assume the role of the child's advocate as he or she matures. The pediatrician may serve as a clearinghouse for information, such as birth and adoption history. He may advise parents and potential adoptive parents as to anticipated problems, and particularly the possibility that their adoptive child may later want to learn his or her biological identity, and that their cooperation in this effort may improve, rather
than break down, the relationship with their adoptive child.

He should counsel and advise his patients who are adoptees to better understand their own feelings and problems, and to provide background information at appropriate times. Finally, he should educate the community, the courts, and the agencies on the changing emphasis in adoptive practices, especially in the field of "the right to know."

Committee on Adoption and Dependent Care

Members: Donald Lewis, M.D., Chairman; George C. Cypress, Jr., M.D.; Joseph H. Davis, M.D.; Ruth C. Harris, M.D.; S. Norman Sherry, M.D.
Consultant: Henry M. Seidel, M.D.
Liaison Representatives: Ms. Clara J. Swan, Child Welfare League of America, Inc.; Ms. Elaine Schwartz, Children's Bureau, OCD, DHEW

REFERENCE

TOYS FOR CHILDREN IN 1898

The Archives of Pediatrics, established in 1884, was the first American journal devoted exclusively to diseases of children. Each issue for a span of many years usually contained an editorial or two. The one below is a good example of an editorial published toward the end of the 19th century.

The amusement of young children is largely derived from toys and playthings. The character, therefore, of their toys becomes of importance even in the case of healthy children.

One of the most noticeable peculiarities of childhood is a tendency to become attached to certain things and to cling to them most persistently. The young child loves certain nursery songs, and never tires of hearing the mother sing them over and over. He loves certain stories, and listens with minute attention to their hundredth repetition. He becomes attached to certain toys and persistently goes back to them in preference to the new and more handsome ones, and clings to the old dilapidated doll in preference to the most gorgeous new one. All this is common knowledge to every observer of children.

An explanation, or a partial explanation at least, is not difficult to reach. A child's mental capacity is yet undeveloped and his comprehension is very small. He knows and appreciates the old familiar doll and its few clothes. The new one, with its closing eyes and jointed limbs and its complex and elaborate dress, is beyond his small comprehension. It tires him as much to investigate and unravel all its mysteries as it does his lawyer father to master an intricate case. So he returns to the old one that he loves and comprehends without effort.

If the child is content with simple toys, why force upon him those that he does not love so much? Why not follow the plain teaching of nature and allow him to pass his early childhood in the most simple and contented manner possible?

It is entirely true that he can soon be educated out of these simple tastes, too often at the expense of his own contentment and the happiness of those about him. When he has once formed tastes for less simple amusements he cannot be forced back into the old ways of life. If he becomes accustomed to a multitude of toys and a mob of dolls, and daily expects something new, the time will come when his requirements cannot be fulfilled. He has tried and has become tired of every amusement adapted to his own age and of that far in advance of it, and he becomes a burden to all about him [italics mine].

Noted by T. E. C., Jr., M.D.

REFERENCE
The Role of the Pediatrician in Adoption With Reference to "The Right To Know"
Committee on Adoption and Dependent Care, Donald Lewis, George C. Cypress, Jr.,
Joseph H. Davis, Ruth C. Harris and S. Norman Sherry

Pediatrics 1977;60;378

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