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ADOPTION
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FEBRUARY 2026 EDITION



JULIA, AGE 15

Photo by: Bry Cox



MICHAEL 16
PHOTOGRAPHED BY HEATHER NIELSON

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UTAH'S
CHILD & FAMILY
SERVICES

**ADOPTION
CONNECTION**
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RESOURCES FOR ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Utah's Adoption Connection offers a comprehensive online resource database designed to support adoptive families throughout the parenting journey. It helps caregivers find practical services, support programs, and information tailored to a wide range of needs.

What's included:

Searchable Resource Database - Easily filter resources by age range, county, and type of support.

Key Categories such as

- DSPD Providers - services for people with disabilities.
- Educational Supports & Tutoring for school success.
- Mental Health Services & Crisis Support, including trauma-informed providers.
- Respite Care options for caregiver breaks.
- Search & Reunion options for adult adoptees seeking non-identifying family history.
- Support Groups to connect with other adoptive families.
- Transition to Adult Living supports for older youth.

Additional support features:

- A lending library of parenting books and videos.

Families can use this hub to easily find and connect with services that match their needs across Utah – from therapeutic supports to social groups and practical services.

Visit <https://www.utahadopt.org/support-resources/adoptive-family-resource-library/search-and-reunion> to learn more.



ON THE COVER: JULIA

Julia, who goes by "Kenzie" is an artistic, outgoing ninth grader with a kind heart. She loves playing guitar, spending time with friends, and expressing herself creatively.

Some of her favorite colors are Pink and red. Her go-to comfort food is pasta, and she has a soft spot for ducks, especially Donald Duck.

Kenzie enjoys history and choir, dreams of learning to skate and Spanish, and is determined to graduate high school and build a happy, independent future.

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Challenging Parenting Issues: The 5 Hardest Things Parents Face

BY: JANET LEHMAN, MSW

Being a mother or father is a balance of taking care of your kids and letting them grow up and learn from their mistakes.

Your role of simply loving and protecting your baby from pain and discomfort changes to one of accepting that your child or teen will need to experience natural consequences for their actions.

The hard part—for them and us—is that these consequences almost always include some discomfort, disappointment, and pain.

“It’s helpful to allow your child to struggle. Change happens out of struggle and in moments of accepting responsibility for our actions.”

Watching my child struggle without stepping in to fix things for him was one of the hardest parenting challenges I’ve personally experienced as a mom, even though I knew it was the best thing for him.

Parents face many challenges. And as we all find out, there are many, many challenges that we never expected or knew about before having children! As a mom and therapist of 30 years, I’ve found the following five the most difficult.

1. How To Parent the Child You Have, Not the Child You Wish You Had

Often, we try to parent our kids based on who we think they should be instead of who they are. It can be tough and exhausting to have a child with ADHD or a teen with ODD who’s defiant and disrespectful. Or you might simply have a child who’s very different from you. Trying to see their side of things becomes a constant, draining battle.

You might think, “Hey, this isn’t what I signed up for! Is this what motherhood is supposed to be like?”

As a mom and therapist, I know that real grief can emerge when you realize that your child is not who you thought they would be. You might have to give up certain dreams you had for your child's future when you realize they're not going to take the path you'd hoped they would.

Understand, though, that once you let go and accept who your child is, a different kind of love can develop. You'll be able to see them clearly for the person they truly are.

I have found that true acceptance is one of the most powerful, loving things a parent can give to their child. It's the basis for so many things, including being able to develop and communicate reasonable expectations for appropriate behavior. Old power struggles fall away, which can give you space to nurture new aspects of your relationship.

As a bonus, when you accept your child for who they are, they can become better at accepting themselves.

2. How To Let Your Child Experience the Pain of Natural Consequences

In general, it's not a good idea to try to protect your child from experiencing the consequences of their actions. How will your child learn from their poor choices if you take away the natural consequences of those choices?

We humans learn through trial and error. It is often the best way to learn. We speed, we get a ticket, and we eventually stop speeding.

Your child can't learn this way if you put up a protective fence around them and try to fix things for them. As my husband, [James Lehman](#), said, "It's helpful to allow your child to struggle. Change happens out of struggle and in moments of accepting responsibility for our actions."

It's our job as parents to help our kids through these difficult times, but it's not our job to bear all their burdens for them. This may mean letting your child feel pain and disappointment.



You can help them by talking about how they can handle themselves differently next time and teaching them some good coping strategies. By simply letting your child know you're there for them because you love them, you're giving them one of the most important things a parent can ever give.

3. How To Face Judgment, Shame, and Blame From Others

If you have a child who acts out and engages in other challenging behaviors—tantrums, yelling, disobeying you, or being annoying and obnoxious—you've probably gotten “the look” from friends and strangers alike. You know the one—it says, “What's wrong with you? Why aren't you doing something about your child's behavior?!”

That look can make you feel like a terrible parent, even if you know you're doing everything you can to raise your child the best you know how. And the truth is, others will probably judge you—it's human nature. If you're in this situation, it's natural to worry about your child disappointing or embarrassing you. It is also natural to worry about how others will react to your child's misbehavior and blame you.

But when your child is acting out, and you're feeling judged by others, stop and say to yourself: “I can't read other people's minds.”

Indeed, if you try to imagine what others are thinking, 95 percent of the time, you're going to read something negative. That's because whenever we're negative, we interpret other people's perceptions of us as negative, too. And in these situations, we don't read people's minds in search of hope. We read them in search of criticism—especially when something is going wrong.

So when you feel yourself trying to guess what your neighbor, your mother-in-law, or your friends are thinking, tell yourself: “I'm not a mind-reader; I don't know what they're thinking.”

Stop the tape that's playing in your head and move on. This is also part of the process of learning how to engage in “positive self-talk,” or talking to yourself in a way that promotes calmness and hope, rather than panic.

4. Coping When Your Child Says “I Hate You, Mom!”

One of the hardest things parents face is when their child is mean, rude, or disrespectful. Your child may have always been this way. Or the change in their personality might have seemingly happened overnight—perhaps when they hit the pre-teen years. One day your 10-year-old loves being with you. The next day they're screaming, “I hate you,” calling you names, and refusing to go anywhere with you.

The words “I hate you” can have the power to reduce any parent to tears or anger. It can make you feel like you've failed and wonder where you went wrong.

Kids know that saying these words can paralyze a parent during a fight, which is why they use this tactic to get what they want. As hard as it is, try not to personalize your child's behavior, even when they say that they hate you. When you personalize things, it makes it very hard to be objective about how to respond to your child in the moment.

A good thing to do when this happens is to stop, breathe, and respond with something like the following: “We're not talking about that right now. We're talking about the fact that you need to do your homework.”

You can also ask yourself: “What does my child need from me right now?” It might be some space. Or it might be for you to follow through on a consequence you issued. But remember, try not to take these words from your kids personally.

5. How To Let Go

During your child's pre-adolescent and adolescent years, you are constantly confronted with the challenge of letting go. This is especially difficult if your kid seems to need to learn things the hard way.

A natural part of adolescence is risk-taking — which often results in rule-breaking and inappropriate behavior. It becomes extremely important as a parent to be able to disconnect from your emotional response to this misbehavior.

Emotional responses include feeling guilty, embarrassed, ashamed, or disappointed. As parents, when our kids get older, we need to pull back a bit and become coaches and teachers while we let our kids begin to play the game of life. We still love our children as people, but we need to give them space to learn, space for trial and error.

As painful as it is to accept sometimes, our children are born to move away from us. There is a sense of grief that goes along with this. I've experienced it myself. It's important to remember that this work of caring for our children while they are constantly separating from us and becoming individuals can be stressful, demanding, and confusing.

Conclusion

One final word. It's difficult for parents to figure out what is right. And the truth is, there isn't a right answer all the time. It's important to accept that there are choices to make and that choices often come with anxiety.

Remember that you are doing the best you can and that you won't be perfect. More important than trying to be a perfect parent is to be a "good enough" parent. A "good enough" parent takes care of their child and tries their best. Hard situations are part of life — but these situations can help us learn and grow.

You can't protect your children from everything bad that might happen to them. Or from the poor choices they may make. But you can help them learn from the bad situations they get themselves into.

Your child will likely not thank you now for letting them struggle on their own and suffer through a consequence, but they may surprise you when they're an adult by telling you that your coaching, teaching, or limit setting made a positive difference in their life.





How to Talk to Tweens & Teens About Adoption

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You adopted your child as a baby or very young child, and now they're growing into the tween or teen years. You've probably talked about adoption before—maybe even since day one—but those conversations start to shift as your child matures. Tweens and teens begin asking deeper questions about identity, biology, and where they fit in the world. Even if your tween or teen hasn't brought it up yet, this is the time when emotions around adoption can start to surface in new ways.

Talking to Tweens & Teens About Adoption

While some of the parts of your child's adoption story may range from feeling sticky, difficult, or even painful to talk about, it's critical that you create a safe space for conversations to unfold and grow. Your goal is to keep these conversations open, safe, supportive, and authentic — for both of you.

Start Talking. Keep Talking.

If you've been talking openly about adoption since your child was young, you've already laid a strong foundation. Now's the time to build on that. Instead of one big talk, think of it as a series of small, meaningful conversations woven into your everyday fabric. Maybe it's while watching a movie that features adoption, driving home from school, or looking at old photos. The goal is to normalize the topic so your child feels comfortable bringing it up when they're ready.

However, if you're just starting the conversation now, please be assured that it's never too late to begin. A good place to start is with simple facts about their story and reassurance that you're open to talking about anything that's on their mind.

Be Honest, Even When It's Hard.

Our kids can usually sense when something is being left out. Sharing the truth of their story, at a pace and in a way they can handle, is key to helping them feel anchored and respected.

If your child asks why they were adopted, stick to what you know. For example, you might say,

“Your birth mom wasn't in a place where she could raise a child at that time, but she wanted you to have a safe and loving home.”

Avoid guessing or making assumptions about motives or feelings you can't confirm. And remember that it's also okay to admit you don't know something. You can say,

“That's something I wish I had more answers to, too. If you'd like, we can look into it together when you're ready.”

If you have a degree of openness with your child's birth parents, you could also say,

“If you would like to, we can ask your (birthmother) the next time we talk.”

Support Their Feelings.

As your child grows, they may start to identify a sense of loss about their birth family, culture, or early story, even if they don't remember it. They may feel sadness, anger, confusion, or even guilt. Your job isn't to fix those emotions, but to make space for them. Practice saying things like:

- “It's completely okay to feel that way. I feel some of it too.”
- “You're allowed to have mixed feelings about adoption—I'll always be here to talk about them.”

Some kids will want to talk often; others may keep things inside. Follow their lead, but continue to offer reassurance and openness. If your child is struggling with identity or emotions around adoption, consider connecting them with a therapist who has experience in adoption or trauma-informed care.

Focus on Connecting Activities

Reading books, watching movies, and playing games together can be great vehicles to open conversations around adoption issues. Whether you speak generally about adoption or specifically about your child's adoption, keeping the tone light and laughing together can increase the connectedness between you. Even if this conversation doesn't yield any new information or unlock the depths within your tween or teen, you are setting a tone that says you welcome them and their questions.

One example of such a tool comes from Sean Delahant, of [Center for Adoption Support and Education \(C.A.S.E.\)](#). In a [Creating a Family.org interview](#), he called it the “Revealer and Hider” game. You and your child take turns sharing a small story or memory—maybe something personal or funny. Then each of you holds up a sign saying either “Revealer” (if you're open to sharing more) or “Hider” (if you'd prefer to keep it private). This activity helps kids feel in control of what they share and when, while also giving them permission to explore what's going on inside.



Provide Age-Appropriate Details

With Your Tweens (Ages 11–13)

At this stage, kids are starting to understand more complex ideas and may want clearer facts about their adoption. If they don't already know the information, share where they were born, the basics of their adoption story, or what you may know about what their birth parents were going through at the time. Try to avoid oversharing or giving adult-level details too soon. Just stick to the essentials and follow their lead.

For Young Teens (Ages 14–15)

These years often bring questions about identity and belonging. Your young teen might compare themselves to peers, notice physical traits they don't share with their adoptive family, or wonder more about their birth parents' personalities and choices.

You can support their curiosity and desire for answers by normalizing that these questions are part of growing up. Let them know that it's okay to feel torn between two families or to have questions that don't have easy answers.

With Older Teens (Ages 16–18)

Older teens and young adults may start asking about establishing contact with birth family (parents or siblings), family medical history, or legal records. They may be considering DNA tests, exploring cultural or racial identity, or talking about possible reunions. They may have even started searching on social media on their own.

It's helpful to approach their curiosity and need to know as a partnership. Let them know you're open to supporting them in a search or helping them gather information—at their pace. Some teens will want to connect quickly; others may change their mind several times. Your steady support can make all the difference.

Don't Overcomplicate the Language.

You don't need fancy phrases or deep speeches—just be honest and authentic. Avoid terms like “real parents” or “given up,” and instead use phrases like “placed for adoption” or “birth or first parents.” Keep your tone warm and supportive. A simple, “I'll always be here if you want to talk more about that,” goes a long way.

Be the Safe Place They Can Always Return To

Your tween or teen may not ask for it, but they want to know they can come to you with big feelings and questions. Being open, honest, and calm even when their curiosity catches you off guard will help them feel safe in their relationship with you.

It helps to remember that their adoption was not just a one-time event—it's part of their identity they will carry in different ways throughout their life. By keeping the door open, you're showing them that their story is important, and that you love all of who they are.

If or When They Want to Search

If your tween or teen expresses interest in finding or contacting their birth family, try not to take it personally. This is about their identity and understanding their story, it's not a reflection of your parenting. Stay calm, ask gentle questions about what they hope to find, and help them think through next steps. Some kids just want to see a picture or learn a name. Others may want contact. Support their curiosity and remind them you're in this together.

Take Care of Yourself Too

Having these conversations can bring up emotions for you as well. Maybe you're worried about how much to share, or you're feeling a little vulnerable too. That's normal. Connecting with other adoptive parents, reading articles, or joining our [online support community](#) can help you process your own thoughts and stay grounded as you guide your child.

Your Presence Will Build Their Confidence

Talking about adoption with your tween or teen doesn't have to be overwhelming. The key is to stay open, honest, and emotionally available. Whether your child is full of questions or still sorting things out silently, your steady presence, commitment to their understanding, and your willingness to walk beside them will help them build their identity from a position of confidence and security that will last their lifetime.

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Beyond the Immediate Family: Engaging Family and Friends In the Adoption Journey

BY: ANNA PAWLEY, LMSW, CLAIRE DAVIS,
LICSW-S, TRACI NEWELL, LBSW-S



INTRODUCTION

Adoption can be a complex subject to discuss for a variety of reasons. Every adoption begins with loss and brings lasting, transformative changes to family dynamics, which makes it a naturally sensitive topic. Additionally, with only 7% of Americans having adopted, it remains a relatively uncommon form of family building, which means the general population is often less knowledgeable about it.^[1] As a result, when a family adopts, extended relatives, friends, and members of the broader community may be unsure of how to offer meaningful support.

In addition, questions about the process are likely to arise from friends and family who are less familiar with adoption. Many adoptive parents have experiences where friends or family ask questions or raise topics that feel uncomfortable, confusing, or even hurtful or offensive. Navigating these sensitive topics with our loved ones—and even with our children—can be challenging and requires thoughtful preparation.

This article explores how to prepare, include, and guide extended family and friends in the adoption journey. It will offer strategies to navigate difficult or intrusive conversations, educate others about adoption, and find supportive and meaningful ways to engage loved ones in the adoption experience.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Open communication about adoption with an adoptive family's relational network is not merely an exchange of facts; it includes sharing and acknowledging feelings about the topic. Open communication creates emotional safety for all parties to express both negative and positive emotions. It is non-judgmental and involves just as much listening as it does speaking. When prospective adoptive parents practice this with each other and their extended families before their child comes home, it becomes easier for them to exercise open communication with their child once they are living in the home. Open communication does not always necessitate agreement, but it provides a foundation to build upon for later discussions. Addressing challenging or "scary" topics early on can help prevent barriers to communication in the future.

Open communication starts at home; if adoptive parents are uncomfortable talking with their children about adoption, they will certainly feel uncomfortable talking about it with anyone else. Children take cues from their parents about what is acceptable or unacceptable. When parents avoid the topic of adoption, they may inadvertently plant shame into their child's mind or send unintended messages regarding their child's origin. For example, a child may feel responsible for their placement or believe there is something wrong with them that caused the adoption. Embracing adoption as an everyday topic and discussing it openly can normalize the child's story. This can be foundational to a child's identity formation, may prevent feelings of abandonment, and can be healing for both birth and adoptive parents as well. Open communication about adoption with extended family members and friends also creates a safe environment for a child to grow up in an adoption-informed community.

Open communication about adoption with extended family members and friends also creates a safe environment for a child to grow up in an adoption-informed community.

BARRIERS TO OPEN COMMUNICATION

Establishing open communication within the adoptive home lays the foundation for extending that same openness to relationships outside the home. When adoptive parents are comfortable navigating adoption-related conversations with one another and their child, they are more prepared to model and initiate similar discussions with extended family, friends, and community members. This consistency fosters a supportive environment in which the child's identity is affirmed not only at home but also in the broader circles that shape their life.

Some parents worry that discussing adoption too often might confuse their child or reinforce feelings of difference or loss. Others may be unsure how to address the topic, especially if they experienced infertility or grief on the path to adoption. These feelings are valid, but they should not become barriers to open dialogue both with the child and their community at large.

Avoiding conversations about adoption can have long-term consequences. Children need to understand their story in age-appropriate ways, and withholding information about their adoption can lead to confusion or a lack of trust. Conversely, openness encourages connection between adoptive parents and their children and helps children make sense of their experiences over time.

It is also essential for adoptive parents to work through their feelings before bringing a child into their home. Misconceptions, unresolved grief, or the belief that adoption is a second-best option or replacement for a biological child can negatively impact their relationship with their child. Preparing emotionally and seeking guidance from adoption professionals can promote healthier family dynamics from the start.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Discuss adoption from the beginning:

To ensure open communication flows naturally, it must begin from the onset of adoption consideration. This means it starts with prospective parents who are setting out to adopt, not only with parents who have successfully completed an adoption process. Understandably, not everyone feels comfortable bringing their extended families into the conversation this early on. However, pre-adoptive parents should honestly consider why they feel reluctant. Does this hesitation come from a desire to discuss the topic in a planned time and space, or does it stem from a fear of disapproval? Talking about adoption early and often can normalize it for less-experienced friends and family members, while also serving as preparation for later discussions with the child.

Normalize adoption as an everyday topic:

Adoption should be a household word, not a special occasion topic or something that is shared once and then forgotten. When adoption and birth families are discussed as a normal part of life, it becomes easier for children to embrace their story and for those around them to feel comfortable asking thoughtful questions. Normalize adoption through books, movies, family conversations, and by modeling respectful language. This helps prevent feelings of secrecy or shame.

Include the child in age-appropriate ways:

When talking to family members about adoption, parents should remember to involve their child in the conversation, especially as they grow. Children learn how to talk about their story by watching and listening to how their parents do it. Including the child reinforces that their story is important and helps them feel empowered to talk about it—or not—on their terms.



PREPARE FOR THE CHILD'S UNIQUE NEEDS AND THE SIBLINGS' ROLE:

Adoptive parents should specifically discuss known behavioral, medical, or special needs with their family and friends. While it is not necessary to reveal all aspects of a child's pre-adoption experiences or diagnoses, parents can thoughtfully share how these needs influence the way they will parent and make any household accommodations. This may include educating their support network on trauma-based behaviors or the specifics of certain medical or developmental needs. Parents can also inform their community of specific ways the family could be supported throughout the adoption journey, and how to be considerate of a child's history of trauma, separation, and loss. Equally as important is the preparation of siblings to welcome a new child into the home. Siblings should be included in developmentally-appropriate conversations about the adoptee's needs and helped to understand how family dynamics might change when a new child is welcomed into the home.



INTRODUCE AND ENCOURAGE ADOPTION-SENSITIVE LANGUAGE:

Parents can help family and friends learn accurate adoption terminology so they can avoid inadvertently using terms that may be hurtful or outdated. Instead of saying “real parent” or “natural parent,” consider saying “birth parent” or “first parent.” Rather than “put up for adoption” or “gave up for adoption,” suggest alternatives such as “placed for adoption” or “made an adoption plan.” When describing a parent’s decision not to place for adoption, instead of “keeping a child,” encourage using language such as “choosing to parent a child.”

PREPARE FOR INTRUSIVE QUESTIONS:

Even well-meaning people may ask personal or inappropriate questions. Adoptive parents can prepare by thinking through common questions in advance and deciding together how to respond. The goal is to protect the child’s privacy while educating others when possible. This is especially helpful when extended family gatherings or community events are coming up. The following section offers more detail on common questions and methods for navigating—and preparing your child to navigate—intrusive adoption questions.

THOUGHTFULLY PROTECT THE CHILD’S PRIVATE STORY:

Not all details need to be shared. Children have a right to privacy, and some elements of their story should be theirs alone to share when they are ready. Remember that all adoption begins with loss, which is painful. The details of why a child was not able to be parented by their biological family may be too sensitive to discuss. Possibly the child’s conception story, the birth parents’ relationships with extended family, or their life circumstances may need to be carefully considered before sharing with others. Determine what feels appropriate to share and rehearse ways to redirect questions that cross the line. Extended family members should be made aware of these boundaries and encouraged to respect them.

CHILDREN HAVE A RIGHT TO PRIVACY, AND SOME ELEMENTS OF THEIR STORY SHOULD BE THEIRS ALONE TO SHARE WHEN THEY ARE READY.

MAKE DECISIONS AS A FAMILY ABOUT HOW TO TALK ABOUT ADOPTION:

Adoptive families should openly discuss how to talk to close family members and friends about birth parents, especially in preparation for a holiday or a family gathering. How can the family be unified in their views of and discussions about birth parents? What names should they use in describing their child’s birth mother? What is the family’s preference on how they want extended family and friends to refer to their child’s birth parents? Honest and open communication is important in navigating these conversations sensitively.

SPEAK POSITIVELY ABOUT THE ADOPTION JOURNEY:

The way parents talk about adoption helps shape how the child and others see it. Parents should highlight the aspects of the decision that were filled with hope, excitement, and love. For example, parents should help their child understand, at an age-appropriate time, that while a history of infertility might be a part of their story, adoption was not an inferior way to build their family. While it is important to speak positively about the adoptive family's decision to adopt, it is equally important to approach the child's adoption and birth story neutrally and honestly. Parents should avoid sugar-coating difficult parts of their history or passing judgment on the child's birth family or pre-adoption experiences. Framing adoption as an intentional and fulfilling path to parenthood, while also maintaining the integrity of the child's story, gives the child language to share their life experiences with friends and family.

MANAGING INTRUSIVE QUESTIONS

Adoptive parents often encounter well-meaning but intrusive questions such as:

- “Don't you want children of your own?”
- “How much did your adoption cost?”
- “Why is adopting so complicated?”

These questions can feel personal or inappropriate, but they also offer a chance to educate others about adoption gently. In these moments, we want to empower the entire adoption triad—adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents—to choose whether to share any part of their story. Intrusive questions can provide amazing opportunities to inform family and friends about adoption-sensitive language.

...WE WANT TO EMPOWER THE ENTIRE ADOPTION TRIAD—ADOPTees, BIRTH PARENTS, AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS—TO CHOOSE WHETHER TO SHARE ANY PART OF THEIR STORY.

Many times, people ask intrusive questions right in front of the child! Parents should keep in mind that these questions are learning opportunities not only for the inquirer but also to set an example for the child. Having clear, respectful responses ready can help adoptive parents protect their child's story while setting healthy boundaries. A thoughtful response can help shape their child's views about their own adoption story and model for adoptees how to think and speak about themselves in a healthy and uplifting way. Our children take their cues from us about how to feel about themselves. A parent who responds to intrusive questions in kindness and truth puts tools in the child's toolbox for how to speak about adoption when they are on their own. Parents should aim to consistently communicate to all listeners that adoption is both a unique and permanent way in which families are built. For example, a child who hears his mother say to a stranger that she is his “real mom” while also expressing gratitude for his birth mother communicates both that he was not born to his mother and also that his place in the family is secure.

The W.I.S.E. Up!® program is one useful tool for navigating these situations.[2] It empowers children and adults in the adoption triad with four response strategies:

- **W:** Walk away or ignore what was said or heard
- **I:** It's private, and I don't have to answer it
- **S:** Share something about my adoption story
- **E:** Educate others about adoption in general



Parents can practice these techniques with their partner, their children, and those in their support network. This tool is most effective when parents first model it for their children when responding to intrusive questions themselves. By modeling these skills in real-life situations, parents can equip their children with the tools needed to strategically share their story with friends, family, and others who are curious. This not only equips children with tools to manage future conversations but also reinforces the idea that their story belongs to them and is theirs to share.

Another meaningful way adoptive parents can support their child is by guiding friends and family in using respectful, adoption-appropriate language. Adoptive parents may choose to explain that phrases such as "put up for adoption" (a term which dates to the orphan train era), can be replaced with more thoughtful alternatives like "made an adoption plan." Similarly, using terms like "birth parents" instead of "real parents" acknowledges all the roles involved in the adoption triad without undermining the adoptive family. These intentional language shifts can contribute to a more inclusive, respectful, and affirming environment for the child.

INVOLVING FRIENDS AND FAMILY IN THE JOURNEY

Involving family members and friends in the adoption process and the child's homecoming can be tricky, but it is no less important for everyone involved. Loved ones may report feeling disconnected from the onset of the adoption process and even carry fears that the child will not form an attachment to them. Taking simple steps to include extended family members and friends along the way can diminish concerns and provide early opportunities for connection and education. After all, these are the people who will likely provide ongoing support to the family following the child's placement.

Parents may choose to draw family members and friends into the home study process since this can be a stressful time for everyone. Providing factual information about agency procedures and home visits can demystify the journey and answer questions early on. Agencies are typically happy to provide educational resources about the agency or program for families when asked. Oftentimes, the wait is difficult for future grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends, too. Inviting them to research the child's country of origin or engaging in cultural celebrations can also offer a sense of inclusion. Family and friends can journal their own thoughts and excitement as they await the child's arrival (this could even be a special gift for the child down the road).

If the adoption has some level of openness, family and friends may be interested in meeting the child's birth family. In infant adoption, pursuing a meeting early on (e.g., a hospital visit immediately following the child's birth) can be overwhelming for both the adoptive parents and the child's birth parent(s). Parents may choose to bridge this connection throughout the child's life, including at birthday parties or other significant celebrations. This type of connection can send a powerful message to the child about the many people who love them and needs to be mutually agreed upon by both families.

Following a child's arrival home, it may be helpful to parents for their community to acknowledge and respect the transitional stage of adoption. The earliest days after parents bring their new child home are critical for establishing bonding and trust between parents and a new child.[3] During these first few months, adoptive parents should be the primary ones meeting their child's needs, including feeding, diapering, bathing, etc. These daily tasks teach the child a long-term lesson that "My parent(s) will meet my needs" and build a foundation of trust for the new family. Practicing this may be tough for some loved ones, who desire to be more intimately involved. This type of integration work does not mean family and friends must stay away altogether; instead, slowly and consistently introducing these important people will help familiarize the child with new faces and voices. For families welcoming older children, keeping photos of loved ones on hand and talking about them as a family can deepen the child's sense of safety and stability as visits continue to occur

Extended family and friends can help in other practical ways, such as dropping off meals, offering carpool or childcare for other children in the home, cleaning, or simply asking the adoptive parents what would be most helpful to them. Any practical way to provide uninterrupted bonding time between a parent and child is a gift. Regardless of the child's age, friends and family can have some involvement in the journey.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Parenting through adoption inevitably requires a commitment on the part of the adoptive parents to understand the challenges that adoptees might experience. It also necessitates that they do intentional work to become healing parents for children who have experienced grief, loss, and trauma. Adoption brings families into the complicated, but often beautiful, world of open relationships with birth parents. This work offers meaningful avenues to aid in a child's healing from their early life experiences.

Especially for children who do not share the same race as their parents, adoptive parents' cultural competence is a unique opportunity for learning to offer their child yet another path to healing. Transracial adoptive parents must be ready to provide racial representation in their home and community. Consider the books in the home, the television shows the family watches, and the neighborhood the child lives in. Do these children have opportunities to see other people in everyday life who look like them? Even considering whether a child's crayons provide an opportunity for them to draw pictures that look like themselves can be crucial in positive racial identity development.

The child's community also plays a role in affirming their cultural identity. Adoptive parents should talk openly with friends and family about why these considerations matter. Encourage others to learn and engage so your child is surrounded by people who reflect, respect, and celebrate their identity. Open and confident conversations about race are an inevitable part of open communication for transracial families that adoptive parents should be prepared for. Parents must acknowledge that transracial adoptees have a significant lack of privacy regarding their adoption status and yet still deserve the same level of privacy in choosing whether to share their stories. Without open communication with their parents, children in transracial families are left to navigate and process this experience alone. When transracial adoptive parents take the lead in initiating these conversations, they offer a gift of acceptance and preciousness to their child.

Parents must acknowledge that transracial adoptees have a significant lack of privacy regarding their adoption status and yet still deserve the same level of privacy in choosing whether to share their stories.

Lastly, transracial adoptive parents must desire to move toward cultural competence and remain open to ongoing learning, with the child's best interest centered. This may require an effort to understand skin and hair care for parents whose children's skin or hair texture is different than their own. Adoptive parents should encourage extended family and friends to approach this part of the child's identity with humility and seek out advice or help from members of the child's racial community. Parents must help their children understand and celebrate their culture, which will require some effort. This can be a shared journey; consider doing research together, utilizing your agency's resources, finding restaurants that serve cultural cuisine, or attending museums or other community events that immerse the family in the child's cultural background.

CONCLUSION

Adoption brings with it both beauty and complexity. Open, thoughtful communication can help demystify the adoption experience for extended family and friends while creating a supportive and inclusive space for the child. When parents are proactive in setting boundaries, inviting education, and embracing their child's story, they model confidence and care. By fostering open conversations and preparing for the questions that may arise, adoptive families create a nurturing environment where their children can deepen their belonging and empower them to share their adoption stories, at their own pace, with pride and resilience.



Adoption is not just roses

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What do you say to a person that is about to adopt? Most want to say congratulations; and to be clear, congratulations are in order. Much has happened before this point that has led to one of the most protective factors in a child's life, and now it's time to legally recognize a relationship as binding and lasting.

And yet, how many also pause to ask an adopting parent or child being adopted: "How are you doing?" Do we as a society recognize the loss that has occurred so that this new family can be formed? In all cases, when there is an adoption, there has been loss. This loss will affect the birth parents, the adopted child, the adoptive parents, siblings, extended family (adoption kinship network) for their entire lives. Do we honor the older adopted child's loss by allowing them to talk about their birth parents, siblings, pets, neighborhoods they miss? Do we recognize that a child adopted at birth has no conscious memory of the people they look like, and who have loved them.

Adoptive families are 2 to 5 times more likely to use mental health services than families not involved in adoption (McRoy et al., 1988; Howard et al., 2004; Juffer & van Iizendoorn, 2005; Keys et al., 2008; Brodzinsky, 2013).

Only 2% of the population of children are adopted but 25-30% of youth in residential treatment centers are adopted (Brodzinsky, 2016). Adoption is a large factor in the lives of many who seek counseling, but there are not enough adoption competent therapists to work with these clients in helpful ways.

There are many nuances to working with children who have been adopted (and the family members that love them) that are not recognized widely enough by treating professionals. Too many do not see adoption as relevant as they are doing their initial assessment. There are even unhelpful things that are said to parents, like: "You just need to be more consistent in your parenting." Or "You adopted these children so long ago; you can't assume that adoption is the cause for her behavior." (CASE TAC training, 2023-2024).

Children who were adopted not only grow up trying to find out how they are like, and not like their adoptive parents; they also try to figure out how they are like, or not like their birth parents. They get to grapple with not feeling like they look like their family. They may wonder if they have other siblings somewhere out there. They may wonder if their birth parents love them. They may worry that their status as a member of the family may be in jeopardy when they turn 18. The list goes on and on for issues that are unique to all people in the adoption kinship network.

We can start to understand families and their struggles by first looking deeply at what really may be going on underneath. The Seven Core Issues in Adoption (developed by Sharon Kaplan Roszia in 1982) are: Loss, Grief, Rejection, Guilt/Shame, Identity, Intimacy, and Mastery/Control. When we can identify the core issues, talk about them, and find ways to meet needs that help bring relief to these issues, then we will be on a better track for helping families heal.

All of these issues do not mean that adoption is bad. It is, as I mentioned above, a protective factor. It isn't the adoption itself that causes most of the issues. It is the inherent issues that come with all adoption situations, and it is when we are not recognizing and dealing with the core adoption issues, that we will more profoundly experience difficulties, rifts, and ruptures in relationships that won't seem to make sense, unless we are looking at the issue from an adoption competent lens.



Some of the foundational principles for working with families with an adoption competence perspective are highlighted here:

1. Therapy must include the parents. They are crucial to the child's adjustment and identity formation.
2. Adoption is not just a one-time event, it is a lifelong process with intergenerational impact.
3. Forming a family through adoption is a different experience than doing so by birth.
4. Services should be attachment-focused and honor that the family is the context to which healing needs to occur.
5. Approach must acknowledge the child's history of relationships with birth parents and impact of the psychological presence and sometimes physical presence in the child's life.

So, when you are searching for the best therapist to work with your adopted child and with you as parents, you will want to consider whether or not they are trained in understanding and treating families that have adopted.

We invite you to consider, the next time you know of an adoption and want to say something, to try and honor the whole journey, and instead of just focusing only on the joy of the adoption, perhaps cry a little with the parents for the losses that only they know about. Perhaps give the child a little more understanding when they misbehave and know that they are fighting battles you will never fully understand, unless of course you have been down that road too.



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**“You cannot lead a child
to a place of healing if
you do not know the way
yourself.”**

-Dr. Karyn Purvis