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10 Things Adoptees Want You to Know

I was adopted as an infant, during a time when adoption was still shrouded in secrecy. My experience is not unique, but it is important. Here are ten of the ten thousand things adoptees want the world to know.

By Lesli Johnson, Contributor

Marriage and Family Therapist specializing in adoption-related issues

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I was adopted as an infant, during a time when adoption was still shrouded in secrecy. My birthmother kept her pregnancy hidden from her family for nearly seven months. Her parents and my biological father's parents agreed she would be sent away to have me. She birthed me in a sterile room, frightened, with no familiar faces and no compassion for her situation. I was taken from her before she even had a chance to see me. Back then, this was considered acceptable. Today, we realize that this separation is traumatic for both the mother and the child, and we recognize that early experiences have a disproportionately large impact on the structure of the brain. I spent 82 days in foster care until I went home with my adoptive parents. My parents felt they were being "open" when they told me I was adopted, but no one helped me understand what adoption was. None of my friends were adopted, or maybe they just weren't talking about it. Adoption was a big secret but I thought about it often. I wondered if my best friend's mom might be my "real" mom. I wondered what was so wrong with me that my birth mom gave me away, and was she going to come back? I loved my family, so this idea caused great anxiety. I struggled to complete family tree and genealogy assignments in school.

I went to therapy for the first time when I was 6 years old because I had begun to suffer from sleep issues and crippling separation anxiety from my mom. I'd begin each day worrying that my mom might forget to pick me up at school. Although she was always there, part of me knew I had been abandoned before and my child self believed it could happen again. Slumber parties and overnights at grandma's house were fraught with "nervous stomachs" and invented earaches. Were my parents coming back? I desperately needed someone to help me understand my feelings. Unfortunately, my child therapist was not that person. I went twice. I drew pictures of pumpkins. Adoption was never mentioned.

I returned to therapy in my twenties, fresh out of college and anxious about pretty much everything. It took two years before I even mentioned that I was adopted. It wasn't on my therapist's radar to ask, and I was conditioned to believe it was irrelevant. It wasn't until graduate school that I really began to explore how my adoption shaped me. I began to connect the dots of my story and ask questions. I met my birthmother and her family and two years ago, I searched for and found my birth father's family. He's no longer alive, but I have pictures of him. For the first time in my life, I see someone I resemble.

My experience is not unique, but it is important. I now understand that the main reason adoptees don't talk about their struggles is generally the same. When we are young, we don't have the ability to identify our experience and articulate our feelings. As an adoptee gets older, if no one is talking about adoption, we get the sense that our feelings won't be understood or validated. I'm now a [therapist](#) myself and have worked extensively with adoptive families. In my work I strive to help this generation of adoptees, adoptive families and birth parents to have a different experience than I did.

Here are ten of the ten thousand things adoptees want the world to know.

1. Adoptees want their adoptive parents to prepare emotionally and psychologically before they bring them home to become a family.

It's helpful when parents have done their own psychological work before adopting and continue to be aware of their on-going experience as it relates to adoption. It's important for adoptive parents to grieve their inability to conceive a biological child if this is why they chose to adopt. Adoption is not a substitute for having a biological child nor is it a way of "replacing" a child who dies. Adoption IS one of many ways to make a family.

Adoptive families benefit when parents continue to educate themselves on relevant issues related to adoption and access support when necessary. Many communities now have various

support groups for all members of the adoption constellation. If your community doesn't, why not start one?

2. The adoptee's experience is REAL.

Adoptees want you to know their experience is real and that no one can "fix" it. It's difficult for parents to see their children struggle with the complexities of adoption. They want to make things better and alleviate suffering. Parents cannot eliminate the pain of their child's past experience. However, they can provide a safe place for their child to explore current feelings about adoption at various stages of life in order to help their child integrate the experience more fully. The adoptee wants and needs validation of their feelings, and a compassionate presence. They want to know it's always okay to talk about adoption and ask questions.

In cases when trickier questions arise, parents might consider waiting to respond rather than being caught off-guard, giving a quick, less thought-out answer that they have to go back and fix later. In a recent episode of "Modern Family," Mitchell is reading a bedtime story to his young, adopted daughter Lily about a "beautiful princess in a faraway land." They are both visibly tired and as Lily begins to nod off, she asks questions about her birth mom. "Was I in my mom's belly?" "Where's my mom now?" Mitchell replies, "She's in a faraway land." He adds, "Because she's a princess and she's very, very busy." Lily, seemingly satisfied, drifts off to sleep. Mitchell's answer creates a fantasy for Lily and she feels compelled to dress up each Halloween as a princess in the hope she'll find her mommy. Her dads are later able to talk with her and the made-for-TV-moment is neatly wrapped up but sometimes it's wiser for parents to wait to answer questions. Parents can say to their child, "I can see your question is important to you. Let me think about it and we'll talk first thing in the morning." Offer a specific time and follow through. This allows space for parents to consider the question, talk with their partner and seek guidance from [a therapist](#) to provide a well thought out answer.

3. The adoptee needs help to make sense of their "story."

Healing occurs with the repetition of a story, especially in the case of children. When a child gets hurt they repeat the story over and over. "I fell off the swing, and cut my knee, it bled, and daddy got me..." They repeat the story to mommy, to the postman and to the cashier at Trader Joe's. This [repetition allows the experience to become integrated](#) into their system as a whole. Similarly, young adoptees want parents to be comfortable with their adoption story and repeat it to them so they can know their story and tell it with ease.

Adoption language can be tricky. Avoid words like "chosen" and "special," as they are loaded. The phrase "She loved you so much she wanted you to have a better life" is near impossible for a child to understand. Instead, use language like, "Adoption was a decision the adults made." "We love you and we are a family." Emphasize that your child had nothing to do with the decision and more importantly, did nothing to create the situation. Adoptees need help with specific language and "tools" to use when they are asked questions by friends and classmates to eliminate potential shame and embarrassment. I suggest parents and children role-play possible scenarios to find answers that fit. For example:

Q: "So, who is your real mom?"

A: "My mom is at home taking care of my baby brother. I also have a birth mom."

"That's my private business," is always acceptable if the adoptee chooses.

4. Many adoptees struggle with issues of self worth, shame, control and identity.

Often, adoptees acclimate in one of two ways. Some might test limits, trying to discover if they are going to be abandoned again. Others acquiesce to situations, sometimes to the point of withdrawal. Hoping if they go along, they will keep their place in the adoptive family. The adoptee is forced to develop a "false self."

Many adoptive parents I've worked with describe their children as defiant and uncooperative, angry, testing out and manipulative. I encourage them to become curious about the behavior, rather than judging or naming it. As we utilize the lens of adoption, we can see the underlying experience that's driving the child's behavior and then tend to the raw feelings of fear, grief, despair and anger. Remember, the behaviors are coping mechanisms and not personality traits. Adoptees need parents to be curious and act as compassionate detectives to discover what's going on or seek professional help if it seems too difficult to do it on their own. Because an adoptee's early experience was that of relinquishment, their brain is wired early on to expect more of the same. Sometimes older adoptees unknowingly set themselves up to re-create abandonments, thus fulfilling the sense of shame and unworthiness. Not having access to the original birth certificate adds to the adoptee's sense of shame. Only eight states in the U.S. allow adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates. Adoptees in other states have modified and falsified documents. Where there is secrecy, there is inevitable shame.

5. Adoptees are in reunion whether they are formally searching or not.

I recently presented at an adoption conference and had the members attending my session participate in a quick exercise before they took their seats. I asked them to walk around the room and find the person they thought they most closely looked like. After a few minutes and some nervous laughter, I had them take their seats and we talked about what that experience was like. I explained that this is what adoptees often do. They walk through the world looking for their lost "twin" or for someone they resemble. The author Betty Jean Lifton calls this living in the "Ghost Kingdom." It's the place where adoptees can go and "hang out" with their birth relatives and imagine life if they hadn't been adopted.

Years ago, I worked with a 12-year-old girl who was adopted at birth. Julia's parents described her as "angry, oppositional, and living in her own world." They explained hers was an open adoption and they knew her birth mom. They told me they answered Julia's questions related to adoption when asked but

added they rarely brought the subject up. They didn't think she was interested.

I quickly discovered Julia was very interested in who she was and where she came from. She was indeed living in her own world -- the Ghost Kingdom! Julia explained she likely shared her hair and eye color with her birth mom.

"She must like to dance because I do," Julia said.

She planned to live with her birth mom for one year when she turned 18. Julia "knew" she had six brothers and "hopefully a little sister." Julia had much to tell and I suspected part of her anger was that no one else seemed interested in her internal world. Kids Julia's age aren't going to initiate a conversation about adoption unless they are 100% sure it's safe to do so. They want their parents to start these dialogues.

6. The adoptee's desire to search is not a rejection of the adoptive parents.

Part of knowing who you are is knowing where you came from. Search is about the adoptee's history and histories have a beginning. For adoptees, their beginning started before they joined their adoptive family.

Many adoptees deny their desire to search thinking that they are going to hurt their adoptive parents' feelings. This is a common theme, even among adoptees who have their adoptive parents' support. Adoptees want and need assurance and more assurance that parents can "handle" the desire to know where they came from. Adoptees might even want their parents to collaborate and assist in the search.

Because they fear hurting the adoptive parents, many adoptees wait until one or both parents are dead to search. They embark on a search only to discover that their birth parent is also dead. The adoptee then suffers a second loss of the parent he or she never knew.

7. Adoptees want to belong. They want to connect and feel connected.

Like everyone else, adoptees strive to find connection and acceptance. Although this idea of affiliation is sometimes inherent with those we are biologically related to, adoptees can find connection through support groups, interaction with other adoptees or identification with their birth country. Adopted children can be encouraged to develop interests and hobbies in line with their adoptive families. Interests and hobbies that are diverse should also be fully embraced, encouraged and supported.

8. Adoption is hard.

When an infant or child is separated from his or her birthmother, it is undeniably a traumatic event. All of the once-familiar sights, sounds and sensations are gone, and the infant is placed in a dangerous situation -- dangerous that is, perceived by the infant. The [only part of the brain that is fully developed at birth](#) is the brain stem that regulates the sympathetic nervous system, that is, the fight, flight or freeze response. The parasympathetic ability to self-soothe isn't available and baby needs his or her familiar mom to act as the soothing agent to help with self-regulation but she's not there. Events that happen age 0-3 are encoded as implicit memories and become embodied because they place before language develops. Adoptive parents can be sensitive to this and later help put explicit language to the felt experience for their child.

Sometimes birthdays and Mother's Day are difficult for adoptees and they might not even know why. Birthdays are often the day adoptees were relinquished and again, that memory of separation is an implicit one, just a feeling. I've worked with parents who become frustrated after planning a big celebration and their child suddenly becomes sad and no longer wants to participate. Parents can empathically respond to a child who is struggling by saying, "I wonder if part of you remembers this is also the day your birthmother made the difficult decision to have someone else raise you." Mother's Day can be hard because as an adoptee is celebrating with his or her adoptive mom, no one is acknowledging or talking about the "other mother," that is, the first mother. Parents can "say" what is not being said by celebrating and acknowledging their child's birth mom.

9. We want adoptive parents to be our advocates.

According to the Adoption Institute, there are more than [1.5 million adopted children in the United States](#). The Center for Adoption Support and Education states that [60% of Americans have contact with adoption](#) in some way.

The school environment can be a great support for adopted children and their families if teachers and administrators are comfortable and informed about the subject, language and issues related to adoption. Trainings need to be implemented in schools to inform and educate about adoption and foster care in the same way educators are trained and informed to the sensitive issues related to race, sexuality, gender and religion. Parents can ask if programs like this are taking place in their schools.

I have a friend who adopted her sons Andrew and Jake when they were infants. The brothers are not biologically related and are different races. Andrew is African-American and Jake is Caucasian. In September, they found themselves in the same Biology class. On the first day of school, the students went around the room introducing themselves. Andrew introduced himself as Jake's brother. The teacher glanced at the only other black student in the class and told Andrew to "quit messing around." Andrew shyly explained they were adopted. The teacher still thought the boys were trying to "punk him." It wasn't until several minutes later the teacher stopped pressing the issue but not before both boys were quite embarrassed. Had proper trainings been implemented, this would not have happened.

10. Adoption is a lifelong process.

Separations, relationships and transitions may be difficult hurdles throughout the lifespan for those whose earliest experience was separation from their birthmother. Attuned parents can help their children and adolescents navigate these events and ideally these experiences will be integrated along the way. In time, adoptees can eventually acquire what Dan Siegel calls "Mindsight" or "the kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our minds and examine the processes by which they think feel and behave..."

As adoptees understand the details of their story, make sense of their feelings and triggers as they relate to adoption, they can cultivate resilience and learn to respond rather than react - a skill that offers more freedom of choice in day to day actions and provides an overall sense of well-being.

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