Adoption Promises

Required Reading Articles Checklist

The following is a list of articles included in your Application Packet for each individual to read. After reading each article, please initial and sign your names in the appropriate spaces.

Include this form with your completed Application Packet.

Applicant Initials	Co-Applicant Initials	Articles
		"Five Chasms Caused by Infertility and How to Bridge Them!" By Elizabeth Calhoun
		"Impact of Adoption on Birthparents" By Child Welfare Information Gateway
		"Adoptive Parents & Expectant Parents Alike Preparing for a Healthy, Lifelong Relationship" By Leslie Foge, MA, MFT
		"Bonding and Attachment: How Does Adoption Affect a Newborn?" By Gail Steinberg & Beth Hall
		"How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade" By Amy Klatzkin
		"Why Adopted Children Need to Know Their Stories" By Angie Johnston
		"How I Learned I Wasn't Caucasian" By Dottie Enrico
		"Dealing with Racism: Perspective of a White Transracial Adoptive Parent" By Beth Hall
		"Losing Lauren" By Rachel Angeline
		"Social Media and the Post-Adoption Experience" By Deborah H. Siegel, PhD, LICSW, DCSW, ACSW
		Additional Adoption Resources

By signing below, we are stating that we have read the articles listed above in their entirety.

_____ _____

Signature of Applicant **Signature of Co-Applicant**

_____ _____

Date **Date**

Although Adoption Promises seeks to provide relevant resources, please understand we make no claims on the effectiveness of these articles.

Stepping Stones

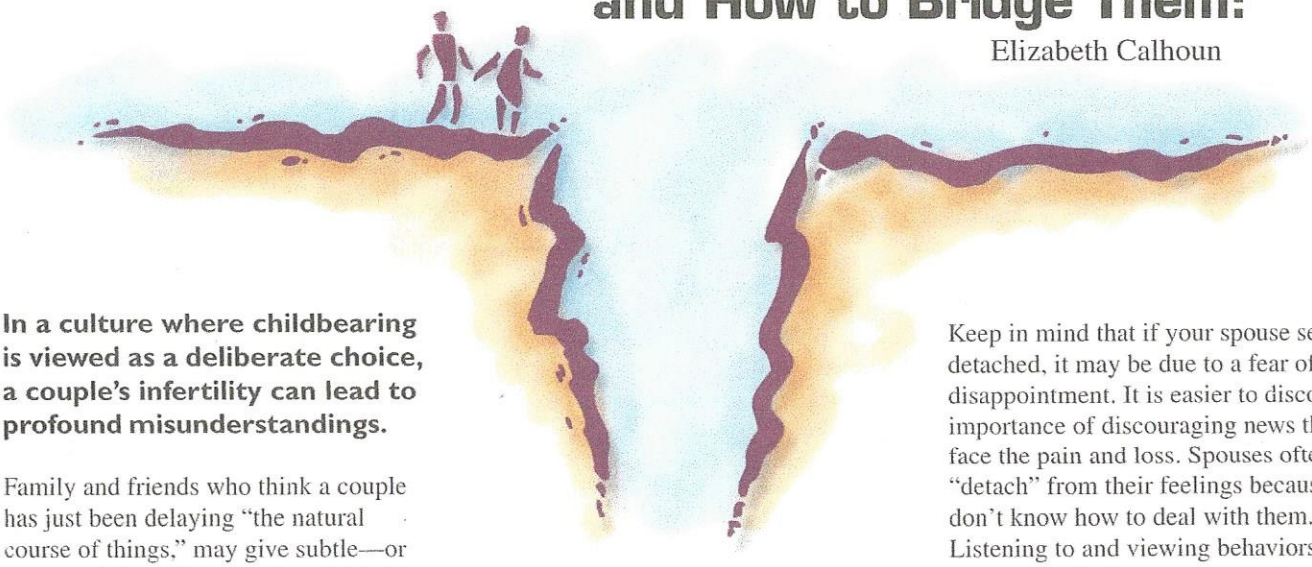
To Offer Christian Support for Couples Facing Infertility or Pregnancy Loss

Volume 17 • Number 5 • Oct/Nov '99
A Publication of Bethany Christian Services

Five Chasms Caused by Infertility

and How to Bridge Them!

Elizabeth Calhoun



In a culture where childbearing is viewed as a deliberate choice, a couple's infertility can lead to profound misunderstandings.

Family and friends who think a couple has just been delaying "the natural course of things," may give subtle—or not-so-subtle—hints that they think it is time for the couple to start a family.

Those of us who would like nothing better than to start a family face a persistent dilemma: Do we explain our situation or preserve our privacy? This "public" aspect of infertility is one of many ongoing difficulties. However, there are five challenges in the "private" aspects of our lives that can carve deep chasms in our relationships. Though Christian couples may have more resources for dealing with difficulties, they are not immune to the consequences of mismanaging the five C's: **Communication, Conflict, Confidence, Community, and Commitment.**

Clear Communication is vital for all relationships. It is even more crucial when life circumstances, such as infertility, increase the likelihood of miscommunication. Couples who listen with compassion and cut each other slack, are far more likely to bridge the communication gap.

Cutting each other some slack means giving your spouse the benefit of the doubt. After all, you are two distinct people who may react to situations differently, vary in how you interpret their importance, or react to loss or grief in unique ways. It is easy to interpret a spouse's delayed emotional responses as "indifference."

Keep in mind that if your spouse seems detached, it may be due to a fear of disappointment. It is easier to discount the importance of discouraging news than to face the pain and loss. Spouses often "detach" from their feelings because they don't know how to deal with them. Listening to and viewing behaviors with compassion is far more productive than "taking it personally."

Conflict can erode a relationship. One moment you are arguing about whose turn it is to do the dishes, and the next moment you're in a heated conflict over who is more emotionally invested in the household and having a baby. Infertility can become an unwelcome issue in every conflict that arises.

The bridge over this chasm is compartmentalizing—building clear boundaries around your infertility issues and keeping them as separate as possible from other life issues. To compartmentalize with success, set aside a specific time each day

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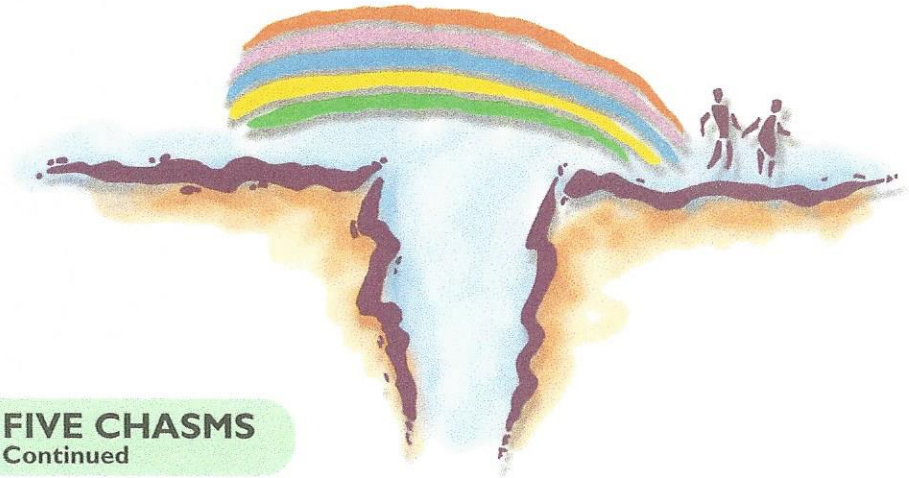


FIVE CHASMS
Continued

or week or month to discuss any issues related to infertility. Agree on a convenient time and stick with it. Don't deal with any other issues. Share your fears and hopes, cry about your grief and loss, or argue if you need to. But don't feel obligated to resolve all your issues at once. There is always tomorrow.

The point is, when you are talking about fertility issues, you are talking *only* about fertility issues. When you are discussing whose turn it is to do the dishes, there is no hidden agenda.

Diminished self-Confidence is another chasm commonly faced by couples with fertility challenges. It is easy to second-guess every sexual mistake of the past. Self-doubt often tags along during the infertility journey, as individuals question their attractiveness and shudder at signs that they are aging before reaching their goal of having children. In short, confidence is at a low ebb, and a couple's love life often is not far behind.

The antidote for this erosion of confidence is simple: consistently and constantly reaffirm your love for your spouse. Compliment each other regularly, and remind your spouse of how and why God brought you together. God has a purpose for your relationship, and you would not be the people you are if it were not for the mistakes and triumphs of the past. God uses all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

The fourth chasm is **Community**. Being part of a faith community centered on parenting and family can seem like a source of grief rather than support. Although it would be wonderful if everyone in your church were more sensitive to the needs of infertile couples, there is no need to wait around for others to reach out to you. Waiting only creates bitterness toward your brothers and sisters in the Lord.

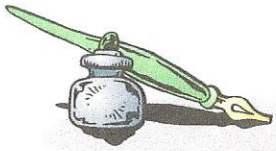
Instead, build a bridge toward your faith community by having your own celebrations. No, you can't plan a baby shower yet, but you can rejoice in the milestones God does give you. If your spouse graduates or receives a promotion, plan a party and celebrate! Be the couple that keeps track of others' anniversaries and throw a funny theme party. Celebrate housewarmings and spiritual birthdays. Keep an anniversary book and write your goals and accomplishments as a couple from year to year. Celebrate your marriage—an incarnation and demonstration to the world of how Christ loves His Church. This is the ultimate goal of a Christian marriage.

If infertility begins to drive a wedge into your **Commitment** to each other, cement it back together with investments in the future. Your marriage is not just about making the two of you happy! What is your calling as a couple? True, children are the original investment in the future of the world. This is not to be denied or minimized. But each of us has gifts which are meant to further God's purpose. God unites couples so the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts.

Are children the purpose and fulfillment of a marriage? No! What a burden for a child to be born to parents who expect that child to insure their fulfillment and happiness. That sense of "completeness" we all search for can only come from finding your calling from God.

Are children a blessing? Yes! A child who is received into a family with God at its core will know, from the beginning, that his or her purpose is to glorify God. And isn't that what parenting is all about?

Elizabeth Calhoun has a master's in counseling from the Denver Seminary. She is a pregnancy counselor for Bethany in Fredericksburg, Virginia.



Reader's Request

I recently read in a booklet, titled "The Effects of Light on the Menstrual Cycle & Infertility; Clinical Observations," that too much light in the sleeping area contributes to infertility and miscarriage. I had personally experienced several of the abnormalities mentioned in the research: short menstrual periods, scant fertile mucous, irregular cycle length, etc. After two months of darkening our bedroom, I had a 28-day cycle, longer periods, and timely ovulations. During the fourth month, I got pregnant! This booklet is published by the Couple to Couple League and costs $5. You can reach the Couple to Couple League at PO Box 111184, Cincinnati, OH 45211-1184 or call 800-745-8252.

"Reader's Request" is a forum which allows individuals to reach out to *Stepping Stones'* readers. The individuals who make submissions are not affiliated with, known to, screened or sanctioned by Bethany Christian Services. All readers who initiate an inquiry or who respond do so at their own risk, and Bethany Christian Services encourages readers to exercise caution.

Child Welfare Information Gateway

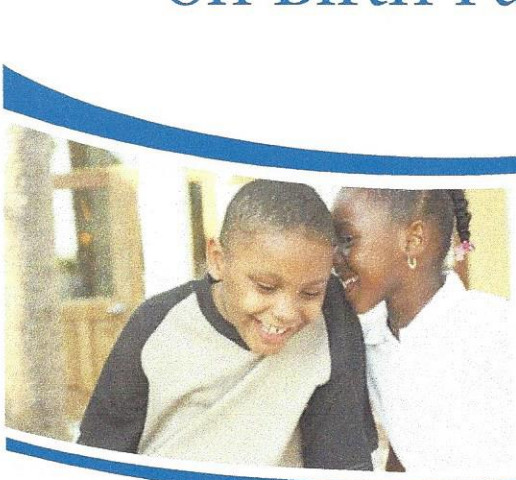
PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

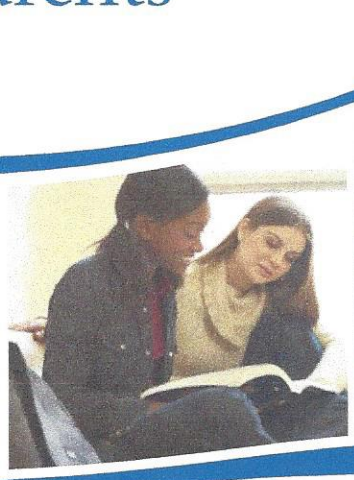
FACTSHEET FOR FAMILIES

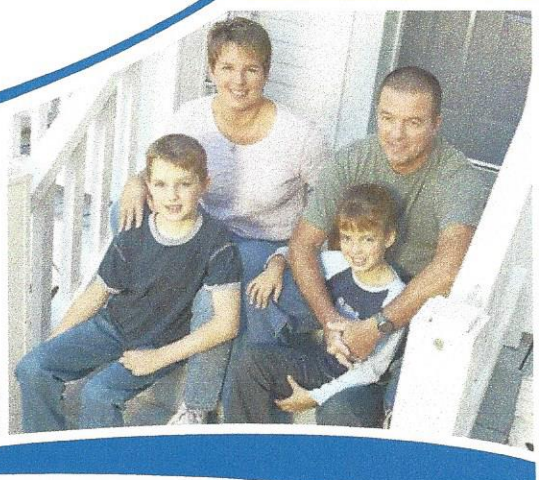
August 2013

Disponible en español
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactobio/index.cfm

Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents







This factsheet discusses some of the emotional issues that parents may face after making the decision to place an infant for adoption, in surrendering the child, and in handling the feelings that often persist afterwards. It may be a helpful resource for birth parents as well as family members, friends, and others who want to support birth parents. It may also provide insight to adopted persons and adoptive parents who want to understand the struggles faced by birth parents.

What's Inside:

- Responding to the adoptive placement
- Gaining control and resolution
- Maintaining contact
- Resources

Use your smartphone to access this factsheet online.

Children's Bureau

Child Welfare Information Gateway
Children's Bureau/ACYF/ACF/HHS
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
https://www.childwelfare.gov

The information provided also may be applicable to parents whose children have been removed from their home and whose parental rights have been terminated.

It is difficult to generalize about the feelings or experiences of all birth parents. Many birth parents feel that the child will have a better life in an adoptive home and are putting the child's best interests ahead of their own when they make the decision to place the child for adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007). Other reasons birth parents place their children for adoption include societal and family attitudes, personal goals and ambitions, and socioeconomic situations (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Each birth parent has faced a unique experience and dealt with the situation in his or her own way, but certain themes emerge in the literature, including grief, guilt, and resolution. This factsheet addresses these issues, as well as issues concerning possible contact. Helpful resources, such as websites, documents, and organizations, provide additional information.

Responding to the Adoptive Placement

Birth parents often describe a variety of feelings and experiences, including grief, thinking about the child, guilt and shame, identity issues, and effects on other relationships.

Grieving the Loss of the Child

Placing a child for adoption can be traumatic for the birth parents (Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007). Most parents considering placing their child for adoption struggle with the decision. Parents who decide to place their child for adoption begin to plan for a great loss in their own lives with the hope that the decision will result in a better life for their baby and for themselves. The birth and the actual surrendering of the baby may prompt various phases of grief in the birth parents, including shock and denial, sorrow and depression, anger, guilt, and acceptance (Romanchik, 1999).

All these feelings are normal reactions to loss. Birth parents may feel a sense of ambiguous loss, or the loss of someone who still is or who may be alive, which is different than the loss of someone who has died (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Friends and family of the birth parents may attempt to ignore the loss by pretending that nothing has happened, or they may not understand what the birth parents are experiencing (Aloi, 2009; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Although many people view the loss of a child as the most traumatic event one can experience, they may not accord birth parents an appropriate level of sympathy because the loss is viewed as a "choice." In some cases, the secrecy surrounding the pregnancy and adoption may make it difficult for birth parents to seek out and find support as they grieve their loss. In addition, the lack of formal rituals or ceremonies to mark this type of loss may make it more difficult to acknowledge the loss and therefore to acknowledge the grief as a normal process (Aloi, 2009).

The actual physical separation from the child generally occurs soon after the birth. Many circumstances can have an impact

on the birth parent's feelings at the time, including mixed feelings about the adoptive placement, support from other family members and the other birth parent, and whether the planned adoption is open (i.e., allowing some later contact with the child). The actions of the agency personnel (if an agency is involved), as well as those of the adoption attorney, adoptive parents, hospital personnel, and physician can all affect the feelings of the birth mother and father as they proceed through the adoption process and the termination of their parental rights.

When birth parents first deal with their loss, the grief may be expressed as denial. The denial serves as a buffer to shield them from the pain of the loss. This may be followed by sorrow or depression as the loss becomes more real. Anger and guilt may follow, with anger sometimes being directed at those who helped with the adoption placement, especially if there was coercion, no matter how subtle, or if the mother had no other viable options. The final phases, those of acceptance and resolution, refer not to eliminating the grief permanently but to integrating the loss into ongoing life (Romanchik, 1999).

Many birth parents continue to mourn the loss of their child throughout their lifetime, but with varying intensity. In a study of birth mothers 12 to 20 years after placement, approximately three-quarters continued to experience some feelings of grief and loss, and one-quarter reported no current grief or loss (Henney et al., 2007). Some of the factors that have been found to be associated with longstanding grief include:

- A birth parent's feeling that she was pressured into placing her child for adoption against her will (De Simone, 1996)
- Feelings of guilt and shame regarding the placement (De Simone)
- Lack of opportunity to express feelings about the placement (De Simone)
- Dissatisfaction with an open adoption (Henney et al.)
- Having a closed adoption (Henney et al.)

Grieving Other Losses

Placing a child for adoption may also cause other (secondary) losses, which may add to the grief that birth parents feel. They may grieve for the loss of their parenting roles and for the person their child might have become as their son or daughter. These feelings of loss may reemerge in later years, for instance, on the child's birthday, or when the child is old enough to start school or reach other developmental milestones. Some clinicians report that birth parents may experience additional grief when they have other children because it reminds them of the loss of this child on a daily basis or, if they encounter future infertility, they may perceive the loss as a "punishment."

Thinking About the Child

Birth parents are unlikely to "forget" the child they placed for adoption. In one study, all the birth mothers, including those in both open and closed adoptions, reported thinking about or feeling something about the child to some extent, with the average response indicating occasional thoughts or feelings. These thoughts and feelings were

both positive and negative, but they tended to be more positive when the adoption was more open (Lewis Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000). Additionally, birth parents who are not in contact with the child may maintain fantasies about the child, such as continuing to visualize the child as an infant years after the adoption (Rosenberg & Groze, 1997).

Guilt and Shame

Birth parents may experience guilt and shame for having placed their child for adoption due to the social stigma that some attach to this (De Simone, 1996; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). This guilt and shame may exacerbate the grief being felt by the birth parents. Some birth parents may feel shame in admitting the situation to parents, friends, coworkers, and others. Once the child is born, the decision to place the child for adoption may prompt new feelings of guilt about "rejecting" the child, no matter how thoughtful the decision or what the circumstances of the adoption. Other birth parents may feel guilt or shame because they kept the pregnancy or adoption a secret.

Identity Issues

Placing a child for adoption may trigger identity issues in some birth parents. They may need to determine *who* the child will be in their lives and *how* the child will be in their lives (Lewis Fravel et al., 2000). Birth parents will need to redefine their relationship to the child (Romanchik, 1999). Their status as parents may not be acknowledged among family and friends, and if they go on to have other children whom they raise, this may also affect how the birth parents view their own identity, as well as that of all their children. Birth parents in open or mediated (i.e., semi-open) adoptions may face additional identity issues as they interact with the adoptive family. In one study, adolescents who were adopted and in contact with their birth mothers most frequently noted their birth mother's role as a friend, with some also reporting relative, another parent, or birth mother role (Grotevant et al., 2007). In another study, birth mothers most frequently desired to play a nonkin role in the birth child's life (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2008). This relationship, as well as the birth parent's perception of his or her identity, may change over time due to various issues, such as formal changes to the level of openness or the adopted child's wishes.

Effect on Other Relationships

Some birth parents may have trouble forming and maintaining relationships (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). This may be due to lingering feelings of loss and guilt, or it may be due to a fear of repeating the loss. Other birth parents may attempt to fill the loss quickly by establishing a new relationship, marrying, or giving birth again—without having dealt with the grief of the adoptive placement. In a study comparing teens who had placed their infants for adoption and those who parented them, though, birth mothers who placed their children had a more positive quality of relationship with their partners (Namerow, Kalmuss, & Cushman, 1997). A few birth parents report being overprotective of their subsequent children because they are afraid of repeating the

experience of separation and loss (Askren & Bloom, 1999).

For some birth parents, the ability to establish a successful marriage or long-term relationship may depend on the openness with which they can discuss their past experiences of birth and adoption placement. Some birth parents never tell their spouses or subsequent children of their earlier child (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Others are comfortable enough with their decision to be able to share their past.

In some cases, the birth mother may lose her relationship with the birth father under the stress of the pregnancy, birth, and subsequent placement decision. The birth parents may also lose relationships with their own parents, whose disappointment or disapproval may be accompanied by a lack of support. In extreme cases, the birth mother may need to leave her parents and her home. The birth mother may lose her place in the educational system or in the workplace as a result of the pregnancy. Birth parents may also lose friends who are not supportive of either the pregnancy or the decision to place the child for adoption (Romanchik, 1999).

Gaining Control and Resolution

Each individual's path toward reconciling the placement of a child for adoption is different, but there are some common themes: (1) resolving grief, (2) making peace with the decision, (3) incorporating being a birth parent into one's identity, and (4) overcoming the effect of the experience on other relationships (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Acceptance of the loss and working through the grief does not mean that birth parents forget their birth child and never again feel sorrow or regret for the loss. Rather, it means that they are able to move forward and integrate this loss into their ongoing lives. For those in an open adoption, this may mean developing a new relationship with the child and the adoptive parents. For birth parents whose child was adopted in a closed adoption, it may mean learning to live with uncertainty about whether the parent will ever see the child again.

The following describes ways birth parents may cope with the placement of their child:

- **Rituals.** Birth parents may find it helpful to create a tradition that honors the child and the decision that was made. Some birth and adoptive parents use an entrustment ceremony as a ritual to transfer parental roles. Entrustment ceremonies can take place in the hospital, a church, a home, or any other location in which the families feel comfortable. There are no guidelines to an entrustment ceremony; the families can tailor the ceremony to fit their needs and wishes. Entrustment ceremonies allow the birth parents to say good-bye to their child and to maintain a sense of control over the placement. Birth parents also may choose to establish other ongoing or finite rituals, such as commemorating certain days or milestones in the child's life, such as the child's birthday or a high school graduation or writing a letter to the child, whether they send it or not.

- **Finding Support.** Birth parents can seek out family, friends, support groups of other birth parents, or understanding counselors to communicate their feelings and gain support. Being able to openly share feelings is often helpful in moving through the stages of grief and achieving some resolution.
- **Education.** There are a number of books, articles, and websites (including blogs) about adoption and the birth parent experience. Many of these include first-person accounts from birth parents, which can provide some context about what other birth parents experience. These resources can be helpful to birth parents who may feel that they are alone in their loss.
- **Writing.** Birth parents may find it useful to keep a journal or blog of their experiences and feelings. This may serve as an outlet for grief or other emotions, and it can also serve to provide some perspective over time. Keeping a journal also allows birth parents to remember details that might otherwise be forgotten over the years.
- **Counseling.** Birth parents may find that they need more support than family and friends can offer, or they may be unable to move forward in the grieving process. In such cases, professional counseling may help the birth parent make progress in dealing with the grief or may reassure the parent that such feelings are normal. A counselor should be able to help a birth parent replace unrealistic fantasy with reality, to acknowledge what has happened, and to accept the reality of the birth parent role. Birth parents should look for counselors who have significant experience with adoption and with bereavement. Referrals for counselors may come from friends, birth parent support groups, or from the adoption agency or attorney who helped with the adoption.
- **Other Postadoption Services.** Birth parents also may benefit from postadoption services, such as support groups or mentoring programs. Some birth parents may be reluctant to return to the agencies that facilitated their placements and seek out in-home services or other agencies (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007).

While the birth parent will never forget the child, it is important that the birth parent adapts to the new circumstances and comes to terms with any regret. When birth parents are able to integrate the loss into their lives and gain some feeling of control, they can then move on to deal with whatever else life brings to them.

Maintaining Contact

Placing a child for adoption does not necessarily mean a birth parent will never be able to contact the child again. Adoption can have some degree of openness, including some communication between the birth and adoptive families, or the birth family or the adopted person may attempt a search and reunite later in life. Birth and adoptive parents need to determine the level of openness that best matches the needs and wishes of all parties. Birth parents can benefit from information about the advantages of open adoption for children.

The number of open adoptions (in which the birth and adoptive families know each other's identities and have direct contact)

and mediated adoptions (in which contacts between the birth and adoptive families are made indirectly through a mediator) are on the rise. In a 2012 survey of adoption agencies with infant adoption programs, agencies reported that only 5 percent of their placements during the previous 2 years were confidential, with 55 percent of the adoptions being fully disclosed and 40 percent being mediated (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012). Although the context around each adoption is unique, research indicates that open adoption can be beneficial for birth parents. Birth parents in an open adoption have been shown to have better postadoption adjustment, increased satisfaction with the adoption process, and better grief resolution (Henney et al., 2007; Ge et al., 2008). For additional information about open adoption and birth family contact, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/contacts.cfm.

Even if an adoption was not structured as having some level of openness, or if the level of openness has declined over time, birth families and adopted persons still may seek out each other on their own. In a study of 125 birth mothers' intentions to search for their children, 33 percent stated they would not initiate a search, 50 percent stated they would initiate a search, and 17 percent indicated they might initiate a search (Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008). The primary reasons provided for not searching were that the birth mothers felt it was the child's right to decide whether to initiate the search and that they did not want to disrupt or complicate the child's life. The primary reasons provided for wanting to initiate a search were (1) desiring to have contact and a relationship with the child and (2) wanting to know about the child.

Nearly four-fifths of the birth mothers felt their children might search for them, with most of those mothers feeling positive about possible contact.

SEARCH AND REUNION AND THE INTERNET

With seemingly everything available on the Internet, birth families and adopted persons are much more easily able to research contact information and establish connections than they have been in the past. This increase in information availability is changing the landscape of privacy and confidentiality, including in adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). With a simple Internet search or a review of social media sites, individuals may be able to quickly determine identities and establish connections. Search and reunion among birth parents and adopted persons is not new, but the speed at which it can occur is. Because of the sometimes instantaneous nature of the Internet, connections may be attempted without giving pause for self-reflection, consideration of the consequences, or assistance from support systems, such as family, friends, and professionals (Howard, 2012).

Since search and reunion can be enormously emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss, adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before search and reunion. Preparation will help individuals think through their expectations and prepare for a range of potential reactions from the other party, including rejection (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

Conclusion

Although the decision to place a child for adoption can be a painful process and affect many aspects of a birth parent's life, many birth parents are able to reconcile the loss and make peace with the decision. Recent shifts away from secrecy and toward openness in adoption are not a panacea for the grief, loss, or other negative experiences a birth parent may have, but research indicates that openness can be beneficial to birth parents, as well as people who were adopted. Additionally, the ever-increasing availability of information and supports for birth parents, particularly on the Internet, provides a way for parents make a more informed decision, find assistance as they move through the process, and discover other parents who have had similar experiences.

Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway. This service of the Children's Bureau provides information and publications about a wide range of adoption topics. It also provides adoption statutes for each State.

- *Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adimpact.cfm)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (list of organizations) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?svcID=132&rate_chno=AR-0031A)
- *Are You Pregnant and Thinking About Adoption?* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_pregna/index.cfm)
- *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)
- *Working With Birth and Adoptive Families to Support Open Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm)
- Laws Related to Adoption (https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/laws/)
- State Statutes Search (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/)
- National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/)

America Adopts: Birth Mother Blogs. This website helps connect prospective birth and adoptive parents and also includes a series of blogs by birth mothers. http://www.americaadopts.com/birth-mother-blogs/

Concerned United Birthparents (CUB). This is a national organization focused on birth parents. http://www.cubirthparents.org

Donaldson Adoption Institute. The Adoption Institute provides information about a wide array of adoption issues. http://www.adoptioninstitute.org

IChooseAdoption.org. This website, which was developed by the National Council for Adoption, provides adoption stories and resources for birth parents, adopted parents, and adopted persons. http://ichooseadoption.org/

Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support. The Insight website offers resources for professionals, adoptive parents, and birth parents considering open adoption. http://www.openadoptioninsight.org

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project. This website provides information on a longitudinal study of openness in adoption. http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. This service of the Children's Bureau provides training, technical assistance, and information services regarding a variety of permanency issues, including the topic of birth family support and education. http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/birth-family-issues.html

Open Adoption Bloggers. This website lists more than 300 blogs about open adoption, including those by birth parents, adoptive parents, and individuals who were adopted. http://openadoptionbloggers.com

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pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

Adoptive Parents & Expectant Parents Alike Preparing for a Healthy, Lifelong Relationship

by Leslie Foge, MA, MFT

A pregnant woman sits in comfortable office across from a man and his wife—possibly the couple who will raise her unborn child. She has seen pictures of them, their house, their dog, and have had numerous phone calls over several weeks, but this is the first time they have met face-to-face. All three smile nervously at each other. Though the phone calls have dispelled some of the tension, none of them have ever been in a situation remotely like this one. How should the conversation begin? What should they say? The husband clears his throat and says, "We were hoping to tell you a little bit more about our road to adoption and why we want to adopt a baby..."

In some domestic infant adoptions, expectant parents and adoptive parents are able to establish direct communication with one another. However, there are powerful emotional forces on both sides that can make communicating clearly and honestly a challenge. For the sake of the child, it is important to overcome these emotions. Important work can be done to build a healthy, lifelong relationship between a child's birth and adoptive families.

Once a match or a placement has happened, the work begins of developing a relationship that will stand the test of time for the adults involved in an adoption. Regardless of the timeframe, it is never too early or too late to start the relationship-building process between the expectant and adoptive families.

At the time of placement, the practical aspects of transfer of custody often take center stage. In order for legal obligations to be filled, the process can become about dotting I's and crossing T's. However, establishing healthy family relationships should be considered just as crucial. In a healthy adoption, all triad members and their extended families are important. Their needs should be considered and compromise should be the name of the game. The integrity of the adopted child's genetic and adoptive heritages is honored with the hopes that the child will then be able to honor and embrace the wholeness of him/herself.

In the early stages of a birth family/adoptive family relationship, the focus should be on getting to know each other organically, even if the relationship needs to start out by phone. If this is prior to the birth of the child, a "match" will have to be agreed upon. Be careful not to feel compelled to "match" unless you have felt ease about talking about your bottom-line beliefs with each other. What are your hopes regarding ongoing contact and openness? Is spirituality an important consideration for you? What are the health histories, including mental health and substance abuse histories, for both the expectant and adoptive parents? What kind of support does each parent have for an open adoption from family members and friends? What is the expectant parents' and adoptive parents' commitment to the adoption process if the baby is born with severe disabilities? Identify topics you would like to talk more about in the near future. Often it is helpful to have social workers or counselors to help with these conversations. However, it is imperative that these conversations occur between the expectant/birth parents and pre/adoptive parents, adult to adult, in service of the child's best interests.

Some of the topics that adoptive parents and expectant parents need to broach with each other are complicated and delicate. These kinds of conversations require well-developed communication skills: you must be able to listen carefully as well as speak clearly and honestly. You may wish to have an adoption counselor facilitate these interactions. You will need to navigate sensitive adoption issues such as the nature of the relationship

you are creating in the near future; ideas about the long-term future of the relationship; your commitment to one another; your commitment to the child; and qualitative openness. (Qualitative openness refers to the quality of the relationship rather than just the frequency of contact or visits. Both sets of parents can demonstrate open-heartedness in adoption by mindfully and compassionately including their children's other parents and extended family in their thoughts, words, and actions.)

In my work with adoptive families in these formative stages, I emphasize developing empathy for all members of the adoption triad, including oneself. Birth parents, adopted children, and adoptive parents have grief about their respective losses. While the losses for birth parents and adoptees are easier to see, adoptive parents have significant losses as well. What they may have expected to be the simple process of becoming parents has often turned out to be a long and difficult journey, over the course of which they have had to give up many things, including privacy, control, and in some cases the ability to continue their family bloodlines. Each triad member needs to acknowledge their grief, talk about it, normalize it, accept it (the grief, not necessarily the loss) and have self-compassion. Once each triad member feels validated in the full range of their feelings, they will be much more likely to be able to tolerate and empathize with the experience of the other. I believe that if birth parents and adoptive parents can respect and understand one another's feelings, conflict that may arise can be successfully negotiated without putting the child in the middle or using them as a buffer to the adults' feelings.

> *It was about a month before Bianca was due to give birth. She had been matched with Stephanie and William for one month, and she and her mother Inez had met with them several times. The visits had gone well–Bianca and Inez felt very comfortable with Stephanie and William, and vice versa. But today, the group needed to talk about plans to name the baby, which felt like a potential point of conflict. Everyone was nervous about starting the conversation.*

Part of building a healthy family relationship is being able to work through conflict. In the beginning, both pre/adoptive parents and expectant/birth parents are trying to make a good impression on one another, but one needs to be careful about getting into the habit of avoiding difficult topics. I have heard both pre/adoptive parents and expectant/birth parents say they feel as though they are walking on eggshells around each other. Addressing "hot" topics and maneuvering through conflict successfully early on can pave the way for success later.

In my practice, I usually spend some time with the expectant/birth family and the hopeful pre/adoptive families separately, to flush out the topics each person wants to be addressed. With an agenda set we, as a group, tackle each topic respectfully, listening while each person speaks of their desires and fears.

> *Stephanie and William had a family name picked out – that of Stephanie's grandmother. After their long struggle with infertility, they had many strong emotions about connecting their child to their familial heritage. Bianca had hoped that her name would somehow be included in the baby's name, as a way of expressing her love for and connection to a child she was not able to raise herself. Once the topic was broached, each person took turns expressing their desires while the others listened attentively. They were able to understand that no one in the room was trying to "claim" the baby as exclusively their own, and move together towards a solution that everyone felt good about. The baby would be named after Stephanie's grandmother, and given the middle name of Bianca, a permanent tribute to the woman who gave her life.*

It is not uncommon for adoption placements to happen very quickly, in which case the building of the open relationship happens mostly after-the-fact. The period after the birth of a baby placed in an adoption is a period unlike any other. The birth parents' developmental tasks are to reconcile their decision to place their child for adoption, begin the grieving process, and develop positive hopes for the future. The adoptive parents are joyful and relieved, celebratory and fulfilled. At the same time, they may be haunted by grief for the birth parents' loss and sometimes they can also be fearful and insecure. Their task is to claim this baby as their own, attach and bond, thinking of ways as parents that they can communicate their child's story to him/her as s/he gets older. Both adoptive parents and birth parents can benefit from having someone to talk to about this difficult but inspirational transition.

Sometimes, birth parents and adoptive parents are encouraged to leave each other alone during the post-partum period, to settle in with new roles and responsibilities. But that does not mean that they shouldn't be supportive of each other. If all members of the triad family are healing, the entire adoption will be healthier. For example, if the adoptive parents know that the birth family is getting good support and care from family members and friends, they can start to turn their attention to bonding with the baby. If adoptive parents can be open to helping the birth parents by being open to contact, the long road of healing can begin for all. A birth mother can do a lot to encourage adoptive

parents' sense of entitlement by complimenting them on their parenting or reiterating their choice of adoptive parents, but ultimately the feeling of legitimacy needs to be developed within the adoptive parent themselves. Similarly, birth parent grief can be soothed by the adoptive parents' support, as they remind the birth parent how important they are to the adoptive family and especially to the child. That said, the grieving process is a road that the birth parent has to walk alone for the most part. It will serve both the adoptive parents and the birth parents well to remember that theirs is a long-term relationship that will take care and attention to maintain. As adoptive and birth parents work together to craft their own personal open adoption, they may not have the full unconditional support of their family members and friends. They will need to keep focusing back to the child to inform them about their intentions and tone.

Another important way to take care of yourself during this period is to find a supportive community of people who share your experience. I regularly meet birth moms who tell me that they have never talked to or met another birth parent. On Your Feet Foundation (www.onyourfeetca.org) is an organization that provides birthmothers with mentoring, educational and vocational guidance, educational grants, and a network of peers who meet, socialize, heal, and support each other. Similarly, if I had one piece of advice to give adoptive parents, it would be to stay connected to the adoption community. An organization like Pact provides opportunities for education, support, and social activities with families like your own. Other adoptive families are resources you can turn to for questions about development stages, openness issues, boundary-setting, communication with others, referrals to professionals, and more.

I highly recommend that all adoptive and expectant birth parents strive for direct contact (face-to-face if at all possible) during the preparation phase of adoption, and that they put all their hopes, fears, and questions on the table, maneuvering through conflict if necessary. Make room in the process to acknowledge the loss that all parties are experiencing. Always keeping the child's best interests in mind, adoptive parents and birth parents must negotiate how they can best support each other—and when that support should come from other sources. I believe that many adoption difficulties can be minimized by some specific preventative work. Take advantage of the opportunity to get to know your child's other family to set the stage for a healthy adoption – a lifelong relationship.

Leslie Foge, MFT, has a private counseling and consulting practice in Lafayette, CA, where she specializes in working with individuals and families touched by adoption. The co-author of Third Choice: A Woman's Guide to Placing a Child for Adoption, she is on the faculty of St. Mary's College.

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When I dreamed again, it was exactly the same. Our tiny newborn pulled a sea-blue scarf over her face. "Honey," my husband said, "you're not dreaming of our daughter. The baby you're dreaming of hasn't been born."

In the rocker, holding her, I thought, "He's right." The baby in my dream was the child infertility kept from us. Our new baby was someone else.... I'd prayed so long to be able to adopt. Why be depressed now? Dare I tell? What if we couldn't bond?

In my arms in the quiet of that night, she looked like a Buddha. She lay calm and alert in a new way. She gazed at my face. I felt drawn into her eyes. She wanted a bottle. For the first time, she sucked eagerly! I had understood her cue. Maybe I really was her mom. Were we going to be all right?

Post adoption depression: What is it? Could it happen to you? Mothers frequently feel a loss when baby is born. Postpartum depression is common. Post-adoption depression is equally common, though hardly ever mentioned. Why feel down just when a monumental dream has come true? But after the high of waiting for baby to arrive, a let-down may be inevitable for emotional balance. Relating to an actual baby may also trigger a more-concrete sense of the loss of your fantasy child. Fear that you might lose your new baby if anyone found out how you feel may also cause you to hide your stress, enhancing a sense of isolation.

But moods change. The way you feel in moments of high stress is not how you will feel forever. Looking beyond dark feelings to what your baby needs and feels becomes the agenda of attachment. The best way to get a notion of what this time may mean for your child is to think about what the parallel time meant when you were born. How do you wish your parents had acted? What were your family's patterns? Looking at our own life events is a way to reach deeper understanding of where we are coming from. These insights can help shape where we are going as parents.

What if you and your baby don't fall in love right away? Newborns and parents don't always fall in love at first sight. And you know what? You have a lifetime to work on it. It's not a race. What matters is your commitment to attach no matter how long it takes. If it takes time to feel that this child is your child, build on signs of progress. If it takes time for the baby to act as if you matter more than anyone else, enjoy interacting as connections grow. The best signals for knowing if you're on track will come from the baby. Gather strength from simple pleasures; smiles and developmental milestones are ¬proud signs of growth. Baby may take more or less time to attach than you do. Your partner may take more or less time. It may take days, weeks, months or a year. Don't feel like a failure if attachment takes longer than you imagined. Most important is building a family together, no matter how long it takes.

Bonding versus attachment: What's the difference? By strict definition, adoptive parents can't bond with their children. Bonding is a one-way process that begins in the birth mother during pregnancy and continues through the first few days of life. It is her instinctive desire to protect her baby. Society tends to talk about bonding, professionals about attachment. We need to be competent with language and talk about attachment. Attachment is a two-way reciprocal process between parents and their children. In any family, attachment must be achieved in order for the child to flourish. Time and interaction are needed. It starts with a promise, a promise from parents to child that says, "you count, and you can always rely on me." From this promise will come the baby's sense that the parents matter more than anyone else, leading to the baby's reliance on them. Parents then begin enjoying their ability to nurture with competence. Richly rewarding feelings grow back and forth as each comes to believe: we belong together.

How does adoption affect a newborn? Is it harder to form attachments? Throughout pregnancy, a baby experiences and is shaped by what happens to its mother. At eight weeks in utero, the baby moves in response to touch, sound, and light. After 28 weeks, she can hear. By the third trimester, he responds to sound and rhythm. The strongest prenatal communication between baby and mother is hormonal. A mother's stress causes her baby to react. Research shows the baby may even play a major role in controlling the beginning of labor. Hormones from the baby may stimulate the uterus to contract. In the first few minutes after birth, a newborn can recognize its mother's voice, resonate to her heartbeat and find food. Can he also discern differences between her and his waiting adoptive parents? The answer must be yes.

After birth, an infant must reach a new physiological balance as a result of being outside rather than inside the body he shared for nine months. In adoption, he must also make an instant change to a new set of parents. Birth in itself is exhausting. Learning how to adapt to the world without the comfort of familiarity takes longer. No matter how warm the reception by new parents, extra stress on baby must be anticipated. Although the baby doesn't understand these changes, he senses changes in sounds, smells, stress, and rhythms. His world is upset. He experiences a loss and reacts. Responses may include crying, difficulty sucking, bowel or bladder disturbances, or withdrawal. Usually such changes are temporary and reverse as he adjusts. Humans have an enormous capacity to recover.

Children handle stress in different ways. Some thrive no matter what; others are vulnerable. Resiliency studies on primates show that attentive care from foster mothers results in bold and outgoing offspring, adept at picking up coping styles. This makes them stronger. They become leaders. Surely adopted children can do the same.

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Don't worry about doing everything right. Your security about being a good-enough parent will eventually help baby feel secure. Take time to get to know each other. There's no rush. Take time to watch, touch, laugh, play, and have fun together. You and your child have a lifetime to continue deepening attachments.

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Bonding and Attachment: How Does Adoption Affect a Newborn?

by Gail Steinberg & Beth Hall

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How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade

Using a favorite doll and a logic children can follow, one mother enlightens her daughter's curious class.

BY AMY KLATZKIN

Early in first grade at my daughter's school, each child is given a special day when she gets to help the teacher in prominent ways and make important choices (like who gets to stand first in line). Classmates interview the child of the day, and the teacher records the answers on a big poster. My daughter was the first of two adopted children in her class to have a special day, and inevitably questions about adoption came up—although, the teacher reported, they were afterthoughts. The class had just finished interviewing my daughter, and the teacher was about to move on, when a classmate asked, "Weren't you adopted?"

I got a message from the teacher that afternoon saying that adoption had come up and that my daughter had handled the situation with confidence and pride. The teacher then read to the class a book called *Families Are Different*. In it a girl adopted transracially from Korea talks about her white parents, her Korean sister, and the occasional discomfort of

Tips for Talking

1. Don't wait too long. Kindergarten and first graders (age 5–7) don't mind their mothers in the classroom and may even be excited by sharing their adoption story. By second grade, children are more self-conscious about differences and less willing to be the center of attention.

2. Don't make your child's adoption story the subject of the talk. Read a book or explain adoption in another way as author Amy Klatzkin did.

3. Be aware that many children this age have never heard of adoption. As one child said to her mother after her turn as "star of the week,", "Mom, they thought adoption meant I was a doctor!" Cover the basics so that your child doesn't have to.

4. Tailor your talk for a young audience. Five to seven year olds aren't sophisticated. Using props—like dolls—is a good idea.

5. Talk to teachers beforehand to get a sense of the class dynamics.

6. Finish with food. Hungry children love a treat, whether it is ethnic food or homemade cookies.

By Julie Michaels, editor of Adoptive Families' *Growing Up Adopted section, and mother of Lily, adopted internationally.*

being different from other families. But she looks around the neighborhood and notices that while in some families everyone looks alike (even the dog), in others there are many differences. All families, she concludes, are held together "by a special kind of glue called love."

I was glad the teacher had read the book, and I was gratified to hear that my daughter had enjoyed her special day. So I was surprised, when I picked up my daughter that afternoon, to see her looking sad. It turns out that the interview was fine. She had enjoyed talking about herself and didn't mind the questions about adoption. She loved the book and was pleased that her teacher had read it aloud. But there was still a problem.

One child had asked if the two adopted girls in *Families Are Different* were real sisters. And the teacher had answered, "They're kind of sisters." It's possible that no one except my daughter picked up on the subtext of that answer. But some kids catch all the nuances when grownups talk about adoption. Mine has her radar fine-tuned. She heard that the teacher wasn't sure just how "real" those sisters were. My daughter doesn't have a sibling, but she has adopted friends who do. Weren't Betty and Zoe real sisters, she asked?

I explained that sometimes grownups not in adoptive families aren't always good at answering questions about adoption. What's confusing, I explained, is that before Zoe was adopted, she and Betty weren't sisters, but that from the moment of adoption on, they were sisters forever. And by the way, would she like me to come talk to the class about adoption next week?

ADOPTING EMMA

At the beginning of the school year, I'd given my daughter's teacher a packet of materials on adoption and school issues (see box). The teacher had invited me to give a talk on adoption, but I hadn't scheduled it yet. I wished I'd done it before my daughter's special day, but after would have to do.

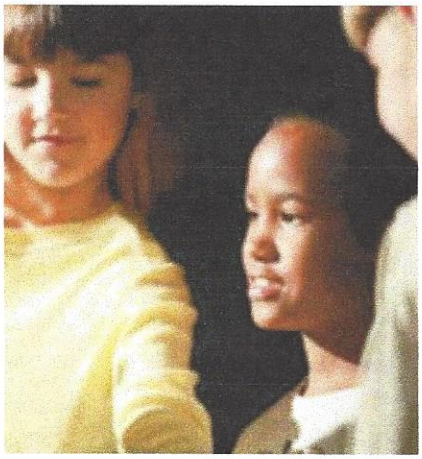
I was nervous about talking to the class, so I asked several parents who'd done it before for some suggestions. Then I talked with my daughter. She had a terrific idea. She has a doll named Emma who was made to look like her when she was one year old. "Let's dress Emma in my orphanage clothes," she said, "and we can talk about Emma's adoption."

And that's what we did. The class loved it, and everyone wanted to hold the "baby." My daughter was a participant in the discussion rather than the subject of it, which really pleased her. We talked first about different types of families, how some look alike and some don't. In my daughter's school a third of the children are biracial so it's not just transracial adoptees who look different from one or both parents. We used this realization as a springboard to discussing adoption.

Together we made two lists on the black board. On one side the children named things that babies need: diapers, bottles, food, clothes, hugs, love, and so on. On the other side they listed what parents do: feed, clothe, and hold babies, change diapers, give medicine. None of the first-graders said anything about being born. At the top of the parents' list I added a crucial part of every child's story: babies need parents to bring them into the world.

You have to be careful how you talk about birth with first-graders. At this age there's a wide range of knowledge about procreation. Some six-year-olds can give accurate anatomical names to all the relevant body parts, while others know only that a baby grows in a mother's tummy. One boy in the class insisted that babies come from the earth. While some of his classmates shouted corrections, I redirected the discussion. I wasn't there to teach the birds and the bees.

Amy Klatzkin and her family



I don't know if it was the doll or the lists, but for most of the kids, something clicked. They were excited to understand something concrete about adoption.

A JOB FOR EMMA'S FOREVER PARENTS

Once we had our lists of what babies need and what parents do, I moved on to adoption. I told them to remember that adoption happens for grownup reasons and that the need for adoption is never, ever a child's fault. Birth parents sometimes have big problems (like being too young to be parents or, in some parts of the world, being afraid to break rules about how many children they can have). Because of a big grownup problem, some birth parents decide that they can't be "forever parents" to their child. I put a circle around "bring babies into the world." I picked up Emma, the doll, and said, "Emma's birth parents could bring her into the world, but they didn't think they could do all these other things," and I pointed to the long list of things babies need and parents do.

"Emma's forever parents," I explained, "adopted her because they wanted to do all those other things for her. But they didn't do the first thing: they didn't bring her into the world. So Emma has two sets of real parents: her birth parents, who are certainly real even if we don't know who they are, and her forever parents, who are also real and who are part of her real forever family."

I don't know if it was the doll or the lists, but for most of the kids something clicked. They were excited to understand something concrete about adoption, and my daughter was proud of the whole thing—especially the interest everyone took in Emma's clothes. "Those were really my clothes," she confided to the class, to general acclaim. When the other adopted child in the class had her special day, no one asked about adoption. They knew enough for now.

What worked here may not work for your child. It may not even work for mine next year, when new questions and concerns may arise. We can't deal with the issue once and consider it done, because understanding adoption is a lifelong process. We need to keep communication open with our children so we know (or can make educated guesses about) what issues are coming up in school and can help them, their friends, and their teachers develop greater awareness and understanding of adoption. AF

Amy Klatzkin is the editor of A Passage to the Heart: Writings from Families with Children from China *and* the Adoptive Families 2001 Adoption Guide. *She lives with her husband Terry Fry and their daughter in San Francisco.*

Adoption and Schools Selected Resources

- *Adoption and the Schools: A Resource Guide for Parents and Teachers.* Available from FAIR at www.fairfamilies.org or P.O. Box 51436, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Consider purchasing copies for your children's schools.

- The Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) offers including a program called *S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators.* Online at www.adoptionsupport.org or via phone (301) 593-9200

- "The Best of Adopted Child: Issues Children Face in School," by Lois Ruskai Melina. This collection includes 10 back issues of *Adopted Child* newsletter and costs $15. Order via toll-free phone (888) 882-1794, fax (208) 883-8035, or order online at www.raisingadoptedchildren.com.

- "School Savvy," by Lois Gilman, author of *The Adoption Resource Book*, addresses handling adoption issues, including the family tree and other assignments, in your child's classroom. Free from *Adoptive Families* magazine. Send a stamped, self-addressed 9x12 envelope to: Anniversary Collection, *Adoptive Families*, 42 West 38th Street, Suite 901, New York, NY 10018.

- *An Educator's Guide to Adoption* offers a practical approach for teachers to support adopted children at school. Order this 22-page booklet from Celebrate Adoption, Inc., www.celebrateadoption.org.

- The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse offers helpful fact sheets on adoption and school issues. See website: www.calib.com/naic/pubs/f_school.htm

Why Adopted Children Need to Know Their Stories

by Angie Johnston, adult adoptee and mother

Good information about how and when to talk with your children about their adoptions is available, and I highly encourage you to read it. But before you do that, let's grapple with the issue of why talking with them is important.

The purpose of open, age-appropriate dialogue about adoption is to connect our children with their existence so they can freely become themselves. To become secretive, afraid, or even passive about adoption dishonors a child's very being and creates more doubts about the significance of his or her existence.

All children need to know they matter. They need experiential knowledge that their existence on this earth is real and that it is good. From that internal sense and knowledge, a child can form the virtue of self-acceptance and develop the all-important ability to give and receive love. For our adopted children, that internal sense about their existence is harder to find. What does all that mean? Let's break it down.

Sense of Being

This is a sense that most of us take for granted. If we had mothers and fathers who nurtured us, loved us well, and met our needs for affection, we probably have a strong sense that we are here, we exist, we are alive, and being here is good.

Any number of things can hinder a child from developing a sense of being—separation from one's birthmother is one of many. The degree to which a child has had to escape his or her existence to survive is the degree to which that child will need to recover a sense of being.

In the movie *The Color Purple*, the main character, Celie, was oppressed and abused. The one person she knew loved her—her sister, Nettie—was forced away from her life. Twenty years later, she found letters Nettie had written to her, and the discovery facilitated her healing. She was finally able to realize that her sister still loved her and had not abandoned her. Celie was eventually able to break away from the man who had kept her under his thumb in shame and abuse.

As Celie drove away from him, he yelled at her, saying she would never amount to anything. She emphatically yelled back in freedom, "I may be all those things you say, but I'm here, and I'm alive!" Celie had lived her entire life without a sense of being and without a voice. Her declaration of existence set the stage for her healing and for her to live her story.

When we openly talk with our children about their stories—however good or bad—it connects them with their existence. When we as parents are unafraid of their stories we honor our children's existence. We say to them, "You are real. You are here. You exist." Consistently and courageously honoring their stories is one of the primary ways we heal the question of existence that troubled their souls when they were separated from their birthparents.

Sense of Well-Being

This is not to be confused with a sense of being, although one cannot have well-being without having a self to feel well about. A sense of well-being is not only the self-knowledge that "I am here," but it is also the sense in our core that being here is good. It is a sense that "I enjoy being alive, and I matter."

The circumstances of our birth speak life or doubt to our sense of well-being. Every child asks this question about well-being, but adopted children ask it with more doubt. An adopted child begins to question the goodness of his or her existence upon the discovery that he or she was separated from the one who made space in her womb for the child's first nine months.

We do not need to be afraid of creating a wound in our children when we speak openly about their stories. In fact, when we embrace and explore their stories with them, we bring healing to their doubts. With time, our children will become less afraid of their wounds and become more free to grow. If we accept our place in our children's lives as well as the people who gave them life, our children will be more likely to embrace their unique journeys.

Self-Acceptance

It is difficult, if not impossible, to accept one's self without a sense of being or well-being. Self-acceptance is the ability to freely accept who we are—both our strengths and our struggles.

As a mom, I used to think that openly praising my children for anything and everything they did would nurture their self-acceptance. I wish I had learned sooner that children who have a sense of self-acceptance should not be overly praised. If anything, overpraising breeds insecurity by creating in our children the need to be constantly affirmed to feel okay.

Self-acceptance stems from being rooted in foundational truth: I do exist on this earth. It is good that I am here. I matter. Self-acceptance comes from love, nurturing, and patience, but it also comes from connecting our children with their stories.

Connecting adopted children with their stories in appropriate ways from day one is a powerful way to cultivate the kind of soil in the soul in which self-acceptance can grow.

Ability to Give and Receive Love

Isn't this skill the foundation for healthy—not perfect—relationships? Isn't this what we ultimately hope for our children?

In the last six months, two mothers shared with me that the reason they chose to adopt from another country was that they were afraid to deal with the biological family. International adoption gave them the distance and security they needed to become a mother to a child who was not biologically their own.

Later, those same two women shared how surprised they were to grieve, literally weep, over the fact that their little girls will never have the chance to know the women who gave them birth or the stories of how they came to be. I was moved to tears hearing them, knowing the wonderful gift they are now giving to their daughters by not living in fear of their daughters' roots. They never imagined that love could move them enough to want

their daughters to know the mothers who gave them life.

We do not need to be afraid of our children's stories, no matter how painful they are. We do not need to be afraid of our children's birthparents out of fear that we will mean less to our children because we did not give birth to them. We can courageously embrace and connect our children to their stories, knowing this is an act of love and will ultimately bring greater security to our relationships with them.

What a gift of love our child's story of adoption is. Enjoy your role as mother or father in giving your child a sense of being, a sense of well-being, a safe place to accept him- or herself, and the ability to give and receive love. This is why we talk with children about adoption.

Bethany Christian Services is a global adoption and child welfare agency that cares for orphans and families around the world. This article is reprinted with permission. To learn more about Bethany's ministries, visit Bethany.org

How I Learned I Wasn't Caucasian

by Dottie Enrico

Born in Korea, I thought I was as American as the kids next door–until the first day of school.

Many of us have painful memories of our first day of school. We recall the tears we shed watching Mommy wave goodbye or hearing the taunts of classmates ridiculing us about a pair of thick glasses or a funny haircut. But for me, the first day of Kindergarten was the day I realized I was not Caucasian. When I was a few days old, I was abandoned by my Asian birthmother on the steps of a city government building in Seoul, South Korea. Like thousands of other Korean children, I was adopted by an American family and brought to the United States before I was six months old. I spent most of my childhood in California, then moved, at age 11, to a small Indiana town.

My parents felt the best way for me and my adopted brother, who is also Korean, to assimilate into American culture was not to dwell on our foreignness. My parents weren't trying to pretend we weren't adopted; they just never discussed our identities as Asians. To them, I was their daughter–the child of an Italian engineer and his German American wife. Korea was simply the place where I was born, and maybe my parents naively believed that being Asian in America wasn't any different that coming from another faraway place like Oslo or Vienna.

But even though prejudice didn't exist in our home, it was unfair of my parents not to prepare me for the small-mindedness of others. In retrospect, I think they owed me some information about my Korean heritage so that when I was faced with racism, I would have a firm, positive feeling about being Asian. On the other hand, it is also easy to understand why they felt uncomfortable about supplying me with a Korean identity. First-generation Americans of various races have immersed their biological children in U.S. culture at the expense of foreign legacies–but these parents had the luxury of sharing the same eyes, hair and genes as their children. Perhaps years of rocking me to sleep and answering my cries in the night had truly blinded my parents to our racial differences. Outsiders, however, were always eager to point them out.

As my brother and I stood alongside three or four neighborhood kids waiting to start our first day of kindergarten, a busload of older children passed, and many hung out the window pointing to our group and yelling, "Chinese cherries! Look at the Chinese cherries!" Several boys pulled the corners of their eyes toward their temples to form "Chink eyes." They laughed and asked us what we had in our lunch boxes, chop suey? I looked at the children around me. They were the same children I had played hide-and-seek with ever since I had learned to walk. I didn't see any Chinese people. I craned my neck, and asked my playmates where the Chinese people were. As they began to snicker, my brother's face twisted in painful awareness. "Dottie, they're talking about us," he said. "We're the Chinese people."

I looked back at him in disbelief. We were not Chinese. We were Italians born in Korea, living in California. I vowed to ask my mother about this when I got home. When the bus came, I purposely sat in front so I could see myself in the driver's mirror. Relieved, I saw the same features that had stared back at me when I brushed my teeth that morning. When school was over, I came home and asked my mother what those

kids had been talking about. Her response was unsettling. she breathed a long sigh and said gently, "Well, honey, you and your brother do have sort of an Asian look, like many Chinese and Japanese people. This is something people are going to say to you for a very long time."

Mother never told me whether it was good or bad to be Asian; she didn't have to. The mocking voices of the kids on the bus had told me that many thought Asians were second-rate and not as good as whites. A wave of regret washed over my mother's face when she saw the tears streaming down my cheeks. She looked away quickly, said nothing. That first day of school taught me that not everyone would see me as I saw myself–a little American girl who liked to show off by dancing to the Beatles. To many, I would simply be "the Asian girl"–my whole identity reduced to "someone who isn't white."

Today, I'm often asked by friends and acquaintances who've adopted nonwhite children whether I think it's important to address their child's racial identity. I tell them yes, that no matter how strongly they wish to ignore the color difference, the child must always be ready to meet the world beyond the family–and for that they will need a strong, positive feeling about being Asian, Latino, Indian. It has taken me years of hard work to understand what it means to be Korean. There have been moments of great joy, but it has also been, at times, a lonely journey–a journey I wish my family had been willing to take with me when I was still a little girl.

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pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

Dealing With Racism

Perspective of a White Transracial Adoptive Parent

by Beth Hall

No one can live in an environment "diverse enough" or "friendly enough" or "good enough" to protect children from the hurt of racism. Discrimination hurts everyone, but white parents are especially susceptible to being surprised or taken aback by racist experiences, because they don't anticipate them. In order to successfully support their children of color, white parents must take an honest look at their own blind spots and biases, in order to become effective anti-racist allies.

Racist things happen, and they hurt.

> *My son was only five when we took him to a Chinese New Year celebration in Chinatown. When we came home he was so excited and wouldn't stop saying "Gung Hay Fat Choy" to everyone we met, whether we knew them or not. We were in the grocery store when a woman and her daughter came up to us and started berating me for bringing more of Them into our country. "Can't you see they are hurting American kids' chances of getting into college? And they are getting rich while our people can't even get jobs. We don't need more chinks in this town..." My first thought was to get us out of there as fast as I could. My pulse was racing and I just couldn't believe anyone would say such a thing in our town and in front of our son. I didn't know what to do and I was afraid to say anything to my son because I was so angry myself I thought it might scare him.*

This is a scenario of overt racism. When a white person, who has likely never been the target of such race-based venom, witnesses such epithets directed toward their child or other people of color, they are often so surprised that they find themselves unable or unprepared to respond.

We have to teach white parents to believe, first of all, that it is appropriate to talk to their children about these and all racist experiences, and secondly, that it is not only safe, but in fact essential to their child's well-being that they do so.

Recognizing Stages of White Parent's Anti-Racist Development

Deborah Haynor and Lori Miller describe four stages in the evolution of transracial parents as they move towards readiness to support their children in combating and navigating experiences of racism.

Stage One: We Are Family. The primary task of this stage is the creation of a transracial family. In this stage, as parents focus on making their child of color their own, the notion that "love is enough" is often embraced.

Stage Two: We Are a Multicultural Family. The celebration of a child's birth culture is the hallmark of this stage. It is often accompanied by the desire to "reassure" the child by speaking about the ways he/she is similar to the adoptive parent in order to minimize differences. Parents who are in this stage are taking steps to appreciate the traditions of their child's birth culture, but they are not necessarily acknowledging their child's racial identity or the racial landscape of the world. This is often a comfortable place for white parents to be and is a common "stuck place" that they may need help to push beyond.

Stage Three: We Are an Anti-Racist Family. Parents in this stage are talking to other white parents about what it means to be white and how that impacts raising a child of color. They are observing cross-racial interactions in person, on television, in newspapers and magazines, and asking "what does race/racism have to do with this?" Parents in this stage are actively giving up the "white privilege" of not having to think about race/racism much of the time. These parents are attending anti-racism workshops where, in a safe group environment, cognitive and emotional learning and skill-building can take place.

Stage Four: We Are a Multiracial Family. This stage is about becoming bi-cultural in a racialized context. This means the white parent spends as much time as a racial minority as their child of color spends as a racial minority. Parents in this stage are asking themselves questions such as: what is the racial makeup of our neighborhood? our child's school? our place of worship? our friends? our family's service providers (doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, plumbers, housekeepers, childcare providers)? They are making significant changes in their lives based on the

answers to those questions.

Parents moving through these stages are purposefully stretching their comfort zones. Pushing oneself to actually behave differently opens the door to establishing oneself as an anti-racist ally.

John Raible, transracially adopted himself, coined the term transracialization to describe white adults who are interested in contact with communities and people of races other than their own not only for the ways it enriches the life of their child of color, but for the ways it enriches their own lives. In fact, a transracialized white adult usually no longer feels comfortable in spaces where whites are in the majority. This is the goal that we need to hold out to white parents of adopted children of color if we are putting their children's needs front and center.

Understanding the Experience of Racism

It is sometimes tempting for transracial parents to see racism as an event, instead of an ongoing series of messages that contribute to an overall belief that there are inherent race-based value differences between human beings. First coined by Chester Pierce in 1970, the term "microaggressions" is more descriptive of the everyday experience of racism. Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Examples include white teachers who rarely call on students of color, or white strangers who compliment Asian Americans on their mastery of English. Microaggressions are detrimental to people of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities.

White parents need to understand that these "micro" actions and behaviors cannot be ignored or explained away, because they do have a significant, cumulative, and harmful impact on the developing child. Helping white parents understand these interactions will give them insight into their children's experiences, and allow them to traverse the conversation from culture to race.

Intent vs. Impact

The social justice movement describes two challenges in confronting individual and societal racism: intent and impact. Many "good-hearted" people don't mean to hurt anyone (intent), yet in fact are being racist (impact) without realizing it or recognizing why.

White parents can fall into the trap of focusing on intent when they respond to situations with comments like, "I'm sure she didn't mean it like that." Over and over, people of color say that specific words are insulting, identify actions that connote white privilege, and do not feel white people hear or understand what they are trying to communicate. It is presumptuous for white people who have not experienced racism to think that they are in a better position to decide how people of color should feel and/or respond to "subtle" or overt racial bias. And that presumption that the white experience is somehow universal or "normal" is the essence of white privilege.

It is too easy for white folks to hold their own experiences and sense of race and racism in equal standing with those who live the daily experience of not being white in America. Whiteness is privilege, and part of white privilege is to think that there is no white culture or that "whiteness" cannot be defined. Whiteness is power; it is the assumption that white people can use their own internal barometers to understand everyone else's experience because unconsciously white people see themselves as the measuring stick, the "norm."

Whiteness is believing that racism is being eradicated because white people don't experience it or see it themselves. In a supportive way, we have to help white parents who are parenting children of color understand the degree to which white people learn about race and racism on the backs of people of color. Parents need to understand that it cannot become the "job" of adopted children of color to help their parents understand that racism exists – or to make the message of racism palatable so they won't feel too guilty. This means finding or creating an environment where white people can inspire one another to think about how to affect the impact of racism in their own community, as opposed to simply focusing on a shared intent to be "colorblind" or avoid racist actions for themselves or their children. People of color struggle with racism their entire lives; it must be the same for white parents who want to be their child's truest advocate.

None of Us Is Ready for Racism.

If parents wait for an injury, or for their children to be "old enough," or "ready," before they start to talk with their kids about unfairness and bias, they will be too late. We are never old enough for it to be something that we know how to handle. As it is with most things that are hard, adults must handle their own feelings about racism before they are ready to help their children deal with it. Most white people raised in the United States were taught not to speak about racial differences; that the best way to be combat racism was to be "color-blind" and see everyone, regardless of skin color, as the same. We continue to be burdened by this distortion.

Gina Samuels describes the problems with the color-blind model for transracial families:

> *[B]eing colorblind can be lethal to the health and well-being of people of color. Prejudice and racism are not caused by seeing physical differences but by attaching a status of "normal" to one group and its members while relegating every other group and their members to the status of "other." Being anti-racist requires a radical change in belief systems, not in vision. For white parents, this might require understanding their "whiteness" as a distinct racial experience. [Another]problematic element of colorblind identities for transracial adoptive families is the belief that equality and connectedness depend on sameness, and that seeing race differences fosters inequalities and disconnections. Some parents hope that deemphasizing or denying racial differences will promote parent-child bonding and family cohesion. This can especially be pronounced for multiracial children with white heritage, whose white parents may wish to connect over shared white racial heritage. My*

research with multiracial black-white adults, similar to research with other groups of transracial adoptees, finds parental attempts to deemphasize their black heritage actually created parent-child rifts and a sense of disconnection into adulthood.

It is critical to remind parents not to hesitate to talk to their children about scary or harsh experiences that they consider a matter of life or death. We don't wait for children to ask us how to cross the street, or fear that talking about the dangers of cars will scar children or make them see danger in places where it does not exist. We know that it is critical to their well-being to have a healthy fear of the road and to understand their limitations in order to remain safe. We have to help parents see that the same principle applies to discussions about race.

Breaking the racial "sound barrier" is critical to providing children of color important survival tools to thrive in a world that is not color-blind and where racism still exists. And it is often something that white people (and sometimes people of color, particularly those who are doing more than getting by) are afraid to do. Talking about and understanding racism gives a child a way to see that the racism she/he experiences is not about her/him; rather it's about something bigger than her/him that operates on a societal level.

Nine Principles for Parents to Learn and Practice

First, Last, and In-Between: Talk About It!
It's easy for parents to imagine that since racial differences have become a comfortable part of their own reality that their children must be feeling the same. This is another reminder of how different a parent's experience often is from that of their child. Parents have finally adjusted and become comfortable with their status as an adoptive family; therefore they presume their child has too. Talking openly with their child about the questions he or she confronts and the issues underlying them is crucial. Initiating conversations with children is critical – otherwise parent's voices will be the ones left out of the mix. There is also a risk here of sending an unspoken message that silence about race is expected in the family and is a specific expectation that the parents have of the child.

People will not stop making comments about race and most of the time you won't be there to help your children respond. Parents need to teach their children how to recognize racialized assumptions so that when they are alone they can be assertive and protect themselves. It is of course important to consider the age of the child when developing expectations of what they can learn about responding to racism. Between the ages of seven and twelve, children become concerned with accuracy; in fact it is sometimes hard at this stage to get a child to speculate about things they don't understand or have a full handle on. Children in this age group are capable of a fairly accurate understanding of social relationships, so this is a time when the meaning of racial biases likely to arise for children. These new feelings will not necessary be obvious to the adults in their lives. Children often stop asking questions. But they absolutely do not stop listening.

Parents can talk about race in straightforward and concrete ways with children of all ages. As they move through elementary school years, every child deserves to have a parent who has communicated certain basic truths about the racial landscape of American culture:

- Race and gender come with birth; no one can choose or earn either.
- You are always available to talk about things that concern her about race. Practice talking about race in many contexts so that you won't be nervous when you talk with your child.
- It's okay to be different. The goal is to recognize, accept, include, honor and celebrate the diversity of human beings. As people, we are more similar than different. Our differences benefit us all.
- He is loved and he is not alone.
- She need not let anybody, of any color, limit or define her solely by race or undermine her acceptance of and belief in herself.
- He doesn't deserve bad treatment and is a good person just as he is.
- There is always something she can do. She has all the tools she needs to be attractive, nice, clean, and smart. She will get up every morning and do what she has to do and get up every time she falls down. The answer lies inside him and you believe that he will triumph in the end. I like to tell children that they have an "internal power" and they need to never give it up.
- People who act rudely don't know him and have no right to comment.
- Some people are toxic, always negative. She has every right to be angry when that toxicity is directed at her. It has nothing to do with who she is.
- He is encouraged to talk about oppression and racism AND that he will be taken seriously when he explores the possibility that something might have been directed at him even if a white person who loves him didn't see or experience it the way he did.
- One person can make a difference.
- He is part of a group from whom he can gain strength and comfort.

Parents Need to Handle their Own Feelings.
Many parents secretly hope that if they love their children enough, negative racial experiences won't happen. When their children begin talking to them about racialized experiences they may want to deny or excuse those experiences as something else because it makes the parent feel better. Parents can ask themselves questions such as: "Who am I taking care of now, my own feelings or my child's? Am I ready for this, or what else is going on for me? What if I feel nervous, frustrated, disappointed, embarrassed, guilty, concerned, happy?"

Parents need a safe harbor for parents where they can acknowledge difficult feelings and move beyond them before their children interpret their uncertainty and fear as denial and lack of support. In order to become an ally and advocate for their child the parent must first acknowledge what often feels like a harsh truth to white people; they need to sort out their feelings and fears about their own racism in a safe context without asking their children to participate in their growth.

Confirm That Race Matters.
Children deserve parents who can admit that race will be a factor in the way that they are seen by others in their community. Admitting this not just to themselves but also to their child is often a big hurdle for white parents, who are not used to talking about such things and are often afraid that naming racism will somehow make their child a victim of it, when of course the exact opposite is true.
Parents need to learn and practice how to use conversations as opportunities to hear what their child is thinking and what their child knows, so

they can begin to address the issues and any information gaps accurately. They need to prepare their child to deal with the reality of negative attitudes about race in the same way they prepare him or her to confront other isms. "Did you hear what that little girl said? She doesn't think it's possible for Asian people to be American..." or "Why do you think she assumes that you don't have a father who lives with you?" Parents must be taught how to become proactive in recognizing racial bias and assumptions as well as affirming the importance of this skill to their child. This will allow the children to begin to identify who they can trust and rely on to be their ally.

A corollary to this principle is the often unrecognized commitment to believing a child when they say something might have racial connotations even when the parent is not sure it does. Recognizing a moment like this means that the parent has progressed to a place where they know that racism happens and don't question it, and that they value the necessity of their child developing good antennae to recognize racism in its overt and more subtle forms. When we are teaching young children how to stay safe on the street, we don't chastise them if they are over-careful on an empty roadway, rather we understand that they are honing their skills and learning to practice caution, which we want to encourage. By the same token, white parents must learn to encourage their children of color to explore the possibility of racialized responses and understand that this will sometimes mean that they see danger when it isn't there. But that is so much better than risking them not having the tools to see danger where it is.

Create Some Responses Together.
Negative attitudes are unfair. Being angry about them is an appropriate response along with having other strong feelings including sadness and frustration. Often the hardest emotion for parents to encourage in children is anger, but righteous anger needs to be validated in order for adults to be true resources for helping children (or adults) deal with the unchangeable reality of racism. Acknowledging difficult feelings leads to being able to talk about them. Once anger has been acknowledged, then parents can brainstorm solutions with their children, so that they know they have allies on their side.

In the brainstorming stage, parents can communicate that they understand their child's experience and share strategies and empathy. Sometimes this can even be in a silly or outrageous way! Even though some of these strategies may not ever be used, children's knowledge and memory of these "good" times will become part of their protective armor next time someone approaches them. Examples could be: "Not another one of these comments, sometimes I get tired of it, how about you?" or "Let's play 'remember the dumb thing someone said to us recently about race and think of the most outrageous things we could have said(even though we probably didn't)'." These exercises and discussions are respite in the storm for people of color, and white parents have to learn how to have these kinds of conversations without being defensive or taking care of the other white people who are often the perpetrators of the hurt.

Help Children Plan Ahead.
Kids develop new problem-solving skills in middle childhood. When a child says she has been teased or excluded because of race, parents need to help her to hone and use these skills in the racial arena. Parents need to concentrate on how to support their child and encourage her to express her feelings. The goal is to practice ways to encourage their child to explore the short-term and long-term consequences of his or her possible responses while being sure they are not second-guessing their child's legitimate irritation in response to racism.

Role-playing is a good way for parents to practice calmly asking children to tell them what happened, how it felt, what she did, what else she might have done or wishes she had done. "What would you do if/when it happens again?" "Do you think it would it be better to back off or to take a stand?"

Another tactic for parents is taking the opportunity to talk to their children about experiences they have with racism or racist remarks and then ask their children for suggestions and or feedback about ways they might improve their own responses. This not only creates a balanced give-and-take, it also becomes a great opportunity for them to model a willingness to demonstrate resilience and self-forgiveness when learning new skills. This is critical for all children of color who face challenges that require skill-sets they must practice and improve over time to become effective and happy human beings.

Prepare Children to Handle Problems on their Own.
It is important for parents to remember that their children will spend most of their lives as adults. For this reason, they need to give their children permission to find their own solutions to their own problems. It is important for kids to feel capable of handling their own problems—especially as they are learning about being treated unfairly because of adoption or race. When possible, children need to feel able to handle racism without adult protection as this will lead to more self-confidence the next time something happens. Often white parents, who are used to using their own white privilege (whether they recognize it or not) in addressing unfairness in their world, are particularly quick to try to fix rather than simply offering response to their child like, "Do you want me to do anything?" or "How can I help? or What are your thoughts about this?" which are often far more empowering.

Provide Information and Challenge
Elementary school kids are information gatherers. This is an ideal time to provide children with opportunities to gather realistic images of members of various racial and ethnic groups. This information will then be part of their repertoire of responses to racist comments or actions. "Remember when Juan said people told us that his friends told him he was a sell-out because he joined the science club at school? But now he is a scientist and he is also a strong Latino man, so that can't be right." or "How can black kids with white moms be stupid, Barack Obama is Black with a white mom and he is one of smartest Americans ever!"

Race and racism are important subtexts to much of what children learn in school. The U.S. was founded on the radical principle that "All men are created equal." But our early economy was significantly influenced by slavery. The idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted, and justified social inequalities as natural. As the concept of race evolved, white superiority became "common sense" in America. It justified not only slavery but also the extermination of Indians, exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican lands by a nation that professed a belief in democracy. Racial practices were institutionalized within American government, laws, and society. All of this leads to the important assertion that even though race isn't biological, racism is still real.

Help Your Family Find Other People of Color to Have as Friends

Parents must make sure that their children are able to talk with other adopted kids and adults who have had similar experiences and can provide new ideas on how to react. This promotes their sense of having allies within their world and reminds them that they are not the only ones experiencing this. In hard times this can make a big difference. Without this exposure the only role models for our children will be the same narrow, generally negative stereotypical models from television and the movies that the perpetrator or questioner is espousing. "Did you call _____, to ask her how she used to handle this when she was your age?" or "Was your friend there when it happened? What did she think?" Remember the old adage, "if it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger." Demonstrate every day to your child that making lemonade out of lemons makes us strong. Being part of an adopted family may sometimes introduce issues we wouldn't face otherwise, but also gives us opportunities to grow closer as we learn to rely on each other for support and laughter to get through our challenges.

This is sensitive territory for many transracial adoptive parents. White parents can sometimes get caught up in the debate about whether transracial families are the best parents for children of color or not. Underlying this is the question about whether they need to live in diverse areas or if children can thrive with less diversity as long as their parents are supportive and giving positive messages about race and people of color.

What we know about all human beings is that isolation tends to be hard on us psychologically. We are a socially interdependent species. Belonging is described by researchers as playing a key role in the maintenance of confidence and self-esteem in most people. Each of us needs others who validate our existence and reinforce our cultural identity, acting as mirrors that reflect our own experience. When this reflection is confusing, or does not match with one's self-perception, it leads to isolation or an identity crisis. When others reject us, we are likely to reject ourselves too and internalize feelings of self-loathing or disgust.

Rather than getting involved in debates about whether or not people are entitled to adopt across racial lines based on where they live or with whom they interact, it is much more important for transracial adoptive parents to understand that their children's connections to others who share their experience and have successfully negotiated similar challenges is critical to their long-term well-being. This means that they must create opportunities for their children to interact not just with other children adopted transracially but also with transracially adopted adults and other adults who share their race.

The reality is that most Americans do not live a truly multicultural life on an intimate basis. Most of us eat dinner with, worship with, and engage in other intimate relationships with people who are the same race as we are. This means that transracial families are doing something different, whether they live in diverse areas or not. Racial isolation is often attributed to unconscious choices that influence our lifestyles. Only by bringing those choices into the light of honest analysis will parents be able to make changes.

Transracial adopters who experience a sense of shame at their own lack of knowledge and/or cultural incompetence may find it difficult to reach out for new relationships in their child's racial community because it triggers their own emotions. But it is critical—perhaps the most critical way that parents will support their child's ability to handle and overcome racism—for them to overcome these barriers so they can place their child's needs for connections and racial guides over own comfort. The more they and their children interact with people of color, the less likely they are to believe racist assumptions, because their experience teaches them otherwise.

When Something Bad Happens: Bring Out the Toolkit

- Validate your child's hurt, offer comfort and share feelings.
- Don't imagine your child doesn't notice or hear something that was said in their presence.
- Not talking about it means you condone it.
- Make sure that your child is clear that being blamed may not be related to his or her actions.
- When your child is the target of a racial slur or is treated unfairly, offer him or her a dignified way to regain composure and withdraw from the situation. Saying something like, "I'm going to give the puppy a bath now. Would you like to help?" can provide some respite from the hurt until he is ready to talk some more.
- Model appropriate reactions to racism. Acknowledging that they have a right to be angry, validating the reasons they are angry and commiserating with them about injustices they observe and experience will go a long way toward helping your children work through their feelings and to strengthen the bond between you.
- Revisit issues from previous days that you have had some time to think about. Children love to know that you have been thinking about them over time.
- Help your child to externalize racist remarks rather than internalize them. This is a critical coping skill for children of color if they are to handle the onslaught of negative messages they will likely encounter in their lives. This skill can be developed through the observations and modeled anger of their parents. Example please
- No one can know the perfect way to respond to insensitive remarks all the time. In fact, people commonly respond to racist insensitivity with shocked disbelief and stunned silence. It is only later that we gnash our teeth and think up clever ways to handle the situation. Giving yourself permission to handle racial insults imperfectly is to acknowledge your humanness. Don't be ashamed. It's not you or your children who need to be embarrassed. Use your reaction to process the event with your children. "Wow. Can you believe he said that? My jaw just dropped open; I didn't know what to say! Here's what I wish I had said." Sharing and processing experiences is an important way to externalize racism.
- Sometimes parents of children of color tell them that they have to try twice as hard and be twice as good to convince biased people that they are not bad. A racist will not be changed by a child's "good" behavior. Your child may no longer trust your judgment if you give them advice that doesn't work.
- Don't feel guilty for your race. Especially when you and the person who hurt your child are both white, it is important for your child to hear you acknowledge that some white people really do abuse their power to hurt others.
- Model obtainable goals. Don't add to your child's stress by over-responding to every situation. Prioritize. Fight the battles that make a difference. Children need direction and hope.

In the Trenches – Real Experiences, Real Answers

My Caucasian husband and I have an African American daughter, who has blessed our lives since her birth four years ago. We have struggled to find intercultural friends and connections. My daughter told me yesterday that a preschool classmate, a white girl, told her that white girls can't play with her because she has brown skin. She was saddened by this. I tried to get more details—were there other kids or adults around when this happened, did she tell anyone, how many white girls were there and were they playing together at the time—but I couldn't get answers I was sure about. In any case, something happened, something upsetting, and it makes me sick to my stomach. I tried to tell my daughter that people say things that are unkind without thinking, or because they themselves have been hurt and don't know better, but I lost her attention—I'm still trying to figure out how to talk to a four-year-old about abstract concepts!

Kids notice bias and difference between the ages of two and three. That is adults' cue to begin the discussion that will last a lifetime. The discussion begins by teaching young children facts about race and racism. Fighting racism begins with knowledge, because it counteracts the power of false justifications for face-based prejudices.

This example also highlights a situation where other children are responding with racist attitudes to the transracially-adopted child, something that happens with significant frequency. In response to the questions the parent expressed above, another parent offered this piece of advice:

I sincerely hope your child is not the only African American child in her school. I can't stress that enough. My daughter gets a lot of support from her African American girlfriends at school whenever there are issues of any kind. They have a little sisterhood going that is a source of comfort and validation for her.

We had to look hard to find a school with a substantial African American peer group for her. It's not convenient, it's not cheap, but that is a sacrifice we signed up for when we adopted transracially. I remember that feeling of hurt on behalf of my child, and wanting to take away the pain! We just keep building her up as much as we can and don't let anybody's ignorance bring her or us down....When we teach kids to recognize bias, we are also teaching them how to create change, become strong and protect themselves.

Peer-to-peer interactions like the one described above allow for frank conversations that don't feel judgmental, because all the parents are living the same experience and struggling to find solutions that support their children.

Children can learn to recognize racism, adoptism (the belief that families genetically linked are best) and all other "isms" if we make an effort to point them out when they come up in reading, on TV, in music, or at the movies – as well as in our real lives. Parents can make a family game of trying to spot "isms" of whatever kind. We may not all react to the same things in the same way, but in making a priority of examining the messages embedded in materials, media and conversations, adults are helping children become clearer thinkers. Children can be taught to ask questions like: "What is wrong with this story? Whose feelings would this hurt? To whom is this not fair? Who is left out of the story? Who is being described incorrectly? And (most important of all) what can we do about it?"

Encourage parents to make their commitment to fight racism very clear, even to very young children. This is especially crucial when rejection from others occurs. Involving children in groups that foster appreciation of differences means that parents' social life must also include frequent activities with not only children but also adults of other races. That said, it is also critical that parents be sure they are not setting up their child up to be an ambassador of multiculturalism, but rather are living multiculturalism in a multiracial community. The more diverse her circle becomes, the less often she will be targeted unfairly because of race or ethnicity. Finding support together helps children understand that it isn't just about them.

Of utmost importance is that adults teach children that racial slurs cannot be ignored. While in this particular scenario the family may not decide to respond by going to the teacher (perhaps the daughter's reluctance is telling her parents something about that particular teacher's response to racism or bias in general), there can be no implicit approval of what happened by doing or saying nothing. There are no excuses, in these days of demeaning music, racist jokes, and loose tongues, one thing must clear to kids: their parent has a zero-tolerance policy toward racist remarks and behavior.

Culture and Race are Different – Parents Must Empower their Children Understand Both.

I recently met an African American woman who was really interested when I told her I had adopted from Ethiopia. The conversation was going well, but at one point it seemed the woman became offended that I identified my child as Ethiopian and not as African American. I am involved in a support group specifically designed for Ethiopian adoptees and parents, and I have reached out and made what I feel are good cultural connections to the Ethiopian immigrant community so my child will feel connected to her country and culture. On the flip side, some of the Ethiopian people I am getting to know have very disparaging things to say about African Americans and I am not sure how to respond to this. I don't really understand the issues between these communities and I am not sure how to navigate them, let alone help my daughter do so.

When white parents adopt internationally they have to ask themselves how much of that is because of a politically incorrect hope that "racism" will apply differently to an internationally adopted child as compared to those who are domestically born.

Understanding race in the diasporic sense acknowledges that there is a global phenomenon of anti-Black (brown) sentiment, not just reserved for American Blacks, but for African, Caribbean, and sometimes simply dark-skinned people who aren't even of identifiable African descent. This diasporic "blackness" takes on different cultural meanings in different nations. Yet even if the "black" that is applied to a South Asian in England or the "black" applied to an Aborigine in Australia seems different, we can't ignore the many similarities in the way racism operates

locally and globally.

For a complex combination of reasons, including a desire to maintain their own cultural identity or the wish to avoid being targeted by racists themselves, some immigrants in the United States have found it advantageous to distance themselves from American groups who share their racial roots. Further, some immigrants perceived as "exotic" may more rapidly gain access to privileges or class mobility long denied to African Americans burdened with less flattering stereotypes.

If we place these ideas about international adoption alongside the pattern of immigrant exceptionalism, it can change the way parents think about the dynamics between internationally born and American-born adoptees. If a parent hears a voice inside their head that says, "MY child won't be like that, my child won't be like those other American people of color," then they need to confront the fact that their child is now a person of color in America, and think about what kind of messages they will convey to their child about other people of color. Will they reinforce stereotypical images that pit more recent immigrants who "make something of themselves" against American-born people who "won't get off welfare"? Or will they place the tensions between these communities in historical perspective and emphasize the common experiences they share?

So while the mother quoted above calling her daughter Ethiopian isn't untrue, not acknowledging Ethiopian American or African American as parts of her identity is problematic because it doesn't fully acknowledge all of the identities she has to navigate and hold. Because the parenting goal is to have children confident enough to move through each of these cultural groups with comfort, parents of internationally-born adoptees must consciously encourage and participate in relationships with Americans of their child's racial and ethnic group as well as immigrants living in America.

This dichotomy can be particularly painful for internationally adopted people who describe a struggle to acknowledge their racialized identity while finding that often their cultural identity does not reflect that of others who were born in their home country. This is yet another reason why parents must acknowledge and support racial identity and anti-racist values, because the promotion of culture alone may result in their child feeling isolated based on the difference between their own experience and that of other same-race peers who have grown up with same-race parents (whether they were adopted or not).

Handling Complex Emotions

> *The dreaded question...Last Friday my Guatemalan seven-year-old asked me, "Mom, what does 'wetback' mean?" Of course, we were in the car so there was no escaping! He said he heard it at school and was wondering what it meant. So I explained for the next few miles...that it was a word that was racially loaded and that people often used as a way to imply that Latino people, especially people from Mexico, don't belong in the United States. That in our family we were not going to use it. I spelled it out for him and told him that it would be the only time he would hear it coming from my mouth. I was so scared and I had so much to say, by the time I was done he didn't have much to say.*

The most important thing about these moments is to recognize them as conversation starters. This mom did a great job of sharing information about a racial slur and why she doesn't agree with it, but she didn't seize the opportunity to hear more about the context of the slur and how her son feels about what he heard. Parents need to learn to hear their children's concerns and keep the conversation going so that the child feels both validated and heard. This is never easy and takes practice.

Part of the additional burden of white parents is acknowledging the reality that they are part of the group that is often the perpetrator of racial slurs. When children see adults working through their own racial privilege, the children can believe that they can trust the adults despite their membership in the privileged group that is targeting members of their own racial group. Often white people struggle between shock and guilt at the notion that their "tribe," their "people," are the perpetrators of racism, because they themselves don't engage in active racial insults. This is why it is so critical for them to find community in groups where they can move through these feelings with the encouragement of others who share their desire to become more race-conscious.

"I don't know" or "let me think about that for a while" are valid answers.

Racism is a complicated and persistent problem. Sometimes we need time to clarify our own thoughts and feelings before we can be of help to our children. Unfortunately, we and our children will probably be wrestling with racism for many years to come. Most of the time we can think of their questions as the beginning of an ongoing conversation.

Sometimes children's concerns are pressing. Hurt feelings, anger, and worries all need immediate attention. Sometimes we may decide to talk with other parents or teachers about an incident. We will preserve our children's trust if we involve them in decisions about what actions need to be taken, or at least let them know about our intentions.

Creating Community – the Difference Between Victim and Victor

> My African-Canadian daughter is seven years old. I recently found her scrubbing her skin with a nailbrush. She told me she wanted to be white just like me. I have read many books with her that portray people from other races in a positive light, I have also always talked very positively about her color, and she has black friends at school. I am upset by her desire to change color and I am not sure how to deal with this. Someone recently suggested that having our child be in a setting where she is the only or one of few people of color may be damaging to her self-identity.
>
> We have an African American son, aged 10, who is just finishing elementary school. He is happy, popular, plays sports and has a lot of friends. He does not ever mention having any issues around race or seem to have any problems at school. He

actually seems more comfortable in settings with his white friends than he does in settings with a lot of black people. Do you think this is an issue we should worry about?

There are two common experiences in transracial families: Geographic Isolation and Demographic or Residential Segregation. Geographic Isolation is defined by families who live in white-majority areas that are geographically isolated from people of color—very few if any people of the same racial or ethnic background as the transracially adopted child (or even people of color of different backgrounds) live within the child's field of experience. Not only is it likely that the child growing up in this circumstance is the only person of color in their classroom or school (with the occasional exception of other adopted children), they may also be the only one in their school district, county, or region.

As articulated by Beverly Daniel Tatum in her important book, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria, this kind of isolation is often debilitating for children. Without community, children's ability to develop an integrated feeling of belonging is compromised. Often the goal of parents who live in this circumstance is to minimize what they may see as the dangerous emphasis that society places on race. Ironically, their choice to live in this kind of isolation tends to produce an internal sense in their child that race is central and a multiracial community is critical to feelings of belonging. Many adult adoptees say that their own experience was so out of line with the worldview of their parents that they felt an overwhelming pressure to flee the environment where they grew up in order to find a diverse community where racial identity exploration is commonplace.

When adoptees in such situations become adults, they often disconnect (physically and emotionally) from their adoptive family because they cannot feel comfortable in the parental environment, or they disconnect from their racial group because they cannot feel comfortable in their own skin. The first choice is sad, because of course the adopting parents desire closeness with their children that is at odds with the adult child's need to leave and find a new and often entirely different environment where they see themselves reflected. But perhaps the second outcome, adults of color who do not feel comfortable with people of their own racial and/or ethnic group, is even more painful, since that has been defined by most psychologists as a symptom of self-hate, something that is unlikely to lead to long-term happiness or a well-adjusted life. Adoptees who have grown up in these circumstances are more likely to suffer from depression and/or low self-esteem.

Demographic or Residential Segregation is defined by transracial families who live in white-majority suburbs or neighborhoods that border neighborhoods or areas with many people of color. Here, a different set of messages is delivered to the children in the family. These children often assume that their adoptive parents have made a conscious choice to keep the people of color who live nearby at bay. This sets up a "loyalty test" that puts the adopted child of color in the position of feeling that they must choose between their adoptive parents and making connections to people of their own racial and ethnic heritage. The irony here is that parents leading this lifestyle usually see themselves as accepting towards people of their child's race and often bemoan how "hard" it is to make true friendships across racial and ethnic lines. They insist they have chosen their home's location only in the name of a "better" school district or a "safer" neighborhood. But better for whom? Safer for whom? These parents are making choices that ultimately isolate their child and set up a dynamic that can get very volatile during the teen years. Of course, motivated families can learn to create connections without moving. Interestingly, those families who invest in such connections often find that they become more comfortable with the idea of living in a diverse neighborhood and end up moving.

Children who grow up in this kind of isolation often seek peers of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds during their tween and teen years in a way that exhibits poor judgment in terms of values and/or trustworthiness on the part of the "friends" with whom they connect. Their view often reflects the main stream media's understanding that people of color live in the "ghetto" because they have no personal familiarity with local neighborhoods of color. This is almost always an inaccurate and very dangerous point of view that stems from low self-esteem and an unbalanced view of what it means to be a person of color in America. Transracial parents often do not understand their own role in setting their children up for this kind of imbalance and flirtation or immersion in dangerous behavior and settings.

Parents in transracial families who live in Geographic or Demographic Isolation often protest that their children seem happy and well-adjusted, but children typically try to fit into the life in which they find themselves. However, it is important to remember that being different or "other" is a central reality of these children's existence, and at the same time they are not learning a cultural language that will connect them to people who share and understand this experience of otherness—so even among other people of color, they feel like outsiders. This double-edged sword of racial or ethnic isolation often causes great angst and pain during the teenage and adult years, and can lead to a real disconnect between adoptees and adoptive parents later in life, when adult adoptees realize the cost to them of the choices their parents made (or didn't make).

Don't Pretend the Danger of Racism is Not Real.

The more I read about Trayvon Martin being shot, the more it sounds like his only crime was being black in the wrong place at the wrong time. I want to believe that somehow my own children will be immune to this, but I know that is my fear speaking. I want to blame his parents or his neighborhood, anything to convince myself that I can keep my own black son safe. He is comfortable with so many of our family and friends that are white, sometimes I am proud because he knows so well how to trust and be close but sometimes I am terrified, what if we haven't taught him how to recognize and react to danger when it comes from an unexpected source through no fault of his own?

Courageous conversations about race and adoption take just that – courage. Why does it so often take tragedy, like the murder of Trayvon Martin, to remind us of the dire risks to children of color in the too often dangerous racial landscape that is America? Supporting children while they make sense of race can feel overwhelming, particularly for parents who are white. As young people experience racism in both overt and subtle ways, adults must learn not only to effectively support adoptees of color but also to provide guidance that will help them stay alive and safe. How can adults master their own anxieties about the dangers of raising their children? How do white children in transracial families understand race? How do we have conversations about racism that feel empowering rather than depressing?

Parents need community where they are allowed to process their fears and have them validated AND they have to move beyond the fear into

action and reaction that both acknowledges and empowers their children.

The reality of the danger for children of color of becoming targets of community reactions because of racial profiling is real. If youth are to be prepared, important adults in their lives must step up to the task of warning them about the hazards that exist AND teaching them how to stay as safe as possible in perilous situations.

Real conversations about how to handle confrontation in safe ways are critical. Often this means teaching children to take a non-confrontational stance in the critical moment; and then after the immediate danger has passed, encouraging them to find productive and prioritized ways to fight the racism inherent to the profiling they experienced. Both parts are critical, teaching children how to recognize danger while remaining calm in the immediate face of unfair reactions AND how to fight back once they have found allies and know they are safe.

The goal is strong, proud, racially-connected children who know their parents are anti-racist allies that they can rely on forever.

Knowing who you are and feeling good about yourself doesn't just mean being strong enough to stand up against racism, it means being encouraged to own and embrace all the positive pride that is the experience of being part of a targeted group that refused to succumb to -isms and takes hold of the legacy of being victor rather than victim. This is the essence of handling racism, and for transracially adopted children this means having the opportunity to be loved and embraced not only by their adoptive parents' community but also by the racial community that is their birth right.

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pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

Loosing Lauren

by Rachel Angeline

It has been nearly a month since Lauren left our family. I feel I am now at a point where my thoughts are pretty clear; the clouds have lifted, so to speak. I would like to share my current thoughts and feelings.

We met Lauren's birth mother, Janice, and Janice's parents in April, 1992. This situations sounded perfect in so many respects. The initial meeting was mutually successful. We all decided to move forward together with the adoption plan. This was an exciting, albeit nerve-racking time for all. Throughout the summer, David and I focused on getting to know Janice. As a birth mother myself (I placed my daughter for adoption 13 years ago in a closed adoption), it was very important to me to give this young girl what was not given to me: respect and involvement in the adoption process. We had many discussions with Janice about her willingness to continue with the plan and she assured us that she was committed to this choice. We visited almost every weekend. We became very close over the seven months we knew one another.

As Janice was only 13 at the time, her parents played a large role in this process. We made our best efforts to involve them in decisions, and spoke with them frequently about their own commitment to the plan. There was always the understanding that this was not Janice's first choice, but adoption had not been our first choice either. Her parents, although separated, presented themselves as being committed to the adoption and to their desire to give both their daughter and granddaughter the opportunity for a childhood and a good future.

Lauren was born in August. David and I were invited to the hospital and spent a very exciting day with Janice's immediate family. Her birth was smooth. Janice did a great job and was assisted by the birth father, whom we met for the first time that day. We held Lauren moments after her birth. She was beautiful, very alert and perfect in every way. We brought her home from the hospital the following evening.

After Lauren's birth, we began the process of becoming new parents and working on defining a relationship with Janice and her family. Both tasks brought stresses. Caring for Lauren was a pleasure - trying at times, but rich with the rewards of her smiles and ongoing unfolding and development. We learned that Janice had some very hard days accepting her decision but she continued to go for counseling and we stayed in close phone contact. We allowed her and her parents to see Lauren when they wanted to. The visits seems to be helpful for them, which made them OK for us.

Around Lauren's sixth week, my immediate family convened here to meet the baby. It was love at first sight for all. We asked them to participate in an entrustment ceremony with Janice and her family. Their participation made it a huge success. It was very moving to bring both families together, both committed to the adoption plan and acknowledging the important roles we all played in this process. Their were many tears, laughter and a mutual sense that this adoption was going to work well.

Shortly after this, Janice hit another low. She felt she did not want to go through with the adoption plan. Her second thoughts filled us with terror and dread. Lauren had been with us for eight weeks. It seemed unthinkable to lose her. Janice's parents held firm in their belief that it would not be right for Janice to parent her child at 14 years of age. The situation gradually improved and Janice assured us she planned to sign the consent forms.

But now, something had changed inside of me. The trust that had evolved between us was shaken. I felt in my soul that we would lose this baby. I refused to believe it. I couldn't happen to me twice, could it?

When we got the dreaded call, Janice was hysterical and abusive, a side of her we had never seen before. Her mother had succumbed to Janice's pressure and agreed to parent the baby. I felt this awful sense of "Well, it has finally happened." In a way, it was almost a relief to be released from the uncertainty of the situation. On the other hand, it was too horrible to be true. We prolonged the inevitable for three days. The realization of each "last" was too difficult to bear - the last bath, feeding, smile - and the pain was breaking us up. We decided to take Lauren to the home of one of the adoption facilitators whom we had been working with. She handed Lauren back to Janice and her mother.

The first few days after losing Lauren were spent in a fog of numbness, sadness, tears, rage and more rage. The indignity of the situation was completely infuriating. Messages like "treat people the way you would like to be treated" or "you reap what you sow" came to mind. How could this have happened to us? Much of the anger stemmed from the injustice of losing a baby we had parented and loved for four months. Much was fueled by the lack of sensitivity we felt from Janice and her family. We have yet to hear a word from them offering any kind of explanation or apology for the total disruption of our lives.

Then there was the sadness. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see her. I had her little body memorized. I know exactly how she felt to touch, what her warm weight felt like on my shoulder. I envisioned bathing with her, clearly remembering how freely she moved in the bathtub. These images and others were ingrained in my mind; their recollection brought bring tears to my eyes.

Time, the great healer, is proving its effectiveness. Each day becomes more manageable. There are even times where it feels like it was all a dream. But it really did happen and, miraculously, we have survived. I know we would not be as sane as we are today without the invaluable support of friends and family.

We are as committed as ever to having a family. Adoption is our best choice. We remain committed to having an open adoption. I cannot deny basic information to another birth mother. Time and circumstances will determine how much contact is good for each of us. I want our child to have answers to questions about identity. We are incredibly scared. While I would not recommend this as a way to learn lessons in life, I have certainly gained a lot through this experience. The bond between a mother and child is incredibly strong. While adoption has many benefits, it also coincides with the loss and suffering of others. I believe open adoption has resulted in humanizing the adoption experience for all parties, but the decision to allow someone else to parent your child is still tremendously painful. Despite the extraordinary stress David and I have faced, we know that our experience is not the norm.

David and I are both more sure than ever that we want to be parents. We have faith that, when the rime is right, it will happen again. We have often asked why Lauren came into our lives and left so suddenly. While we will probably never know for sure, we do believe that God has a better plan for us. Lauren's presence was an incredible gift and we are grateful for the time she spent with us.

Postscript:
Three months have passed since we lost Lauren. I am amazed by our ability to survive. It has been especially helpful to meet with others who have shared similar experiences. Our small group met regularly for a few weeks and we were able to share an incredibly personal, painful journey together. It was very healing to know that we were not alone, that this kind of disruption can happen to other sensitive, intelligent and caring people. We understood each others' tears, anger and occasional laughter as we reflected on our situations. We were able to support each other and inspire each other to move forward and let go of the past. Of course, there are still days when the pain is very present, but they are less frequent now and we know we will get through to the other side.

Rachel Angeline is birth mother to a daughter she placed for adoption in 1977, adoptive mother to Elliot and birth mother to Naomi, both of whom she is now parenting.

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Social Media and the Post-Adoption Experience

By Deborah H. Siegel, PhD, LICSW, DCSW, ACSW
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Social networking sites have revolutionized the way we connect with people and are changing the postadoption experience in unexpected ways.

A clinical social worker in private practice sits with her clients, Mark and Charlene, who are the adoptive parents of 14-year-old Ava. As Mark and Charlene tell her the story that brings them to her office, the social worker thinks, "Uh-oh. How do I help these folks manage this novel, complex situation? What principles do I follow here? Are there any best practices?"

"When we adopted Ava at birth, we had an explicit written agreement with her birth parents that we would send them annual letters and pictures via the adoption agency and that Ava could contact her birth parents when she turned 18," Charlene explains. But now, Ava's biological younger sister, who's being raised by Ava's birth parents, has contacted Ava on Facebook. Ava's birth parents didn't know about this contact before it happened because Ava's sister did it from a friend's smartphone. Now the girls are Facebook friends.

All the ins and outs and intrigue of the girls' communications are broadcast on their Facebook walls. As a result, Ava is now in touch with five other biological siblings, four of whom had been adopted by four other families. There is much mental illness, addiction, incarceration, and upheaval in Ava's birth family, and it is unknown what is going on in the other four adoptive families.

Is this contact among the children safe? Should Ava's parents stop it? Is it possible to stop it? If they can't stop it, how do they handle it? Is there any way for the parents to monitor it so they know exactly what Ava is being exposed to and dealing with? Even if they can monitor the contact, how do they handle Ava's questions, feelings, and behaviors stemming from it?

The Social Media Revolution

As extraordinary as this scenario may seem, it reflects a sea change in adoption today. Parents' efforts to control adoptees' access to birth families can be potentially futile given the electronic communication explosion. Most adoptees have a natural, understandable curiosity about their birth families and with the rising number of social networking sites it can simply be easier to find people these days, even with as little information as a unique first name. This is true in international as well as domestic adoptions.

Today, adoptive parents must anticipate and plan for the likelihood of digital contact with birth family members. The outcomes of adoptees and birth family members connecting with each other electronically can ease the anguish spawned by the secrecy and cutoffs in traditional adoption practices. At the same time, electronic communications invite complexities and issues that challenge even the hardiest, wisest, best-prepared members of the adoption circle.

Just as any extended family relationship may engender tumult, there can be intense emotional repercussions when the child is in touch with birth family members without the adoptive parents'

knowledge, guidance, or supervision. In these cases, there may be no protective emotional safety net to help the child handle confusing, overwhelming storms of feelings or make carefully considered choices about how to establish and maintain boundaries or manage complex emotional expectations and demands.

Adoptive parents are affected, too. When they learn about the electronic contact after the fact, they may experience panic, fear, uncertainty, anger, vulnerability, loss, or betrayal as well as delight, excitement, hopefulness, and curiosity. Even when adoptive parents know about the contact beforehand, they may worry about communications that occur without their oversight. They may wonder, "What if a birth family member shares feelings or information that is more than the child is emotionally prepared to process?"

New Forms of Contact

While just a few years ago adoptive and birth parents, often with social workers' help, could aim to control a child's contact with his or her biological families, today social networking sites, text messaging, smartphones, and the Internet have changed the landscape. Even if a child does not have his or her own cell phone or computer, these devices are readily accessible in friends' homes and pockets and at schools and public libraries. A child curious about adoption is free to explore in new and private, unsupervised ways. The child's developmental maturity, temperament, mental health, learning style, and family circumstances all affect how the electronic contact impacts the child.

Unanswered Questions

Families are turning to social workers for guidance when they discover that the children they adopted have been in touch electronically with birth families. Social workers, too, are unsure how to manage the situation. Parents are realizing that the toothpaste cannot be pushed back into the tube; thus, they are asking compelling questions, such as, "Is there an electronic way for us to block the contact? Will our efforts to control electronic contact just turn it into enticing forbidden fruit and drive children underground into more secrecy without our involvement and protection? Are there ways to monitor the contact so we at least can keep an eye on what's going on? If we had known beforehand that this might happen, was there a way to avoid all this in the first place?"

Varying Issues

The issues generated by electronic communications vary depending on the electronic medium used and the type of adoption. The permutations are vast. For instance, when a birth parent's parental rights have been involuntarily terminated by the public child welfare system due to severe abuse or neglect, a birth parent may feel angry, hurt, resentful, and disinclined to support the adoption. This birth parent might use the Internet or social networking to initiate contact with the child to convey messages that, however loving and well intended, might cause distress, such as, "You were stolen from me. If you don't come back to me, I can't go on." The child may feel divided loyalties, pressured, guilty, and responsible.

Voluntary terminations of parental rights in open adoption present a different scenario. For example, even when the birth parents and adoptive parents have fully agreed to stay in touch with each other via e-mail and phone and not use Facebook, other family members may not adhere to this agreement. A birth family member may tell the child an adoption story that differs from the story the adoptive parents have shared, confusing the child.

A set of adoptive and birth parents may have agreed to hit the pause button on electronic contact for a while at the birth parents' request, only to have the adopted child reinitiate it without the adoptive parents' knowledge, thus unintentionally pushing their birth parents away when what the child hoped was to have more intimacy and contact.

Issues also vary based on the electronic medium used. Parents may be able to monitor some forms of electronic contact. If parents have the password to an e-mail account, they can review the child's messages. Parents who look at the child's cell phone may be able to examine the phone numbers dialed and received. However, a child might use Facebook privacy settings to block other parental attempts at monitoring or use a friend's cell phone so parents are unaware that contact occurred.

Guidelines for Social Work Practice

The days when social workers and parents could control an adopted child's access to contact with or information about their birth families are over. In large part, this is an improvement, as we now know that humans have a need for connection with their biological roots and information about themselves. At the same time, we also know that all children, adopted or not, do well with informed, compassionate, skilled structure and supervision, particularly when they may be at physical or emotional risk of harm. Thus, the electronic revolution in adoption presents opportunities as well as problems. Social workers need guidelines for helping families balance them.

One size does not fit all in any aspect of adoption practice. Each adoptive parent needs to determine, hopefully in cooperative collaboration with the child's biological parents, what kinds of contact will best serve this particular child. Today, most infant adoptions in the United States involve some kind of exchange of identifying information and agreement about postadoption contact between the child's adoptive and biological families. This is a major advance toward respecting adoptees' human rights.

Social workers are wise to educate today's prospective adoptive and birth parents about the likelihood of someone other than them initiating electronic contact during the adoptee's childhood. Informed about this possibility, parents can then be guided to lay the groundwork for anticipating this and responding to it when it occurs.

Laying the groundwork has several key elements. For instance, prospective parents need pre- and postadoption information about and support in managing the normal, predictable feelings they and other participants in the adoption circle may have. They may need guidance about ways to create open communication about adoption issues within their household and extended families. They need to learn how to talk to and about all members of the extended family of adoption with compassion and respect. Social workers who find themselves counseling people whose lives are touched by adoption need high-quality continuing education in these areas so they can help parents find the words to talk about difficult adoption facts and feelings in ways that are helpful to the child.

With skilled pre- and postadoption information and support, adoptive parents can learn how to talk with their child about the child's hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties regarding adoption in general and electronic contact with birth family members. Parents can discuss in advance how electronic contacts might be managed. Thinking ahead of time about these matters puts parents in a better position to engage in the child's electronic communications; they can let their child

know, for example, that they will occasionally monitor e-mails, Facebook messages, and cell phone records and will discuss concerns directly with the child and, if need be, with biological relatives involved in the contact. Parents must be familiar with how Facebook works. They must have their radar up for signs that their child is in contact with biological family members, especially in adoptions of children who were abused or neglected by their birth families and where there are court orders barring contact.

Social workers are wise to help adoptive and birth parents establish open, honest, respectful, empathic communication with each other before an adoption occurs, recognizing that adoption is not an event but a lifelong journey that may require recalibration from time to time as the adults' and child's needs change and new issues emerge from one stage of life to another. Social workers should help prospective adoptive and birth parents understand that the adopted child's needs may differ from their own and that the child's needs must come first. With this groundwork laid, families are better prepared to communicate constructively.

A clinician's first impulse upon hearing the adoptive parents' dismay about their young child text messaging and Facebooking a biological family member may be to help the adoptive parents establish their authority by perhaps forbidding the child to use the computer or phone. However, this approach has a strong likelihood of creating a dysfunctional power struggle that cuts off effective communication within the adoptive family, driving the child underground emotionally and electronically. Parents are wiser to create within their family what's called "communicative openness" about adoption and other emotionally laden issues so that no topic (such as sex, money, anger, etc.) is out of bounds.

Adoptive parents should be fully transparent about adoption with their child, using age-appropriate language that honors the child's biological family. They should tell their child the true adoption story from the beginning, including the reasons for the adoption and the birth family's attributes and challenges. Social workers can help parents practice how to tell difficult truths in words the child can understand and that convey compassion and respect for the birth parents. Clearly, children of all ages who have open, honest, straightforward communication with their adoptive parents are in a better position to use their parents as emotional allies when adoption issues emerge.

That said, even children with the best relationship with their adoptive parents might assert their autonomy and go into the digital world on their own, stepping onto emotional landmines. Given this new reality, all prospective adopters need to consider carefully whether they are willing to enter the adoption journey that lies ahead in the electronic era. Social workers should neither overdramatize nor sugarcoat this landscape; rather, they must educate honestly and thoroughly so prospective adopters are empowered to make informed choices about whether to adopt and how to respond to normal developmental crises, including electronic ones.

Caroline Peacock, LCSW, in the Spring 2011 Friends in Adoption newsletter, suggests other guidelines birth families and adoptive parents might want to consider. Possibilities include the following:

• Begin the adoption with explicit boundaries about what kinds of contact the birth family and adoptive parents will have with each other, which adoptive and birth family members will participate in the contact, and how frequently contact will occur.

• Create a separate, unique e-mail address for communication. Agree to use this instead of social networking sites so there is more privacy and so adoptive and birth parents can exercise some sort of oversight over electronic communication that may involve children.

• If using social networking sites, engage the greatest privacy settings to avoid disseminating confidential material about the child or that expands the possibility of others initiating contact.

• Be cautious about accepting friend requests on social networking sites, as these requests can open a Pandora's box of relationships.

Research-based practice and policy guidelines to help social workers support families coping with electronic communications in adoption do not yet exist; thus, adoptive families are adventurers in a brave new world in which people are wandering without a map.

In blowing secrecy out the window, electronic communications in adoption open new possibilities as well as issues. These changes promote a new sense of extended family formed by adoption, one that involves all kin. While a generation ago social workers thought that adoption was an event that should be shrouded in secrecy, today it is clear that people's need for connection with their biological heritage is an imperative that must be recognized and honored across the life span. Social workers have the responsibility to educate themselves about the new frontier of adoption issues so they can empower families knowledgeably.

— Deborah H. Siegel, PhD, LICSW, DCSW, ACSW, is a professor in the Rhode Island College School of Social Work, a clinician specializing in adoption issues, an adoption researcher, and an adoptive parent.

Adoption Resources

Although Adoption Promises seeks to provide relevant resources, please understand we make no claims on the effectiveness of these articles.

Books on Adoption

The Connected Child
by Dr. Karyn Purvis, Dr. David Cross, and Wendy Sunshine

A Child's Journey through Placement
by Vera Fahlberg

Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew
by Sherrie Eldridge

The Whole Life Adoption Book
by Jayne E. Schooler

Adoption without Fear
by Jim Gritter

Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families -- and America
by Adam Pertman

Adoption Is a Family Affair!: What Relatives and Friends Must Know
by Patricia Irwin Johnston

Post-Adoption Blues
by Karen J. Foli

Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past
by Betsy Keefer & Jayne E. Schooler

Loved by Choice: True Stories That Celebrate Adoption
by Susan Horner

A Love Like No Other
by Pamela Kruger & Jill Smowloe

Adoption Websites & Online Resources

www.adoptivefamilies.com

www.adoptionlearningpartners.org

www.lifesongfororphans.org/adoption-funding/resources/

www.pactadopt.org

www.childwelfare.gov/adoption

http://ichooseadoption.org/

Books on Infertility

Adopting After Infertility
by Patricia Irwin Johnston

Surviving Infertility
by Linda Salzer

Infertility: The Emotional Journey
by Michelle Hanson

Labor of the Heart: A Parent's Guide to the Decisions and Emotions in Adoption
by Kathleen Whitten

Additional Adoption Resources

Although Adoption Promises seeks to provide relevant resources, please understand we make no claims on the effectiveness of these articles.

Books on Adoption & Parenting

Adoption Parenting; Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections
by Jean MacLeod & Sheena Macrae, PhD

Parenting from the Inside Out
by Daniel Siegel & Mary Hartzell

Brothers and Sisters in Adoption
by Arleta James

Raising Adopted Children
by Lois Melina

Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child
by Holly van Gulden & Lisa M. Bartels-Rabb

How to Raise an Adopted Child
by Judith Schaffer & Christina Lindstro

Books on Open Adoption

The Open Adoption Experience
by Lois Melina and Sharon Roszia

The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole
by Lori Holden & Crystal Hass

Open Adoption, Open Heart: An Adoptive Father's Inspiring Journey
by Russell Elkins

Making Room in Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties Through Open Adoption
by Micky Duxbury

Books on Adoption for Children

I'm Adopted!
by Sheila M. Kelly & Shelley Rotner

Searching for...the You We Adore
by Valerie Westfall

How I Was Adopted
by Joanna Cole

Flora's Family
by Annette Aubrey

I love my hair!
by Natasha Tarpley

Rain or Shine
by Hilary Horder Hippely

Carolyn's Story: A Book About an Adopted Girl
by Perry Schwartz

We See the Moon
by Carrie A. Kitze