

Adoption Advocate



Unwrapping Opportunities for Adoptive Families During the Holidays

BY ELISE LOWE

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At various times throughout the year, we are immersed as a culture in times of annual celebration that are strongly linked to traditions, memories, friends, and family. Which holidays are celebrated, and how they are celebrated, is also strongly tied to religious and cultural background. Families often repeat the same rituals, passed down through generation after generation of shared history. We pull out an old recipe card and bake the same cookies that our grandmother baked, or unbox a decades old menorah to light up for another year, or gather around the television to count down in national unity as the ball drops at midnight in Times Square.

So, what does all of this emphasis on tradition and family mean for those families that have been formed by adoption? In our experience, it can mean that there are some unique challenges that must be addressed and navigated in these seasons. But it also means that there are unique opportunities that we can take advantage of at these times. When handled well, the same areas that can pose difficulty at the holidays can also provide powerful opportunities for growth, connection, and healing.

This article identifies several important tasks for adoptive families and provides suggestions on how to respond in ways that strengthen bonds and reinforce the family unit.

Tasks and Opportunities for Adoptive Families

Be a Curious Listener

Holidays naturally lend themselves to storytelling. Through children's books, familiar songs, or nostalgic films, we find ourselves immersed in the same stories year after year. This emphasis on storytelling provides a natural opportunity to learn more about your child's life before entering your family, especially for those that have recently finalized an adoption. Perhaps there was a certain celebratory meal that was traditional in your child's birth family. By taking a curious stance, parents can gently seek to learn more about their child's story, in hopes of incorporating some of the traditions they had grown accustomed to. In addition to providing a sense of comfort and normalcy within the home, this communicates to the child that we are listening when they share about their history, and we are eager to learn. There may

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also be more natural opportunities this time of year to check in with your child and discuss feelings that are more difficult to express. Parents can use speculative questions such as, “I wonder if this time of year brings back memories of times that you used to spend with your birth mother?”¹ The child is then able to share as much, or as little, as they are comfortable discussing at that time. The important piece here is the message that the adoptive parent is sending by asking the question. They are acknowledging the child's life prior to being placed in their adoptive family and communicating their willingness to hear about how that may be impacting them. By being sensitive to times when the child may be more open to discuss their memories and feelings, adoptive parents can create a culture of openness within the home.

Integrate Attachment-Building Activities

By highlighting family dynamics, holidays can also underscore the new roles that exist after finalization. Being mindful of tangible opportunities to incorporate the child as a

member of the family is an important part of building attachment after finalization. These opportunities also exist during the holidays in ways that they may not at other times of the year. A holiday card that announces a new family member, another stocking hung by the fireplace, and even silly traditions like matching pajamas send a powerful message to the child: *You are part of our family, and we will include you, because you belong here and your belonging is permanent.* Some children who have spent significant time in institutionalized care may have little or no framework for their new role as a member of a family. They may even be visibly uncomfortable and unsure of themselves. In these situations, patience, consistency, and empathy are key. Some children, especially those that cared for younger siblings, may act “parentified” and older than their years.² For these children, this new role of being a child, accepting gifts and affection and taking part in ‘childish’ traditions may feel awkward, and they may even put up resistance. Or it may be that tangible gifts are accepted, but loving words or physical touch may be much less comfortable for children and youth who have not yet connected on an emotional level. Once again, patience and understanding are important. Adoption means that each member of the family needs to adjust to their new role, whether that is the individual who was adopted, a sibling, or the parents. Extended family members must also get to know the child as well.³ Have patience with yourself, your family members, and your child, and allow room for attachment to grow. While we

¹ Kim, J. (2009, February 9). *Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children*. North American Council on Adoptable Children. <https://www.nacac.org/resource/ambiguous-loss-foster-and-adopted-children/>

² Kim, J. (2009, February 9). *Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children*. North American Council on Adoptable Children. <https://www.nacac.org/resource/ambiguous-loss-foster-and-adopted-children/>

³ Singer, E. *Holidays with Extended Family: An Opportunity for Connection*. Center for Adoption Support and Education. <https://adoptionssupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Holidays-with-Extended-Family-An-Opportunity-for-Connection.pdf>

all have an innate need as social-emotional beings to create meaningful relationships, the interpersonal skills required to create them must be learned. You have a lifetime to tutor your child in this and to settle into the *journey* that is attachment.⁴ Just as you are patient with your child, do not allow undue pressure to be placed on yourself as the parent to feel an immediate connection. Attachment and trust grow as loving actions are consistently modeled over time.

Celebrate Culture & Heritage

Holidays and celebrations sit within a cultural framework. So, this is not just about engaging in celebrations common to the culture of the adoptive parents, but also considering the child's culture of origin. In transcultural and/or transracial adoptions especially, where the child and parents are of a different culture or country of origin, adoptive parents have a privilege and charge to educate themselves on and participate in their child's racial and cultural heritage by grafting it into their family traditions.⁵ This is critical towards helping the child develop a healthy identity and concept of self. However, be wary of engaging in certain traditions or holidays *solely* for the adopted child in a family, and singling them out in this way. Although well-meaning, this can actually be counterproductive. After an adoption takes place, the entire family, not just the child, must embrace their new identity as a transracial or transcultural adoptive family. This might look like cooking an Indian feast on Diwali or attending an Ethiopian New Year (Enkutatash) celebration. There is also a list of children's books below on a variety of holidays,

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from Chinese New Year and Hanukkah to Holi. Seek out cultural experiences that are happening locally, or even virtual experiences. When taking part, be intentional in making connections that expand your circle of friends and acquaintances that share your child's culture. You might even attend gatherings with other transracial or transcultural adoptive families, which can be very helpful for both parents and child. By incorporating traditional food, music, or games into your family's typical celebrations you will establish new traditions and begin to forge a powerful shared history. Remember, loss of traditions and cultural customs are additional losses for the individual who was adopted. Finding ways to honor and incorporate this core element of your child's identity is essential to healthy identity development, and holidays provide a great tangible way to do so.

⁴ Maxon, A. (2017, May 22). *What to do with Challenging Behaviors*. <https://allisondavismaxon.com/what-to-do-with-challenging-behaviors/>

⁵ Mack, E. & Hamilton, K. (2020, August). Proactive Engagement: The Adoptive Parent's Responsibility When Parenting a Child of a Different Race. *Adoption Advocate: A Publication of National Council for Adoption*, 146, 1-18.

Increase Structure & Adjust Expectations

Any parent can tell you that family gatherings, road trips, vacations, and breaks from school that often come with the holidays are not exactly a recipe for structure and predictability. These conditions can send any child into a meltdown in front of family and friends, or an entire mall of shoppers. But for the child that has experienced trauma, neglect, abuse, and/or changes in caregivers, a lack of predictability is not just difficult, it feels truly threatening and unsafe. The most therapeutic settings for these children are consistent, predictable, and repetitive environments. These conditions soothe nervous systems that have been highly sensitized to change.⁶ It is important to have realistic expectations, understanding that there may be neurological differences in your child's ability to cope. Wherever possible, increase structure: maintaining mealtimes, nap times, typical foods, nighttime routines, and comfort objects. Other strategies include verbally preparing your child for new situations or rehearsing social interactions together. When visiting a new home, ask permission of the host to take a short tour with your child, (e.g., "This is where the toys are, this is where the cat sleeps, here is where there is a bathroom," etc.). Familiarizing your child with a strange space can greatly reduce anxiety and increase 'felt safety.'⁷ Also, consider just how much activity is realistic in a day or week. While it can be challenging to modify traditions based on what is doable at this stage, focus on the memories that you are able to build,

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even if that means less activity. Know that you have a lifetime ahead with your child to build memories!

Be Attuned to Grief Responses

Any annual event that marks time and relationships has the propensity to exacerbate grief. Those of us that have lost a loved one or walked through a season of loss, know that the joy of celebration can actually magnify our grief. All of the emphasis on togetherness can highlight separation from birth family, siblings, or country of origin. Holidays are also strongly associated with memories. Highly emotional memories are encoded as implicit memories and associated with the same sensations felt during the event. When these memories are triggered, they have a powerful impact and the child may feel as though they are vividly reliving the moment.⁸ By staying attuned to certain behaviors that are typically rooted in grief—angry outbursts, anxiety, irritability, being withdrawn, or having trouble sleeping—parents can be attuned to when difficult memories are being triggered. They can then respond with empathy, which builds attachment. Holidays also offer a wonderful opportunity to help your child remember and create more joyful memories. Your child now

⁶ Perry, B. (1999). Bonding and Attachment in Maltreated Children: Consequences of Emotional Neglect in Childhood. *ChildTrauma Academy Press*. 1(3), 1-10.

⁷ Purvis, K., & Cross, D. (2009, July 18). *Creating Safe Places for our Children*. Empowered to Connect. <https://empoweredtoconnect.org/creating-safe-places-for-our-children/>

⁸ Williams, A. *Memory and Trauma Anniversaries: Implicit and Explicit Memories*. Lifeline Children's Services. <https://lifelinechild.org/memory-and-trauma-anniversaries/>

has a lifetime ahead of new experiences and memories to be created with their forever family. Look at photos together, take a fun day trip, make a traditional meal or just spend one-on-one time together. For older children, work together on ways to commemorate their memories and reframe difficult days in ways that are healing.

Stay Mindful of Sensory Overload

Celebrations across all cultures are strongly linked to sensory experiences: light, song, smells, and taste. But children with traumatic histories often have sensory systems that are sensitized and can be easily overwhelmed, causing an increase in challenging behaviors. Many internationally adopted children, especially those who have experienced significant time in institutional care, show evidence of sensory processing disorders. These children may either avoid or crave sensory stimuli more than other children.⁹ There are a number of helpful resources, such as “The Out-of-Sync Child,” which can assist families in tracing their children’s behaviors to learn which may be related to sensory experiences.¹⁰ But it is helpful to be generally mindful during celebrations about moderating sensory intake, such as multiple hugs from family members, flashing lights, unfamiliar foods, or the loud noise of crowds. On the other hand, holidays provide many opportunities for rich sensory experiences that are so important for the children that have been deprived of them. It is also important to be aware of your child’s typical sensory responses. Studies show that children institutionalized for longer

than 18 months show increased avoidance of sensory experience *and* increased seeking of sensory experiences. This means they cannot always regulate responses to sensation.¹¹ A child’s differences in processing sensation may require parents to make adaptations for holiday outings, such as having children wear ear protection at 4th of July fireworks displays. Conversely, children that are expected to sit for a long period of time at a family event may need to hold something to engage their sense of touch. A sensory fidget is a self-regulation tool that helps children focus by keeping their fingers busy when they are sitting still. The key is moderation and mindfulness of sensory input.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: The holidays will bring some of the first gatherings with our extended family since the adoption; how do I educate family members on using adoption-friendly language and navigate sensitive questions?

A: This will be a valuable and exciting time for your extended family to build connections with your child, but you are wise to encourage adoption-friendly language. Often, our friends and family simply do not know the right language to use, so we can model accurate and constructive language for them, providing examples of how to speak about adoption-related issues. If certain phrases are used that are less than adoption-friendly, you could frame your response in a way that asks for the support of your family member in

⁹ Wilbarger, J., Gunnar, M., Schneider, M. & Pollak, S. (2019). Sensory processing in internationally adopted, post-institutionalized children. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51(10): 1105–1114. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3119572/>

¹⁰ Kranowitz, C. (2005). *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder*. Skylight Press.

¹¹ Wilbarger, J., Gunnar, M., Schneider, M. & Pollak, S. (2019). Sensory processing in internationally adopted, post-institutionalized children. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51(10): 1105–1114. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3119572/>

implementing adoption-friendly language in your home. This is generally better received than a critical or corrective response. For instance, “Our family is going to use the phrase “birth family” rather than “real family” so that our child always knows that we are his real and forever family. Will you help me in using that language moving forward?”

Preparing yourself in advance for how you will respond to intrusive questions or unexpected comments is important.¹² If there is curiosity about the specific personal information about your child’s adoption story, you could politely state that those details are private and they are your child’s to share or not when he or she is older. Your extended family can be an important part of your support network and you need them as allies in this journey, so invite them to learn along with you. You may even ask if they mind if you provide certain educational resources to read over. Make them aware that you are hoping they can support your family’s transition. These same extended family members will likely be important figures as your child grows up, so it is very important that your child feels all family members see them as “one of their own.”¹³

Q: This is the first holiday season since finalizing our adoption through foster care. How do I honor my child’s birth parent but ensure that I do not make the holidays more challenging for my child?

A: The answer to this question of course depends on many factors, such as the age

of the child, the existing relationship and communication with birth family, and any safety considerations that may be a factor. But generally speaking, seek to honor your child’s birth parent in some way, especially if it is desired by the child. In scenarios where visits are not occurring or possible, consider providing a photo album, drawings, cards, or mementos of the child to the birth parent. If some phone contact or visits are part of the plan post-finalization, remain sensitized to the grief responses that are detailed above so that you can monitor how your child responds. Do not hesitate to seek out professional assistance from your adoption agency or mental health services as needed. These are challenging situations to navigate that can be emotional for both you and your child. Asking the question shows an openness and willingness to incorporate birth family in a way that will promote a healing environment within your home.

Q: How can we best handle Mother’s Day or Father’s Day as an adoptive family?

A: Mother’s Day and Father’s Day can be sensitive holidays, not just for adoptive families, but also for those that have lost a parent, those that have a history of infertility, and many others. So one thing to be mindful of first are any areas where the holiday may already be difficult for you as the parent. This could naturally and understandably impact your ability to cope with any additional challenges the holiday creates for your child. If possible, families should have an open discussion around the holiday and the feelings

¹² Cabbage, C. & Hollar S. (2019, September). Did They Really Just Ask That Question? Five Questions to Ask Yourself Before Responding to Intrusive Questions and Comments about Adoption. *Adoption Advocate: A Publication of National Council for Adoption*, 135, 1–7.

¹³ Singer, E. *Holidays with Extended Family: An Opportunity for Connection*. Center for Adoption Support and Education. <https://adoptionssupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Holidays-with-Extended-Family-An-Opportunity-for-Connection.pdf>

it creates. They should also consider how to either acknowledge or communicate with the birth parent in some way, if it is possible and appropriate, keeping in mind the best interest of all that are involved. However, be mindful of waiting for the child to request to involve their birth parent in some way. They may be concerned about your feelings as their parent, and therefore not bring the subject up, because they think this is a day that they are only supposed to celebrate you. Taking the first step to ask if or how your child

may want to incorporate or remember birth family can allow the child to feel comfortable, and reduce concern that they will hurt your feelings. Another area to be mindful of is school, where Mother's Day and Father's Day events can be common. It can be wise to inquire ahead with your child's teacher about the activities and events planned. You may want to be aware of what is to come, so you and your child can make decisions on how to best navigate those events and have an open discussion on their feelings around them.

A Note on Birthdays

I can attest, as both an adoption professional and individual that has been adopted, that birthdays require extra support across the lifespan. It is a day that is strongly linked to that first attachment relationship, and while attachment is learned in childhood, it impacts us for a lifetime. In childhood or adolescence, this can mean meltdowns or difficult behaviors leading up to or on the day. But I would encourage adoptive parents to have empathy, grace, and to *lean in* by fostering closeness even on difficult days. This is so critical as individuals that have experienced disruptions in attachment relationships can sometimes “lean out” on hard days but need to be pursued with love and kindness. I would encourage parents to be intentional about recognizing the difficulty that comes with the day, and acknowledging it, while also celebrating their child. A practical way to do this could be to light a candle for birth family, before lighting a birthday cake. I'd encourage parents to work with their children to find a way to recognize their birth family if the child is at an age and stage where they are open to this. The birth parents are a part of that day and always will be, whether or not they are present. I had many thoughts growing up about the decision that my birth mother made on that day and often wondered whether or not she was thinking of me. Now, even as a professional that understands grief and loss, birthdays can be challenging in adulthood as I celebrate my own children. In childhood, parents need to be the loving and intentional individuals that support their children around this issue. In adulthood, it may also be a spouse, family members, or close friends that are instrumental. In my experience, these significant people can be so helpful, not just in acknowledging the difficulty, but in reframing the day into one day of celebration. Although sometimes hard to explain, it is possible to feel joy and grief at the same exact time. My adoptive mother calls every single year to celebrate me on my birthday, while my birth mother does not, and the joy of one does not replace the difficulty of the other. With the love and support of the important people in my life, I have learned to accept and grieve this, and reframe the day into one of reflection and celebration.

— Lindsey Reeves, LCSW, Adoption Professional

Conclusion

Annual occasions that are family-centered can certainly trigger some difficult feelings, but they also provide powerful opportunities for healing that are unique to the season. While our culture may portray every holiday as a Norman Rockwell scene or greeting card worthy moment, we all know that regardless of whether our children have come to our families through biology or adoption, it is completely normal that this is not always the case. However, adoptive parents do have a unique opportunity to make joyful memories and create a safe place for their children to experience the healing love of their forever family.

Additional Resources for Parents and Professionals

- [Understanding Sensory Processing](#) – Empowered to Connect
- [Celebrating Birthdays](#) – Brave Love
- *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder, Revised Edition* – by Carol Kranowitz
- [Why Christmas Stinks Sometimes](#) – Michael Monroe, Empowered to Connect
- [Proactive Engagement: The Adoptive Parent’s Responsibility when Parenting a Child of a Different Race](#) – National Council for Adoption

- [Did They Really Just Ask That Question? Five Questions to Ask Yourself Before Responding to Intrusive Questions and Comments about Adoption](#) – National Council for Adoption

Resources for Children

- *The Out of Sync Child Has Fun* by Carol Kranowitz
- *My First Chinese New Year* by Karen Katz
- *Lunar New Year—Celebrate the World* by Hannah Eliot
- *Ramadan—Celebrate the World* by Hannah Eliot
- *Diwali—Celebrate the World* by Hannah Eliot
- *Holidays Around the World: Celebrate Hanukkah with Light, Latkes, and Dreidels* by Deborah Heiligman
- *Holidays Around the World: Celebrate Kwanzaa* by Carolyn Otto
- *Holidays Around the World: Celebrate Christmas with Carols, Presents, and Peace* by Deborah Heiligman
- *Festival of Colors* by Surishtha Sehgal
- *Let’s Celebrate Holi!* by Ajanta Chakraborty
- *Eight Candles and a Tree* by Simone Nathan
- *The Atlas of Christmas—The Merriest, Tastiest, Quirkiest Holiday Traditions from Around the World* by Alex Palmer

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Elise Lowe is an adoption professional with a passion for working with children that enter their families through adoption, and their parents. Over more than nine years in the field she has held various roles, from directing international adoption programs to supporting families that have adopted through the foster care system. During her career, she has also traveled internationally, visiting orphanages in several countries. Elise has a passion for mobilizing families and their communities to compassionately and competently support individuals that have been adopted or await permanency. Elise lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

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