

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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Putting the Pieces Together *The Significance of the Child's Story*

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Curiosity about who we are, where we came from, and our significance in life is universal. Today, opportunities abound to search family history to fill in the missing pieces of the past, whether a family member shares stories from one generation to the next or we search on social media and genealogy websites for clues. For many adopted persons their life story has missing parts and unanswered questions—and, as a result, some may feel like their identity is an incomplete puzzle.

This article addresses the importance for children who were adopted to learn about their biological family and their origins, to have their life story preserved accurately and completely, and for that story to be easily assessable. In the past, transparency in sharing about a child's history and maintaining biological connections has been limited in adoption practice in an attempt to protect the child, birth parents, and adoptive parents. Efforts to maintain anonymity for the biological parents, and adoptive parents, resulted in the adopted person having limited or no information about their history. Adoption professionals today recognize that that level of secrecy ultimately served no one's best interests.

Adoption practice is evolving with more recognition that transparency in sharing information early on benefits the health and well-being of all parties, including adopted persons. Today, there is increasing openness in adoption, more information passed on, and more connections being



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maintained across time. Although improvements have been made, barriers still remain for adopted people to seek and find the missing pieces of their sacred life story.

Life Before Placement

The child's life began before being placed in the adoptive home. The child's full history is an inherent part of his or her identity. To develop a secure sense of identity, we all need to feel a sense of belonging to family. Our sense of identity develops as we create a coherent narrative joining the past with the present. When the birth family history is not known or is limited, the adopted person's history is fractured and incomplete.

Why is Preserving a Child's Story Important?

"In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning; no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness." – Alex Haley (Roots)

Children as young as two and three years of age begin to ask questions about their place in the world and their identity. They see a pregnant woman and ask their parent if they came from their mom's tummy. Children of color will have questions about why they may have a different color of skin compared to their parents. Children being raised in a family who looks different from them may wish to look like the people raising them out of a desire to belong and feel connected.

Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Marantz share in their book, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, "when problems emerge in an adoptee's life as part of normal adjustment, the most pervasive feeling is an overwhelming sense of loss. The loss inherent in adoption is unlike other losses we have come to expect in a lifetime, such as death or divorce." Adopted people who are raised with knowledge of their life story and have opportunities to grieve losses with safe and supportive parents are likely to develop a more integrated sense of self, making them less vulnerable to psychological distress throughout life.¹

Dr. Daniel Siegel, M.D. and Dr. Bruce Perry, M.D. have advanced research about the impact of trauma and loss on the developing brain. They suggest that "emotion operates as a central organizing process within the brain ... so an individual's abilities to organize emotions ... directly shapes the

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¹ For more David M. Brodzinsky, Ph.D., Marshall D. Schechter, M.D., and Robin Marantz Henig, *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), page 9.

ability of the mind to integrate experience and adapt to future stressors.”² To help heal early trauma and loss, there needs to be a link between the feelings that originate in our non-verbal part of the brain (amygdala) and our thinking/rational brain (cortex) to bring forth words to create a coherent narrative. This helps us make sense of the past and link the past with the present and future. It is important for parents to meet the child where they are developmentally in discussing their life story, providing them loving support, helping them learn how to regulate their stress-response to fears about losses, and letting them share and ask questions at their pace.³

Adoptive parents who have a securely attached parenting style are most effective in nurturing the child’s spirit to help them make sense of their past, begin healing, and develop emotional resilience throughout life. The parent serves as a secure base for an adopted child by building trust and safety, being present, and helping the child develop a voice to share feelings of significance and belonging in the world.⁴

Parents raising adopted children can build intimacy and help their children develop a sense of belonging by having a willingness to talk about their past and to answer questions as a normal conversation through each developmental stage. To ignore and avoid helping a child make sense of who they are and where they have come from rejects part of the child, and creates disconnection between the parent and child.

The Role of Adoption Professionals

In all types of adoption practice, professionals, agencies, and attorneys have the responsibility to make every effort to collect and verify the authenticity of all the available health, social, educational, and genetic histories about a child and their biological parents to share with the prospective parents prior to placement.

Additionally, the adoptive family needs to be proactive in gathering the child’s background information and passing this on to their child over the years to come. It becomes much harder to fill in the blanks to unanswered questions years after an adoption.

² For More Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., *The Developing Mind, How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York, NY: Guilford, 1999).

³ For More Jeanne Supine, “*The Long Shadow: Bruce Perry on the Lingering Effects of Childhood Trauma*,” *The Sun*, 2016, 4-13. and the ChildTrauma Academy website, <http://childtrauma.org/>.

⁴ For More Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper, Bert Powell, with Christine M. Benton, *Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting can Help You Nurture Your Child’s Attachment, Emotional Resilience and Freedom to Explore* (New York, NY: Guilford, 2017).

After placement, as more information becomes available, professionals need to inform families and make note in the child's record. It is up to everyone involved with child placement—foster care and adoption practices, biological family, kinship family, adoptive parents, adoption professionals, and courts—to ensure adopted persons will be provided accurate and complete information about their history as they grow and develop.

Professionals who place children for adoption have the ethical obligation to provide post-adoption services to adoption triad members (adopted persons and biological and adoptive parents) who request access to records and need follow-up services long after adoption placement. As an agency that has placed children for adoption for over 100 years, Buckner International regularly has adopted persons, birth families, and adoptive parents request post-adoption services years after placement. Agencies and adoption professionals need to be ready and able to serve.

How Do Adopted Persons, Birth Families, and Adoptive Parents Seek Information?

It is best to first contact the adoption agency, professional, or attorney who facilitated the adoption when wanting to access information. Most U.S. states seal adoption records from the public. States have different laws about how long adoption records should be maintained, how to access them, and what information can be given, whether it is non-identifying or identifying information that can be shared. Additionally, states, and some adoption agencies, offer mutual consent registries for adoption triad members who express interest in making a connection with another party. Intercountry adoption records from a child's country of origin are most often closed and not accessible to the public. Information may be obtained from a child's former orphanage, foster home, or extended biological family members depending on the circumstances.

Experienced adoption agencies that provide post-adoption services and have contacts where the child was adopted can help a family navigate the complex nature of search and reunions, both in the U.S. and in the child's country of origin. When adopted persons and birth families have utilized all the resources and guidance adoption professionals can provide, they are increasingly seeking information and connecting with each other through social media, private investigators, or volunteers to assist. These avenues can provide an opportunity for biological parents and adopted children to fill in some of the missing pieces of their stories.

When an agency closes, adoption records may be transferred to another licensed adoption agency or other designated authority to be maintained according to that state's laws. Unfortunately, it becomes more difficult to find and access adoption records when agencies close, attorneys retire, and when the laws are restrictive. The Child Welfare Information Gateway offers an online directory of foster and adoption resources. This directory can be helpful to locate an adoption agency or state agency that assisted with a domestic or intercountry adoption.⁵

Additionally, an informative article from the Child Welfare Information Gateway website, *Access to Adoption Records, 2015*, provides a guide for adopted persons, birth parents, and adoptive parents on the topic with state-by-state information.⁶ It is wise for the adoption community to stay up-to-date about policy and legislative reforms that can impact access to adoption information.

Advice for Families Parenting Adopted Children

Talking with adopted children about their life story can sometimes be uncomfortable for parents, especially if there was a difficult history or when there are more questions than answers. Some adoptive parents may avoid talking about the past due to an underlying fear of traumatizing the child or thinking the child would reject them and seek their birth family.

Children who are raised in a closed family, filled with secrecy, are more at risk of feeling a part of themselves has been rejected, and they are at risk of developing psychological problems. When a parent provides a secure base for the child and provides an open door, always willing to discuss their background, losses, and life story, the parent and child will strengthen their relationship.

Below, are some helpful tips for foster and adoptive parents:

- Create a Lifebook for the child that begins *before* they were adopted. A Lifebook is a chronological record of the child's life story to help them learn and make sense of the past, how they transitioned to the present, and prepare them for the future. Add meaningful stories and mementos from over the years. Include the child in creating the Lifebook to encourage dialogue, time for questions and sharing. The more the adopted person knows, the more secure they will feel in their sense of belonging. Beth O'Malley, a social worker who lived in foster care and was later adopted, has an informative book and website with resources

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⁵ For more on "National Foster Care & Adoption Directory." Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2017. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>

⁶ For more on "Access to Adoption Records." Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015, pages 1-60, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/infoaccessap.pdf>

about creating a Lifebook and the Child Welfare Information Gateway also offers Lifebook resources.^{7,8}

- Integrate affirming parent-child activities like reading books or renting movies with adoption themes (*Superman* or *Free Willy*, to name a couple); making cards for their birth family for Mother's Day and Father's Day; acknowledge the birth family on the child's birthday, graduation, and other special times; talking about their birth country, culture, race, and origins; and imagining the birth parents if they are not known: their interests, what they might look like, and map out where all the family members are from.
- Help adopted children become connected with others like themselves by intentionally developing friendships with other adoptive families and children in the community, school, church, and other supportive places. Having others who have similar life experiences and racial mirrors will help a child not feel as isolated or different. This is especially important in transracial adoptions with children of color who are raised in families who look different than them. Seek role models and friends who mirror the adopted child.
- Participate in support groups geared for specific groups including adopted people, adoptive parents, and birth parents, to help feel connected with others with similar life and cultural experiences.
- Participate in counseling as needed (family, individual, group counseling) throughout the child's development to help identify and make sense of trauma and losses, validate feelings, find meaning from the losses, and explore belongingness, identity, and self-concept.
- Participate in heritage events and heritage tours to the child's birthplace, to celebrate and embrace the unique heritage the child brings to the family, and show respect and honor to this important part of the child's identity.
- Prepare the child with a healthy understanding of their life story prior to them starting school. Parents should help the child be prepared and able to respond and set boundaries when people ask about their past. Additionally, the child needs to know it is okay to ask their parents and teachers for help when faced with questions, bullying, and when they have school assignments that involve sharing family history, as in creating a family tree or sharing baby photos.⁹
- By the time the adopted person launches out of the home as a young adult the parent should share copies of adoption paperwork, legal paperwork, birth certificates, citizenship documentation, biological family information,

⁷ For More Beth O'Malley, *Lifebooks: Creating Treasure for the Adopted Child*. (Adoption Works, 2011), 96. <http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com/adoption-lifebook-guide.htm>

⁸ For More on "Lifebooks." Child Welfare Information Gateway. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/postplacement/lifebooks/>

⁹ https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/NCEA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO27.pdf

the Lifebook, letters, photos, videos, and shared stories that are not written. Parents need to be responsible to keep up-to-date any legal documents that may expire, like citizenship documents, and explain the importance of the documents to the young adult and how to manage those.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations

- Ongoing education can help adoptive parents empathize with what their child, teen, and young adult experiences and needs to thrive. Find opportunities to learn from adult adopted persons to gain an inside perspective.
- Along with all the good that comes out of an adoption, it cannot be ignored that adoption is not possible without significant losses. The adopted person lost the opportunity to be raised by his or her birth parents, the birth parents did not have the opportunity to raise their child, and in some circumstances the adoptive parents lost the ability to have a child biologically. These losses resurface at every developmental stage across the lifespan. If adoption is only celebrated in our society and we minimize or dismiss the significant losses that came from adoption, then everyone involved is more likely to experience unresolved grief, disconnected relationships, and missed opportunities for healing together.
- The child's life story will involve difficult information, but they deserve to know the truth at developmentally appropriate times, to understand why the adoption occurred. Speak with adoption professionals for advice about what to say to children. The earlier the parent begins to talk with the child about their past the more likely the parent-child relationship will be enriched.
- The child's story belongs to them. Be sure to honor privacy and not share with friends and family information the adopted person does not know and would not appreciate being shared with others. There are few things the adopted person can control in their life, so let their story be theirs to share. As a wise professional once said, "let the child be the witness" for how we choose to handle a child's information and keep their story sacred.
- If the adopted child expresses a desire to search for birth family, be supportive of the child and seek help from the adoption agency or other experienced adoption professionals to provide sound counsel, particularly when the child is still a minor. Searching for birth family through social media is becoming more common, but there can be heart-breaking or even dangerous results when turning to untrustworthy resources. Parents who are not open to an adopted person's curiosity about searching will miss the opportunity for a shared experience.

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- Foster a loving environment of openness, honesty, and safety for conversation with the child about their life. Acknowledge there are many ways to create families to normalize adoption and the importance of the biological and adoptive family.

Putting together the pieces of our life, where we came from, who we are, and where we belong is a universal desire. Each person has value and life purpose. The adopted child may not feel he or she has value or purpose after feeling rejected, separated from loved ones, experiencing broken attachments, and having traumatic losses. It is up to supportive parents to help the child feel safe, provide a nurturing environment where they can make sense of their life story, bridge the past with the present, and to create new shared memories, a sense of belonging, and resiliency for their life ahead.

Additional References

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