

# Adoption Advocate



## The Value of Adoptee Voices

BY RAMYA GRUNEISEN

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**I**n a field saturated with research and best practices on adoption competency and adoption-informed care, there is much value in creating intentional spaces where we can learn directly from adoptees. Adoptees possess valuable perspectives and offer a wealth of knowledge to adoptive parents, prospective adoptive families, adoption professionals, and the wider community.

Part of honoring the adoptee voice is recognizing that there is no single adoption narrative. This requires us to hold space and honor the voices of all adopted individuals and their experiences with adoption.

As an adoptee, I am often asked what it means to hold space for adoption. I believe holding space for adoption means purposefully creating time and opportunities to be present

*...holding space for adoption means purposefully creating time and opportunities to be present and sit in humility...*

and sit in humility while learning from the experiences of adoptees and believing their stories as their truth. Holding space is an *active* process and one of the many ways we can make adopted individuals feel seen and heard.

Empathy plays an important role in our ability to hold space effectively and honor the experiences of others. Groundbreaking researcher and author Brené Brown explains that empathy is the ability to feel with others. Empathy fuels connection because it communicates the healing message “you’re not alone”.<sup>1</sup> Empathy allows us to connect with the experiences of others, even if we have not had those experiences

ourselves. Thus, empathy provides a pathway for individuals who have not experienced adoption firsthand to deeply connect with and care for adoptees.

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<sup>1</sup> RSA. (2013, December 10). *Brené Brown on Empathy* [Video]. YouTube. <https://brenebrown.com/videos/rsa-short-empathy/>

## The Importance of the Adoptee Voice

One of the best ways to learn about adoption is from adopted individuals. In fact, I believe incorporating the voices of those with lived experience should be a best practice for adoption training and education. Fortunately, there has been a shift within the adoption community, with “an emergence of scholars who are adoptees, changing the dominant discourse from a focus on adoptive parents and agencies to that of the lived experience of adopted persons.”<sup>2</sup> By combining the personal experiences of adoptees with evidence-based research and theory, we can gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complexities and needs of the adoption community.

Cam Lee Small, a licensed counselor and Korean adoptee, has made significant contributions to the adoption field through his innovative work and is considered to be an important figure in the adoption community. In emphasizing the importance of the adoptee voice, Cam wrote, “Please look to adoptees to learn about adoptees. Please regard adoptees as primary sources when referencing adoptee-related needs, perspectives, research, and interventions.”<sup>3</sup>

**Personal Reflection:** I have found that parents that do adoption well demonstrate a dedication to ongoing learning on how to support, advocate for and uplift their adopted child. While pre-adoption education provided by adoption agencies

is necessary and often comprehensive, it is incomplete without the inclusion and representation of the adoptee voice. I strongly urge prospective adoptive parents, current adoptive parents and adoption professionals to make learning from adoptees a priority in their understanding and approach to adoption. If you are not sure where to start, I recommend [this list](#) of adoptees involved in adoption education and advocacy.<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned, every adoptee’s relationship with their adoption story is unique and varied. It is important to acknowledge that not all adoptees have positive feelings towards their adoption, and some do not support adoption entirely. By holding space for their experiences, we can approach the subject with openness and empathy, and actively seek to understand the reasons behind their feelings with curiosity instead of judgment or defensiveness. I encourage you to listen and learn from adopted individuals who support adoption and those who do not—there is much to learn from both.

## How to Value Adoptee Voices

As an adoptive parent, prospective adoptive parent, adoption professional, or someone with another connection to adoption, you have the opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to valuing the voices of adoptees by actively honoring and holding space for their perspectives. This involves being open to learning, even when it may be uncomfortable, and intentionally seeking out the perspectives and experiences of adoptees. In doing so

<sup>2</sup> Wiley, M. O. (2017). Adoption research, practice, and societal trends: Ten years of progress. *American Psychologist*, 72(9), 985–995. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000218>

<sup>3</sup> Small, C. L. [@therapyredeemed]. (2022, June 8). “Yes, there is incredible value and potential in connecting and collaborating with other members of the ‘adoption constellation’ as we” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeisJm4um7a/>

<sup>4</sup> Small, C. L. [@therapyredeemed]. (2022, November 3). “There are so many more who should be added to this list, I’m so sorry if I’ve missed you! Please” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkgOMRbuP4E/>

you can help create safe and supportive environments for adopted individuals. I encourage you to lean in and engage in this process as there is much to be gained through holding space and honoring adoption from the adoptee perspective. Here are five ways you can hold space and honor adoption:

### 1. Recognize that adoption always starts with loss.

Adoption involves loss because it always includes the separation of the adoptee from their birth parent(s), which is their first and primary relationship. Even if adoptees maintain relationships with their birth families, the loss of this primary bond is still felt. As hard as it may be to reckon with this fact, adoption is not the way it was supposed to be. Ideally, there would be no reason for children to be separated from their birth parent(s). One of the ways we can honor adopted individuals is by being willing to sit with this reality and hold the tension of it. Holding tension is the ability to feel opposing emotions simultaneously while acknowledging that both emotions can be true. If you can hold space for the joy of adoption you must hold space for the loss in adoption. Holding tension is an essential skill in being able to honor the experiences of adoptees.

**For prospective adoptive parents:** If you are considering adoption, I challenge you to reflect on the reason you are choosing to adopt. Ask yourself if you are willing to hold the tension of joy and loss experienced by adopted children. Are you willing to grieve that with your child? It can be easy to focus on everything a child gains when they are adopted, but adoptees need parents who understand the magnitude of what adopted

individuals lose when adopted. Parents must be willing and able to hold the grief and loss as well as the opportunity for beauty and healing that coexist in every adoption story. Adoption done well acknowledges these two realities and meets the needs rooted in them. If you are unwilling to hold that reality or do not know how, I encourage you to seek additional education and support prior to pursuing adoption.

**For current adoptive parents:** One of the ways you can honor your adopted child is to reflect on the reasons their birth parent(s) placed them for adoption or were unable to parent them and grieve that those reasons exist. Adoptive parents should create space for their child to express feelings of grief and loss. When your child vocalizes feelings of disconnection or loss, affirm that. Empathy can be incredibly healing for adoptees.

**For both prospective and adoptive parents:** It is imperative to educate others when they speak about adoption from a one-sided or uninformed perspective. Individuals who do not have a personal connection to adoption may only consider the positive aspects of adoption; encourage them to hold space for both. Challenge incorrect, dominant adoption narratives with truth. When you adopt, you take on the responsibility of educating extended family, friends, and those in your circle about the realities of adoption, as well as teaching and modeling adoption-positive language. This involves correcting others when they express sentiments like “your child is lucky to be adopted.” While it may be true that the child’s life could have been worse, they are still experiencing the profound loss of everything familiar to them and need the space to mourn that.

*If you can hold space for the joy of adoption you must hold space for the loss in adoption.*



**For adoption professionals:** How does your prospective adoptive parent training program incorporate adoptee voices and messaging about grief and loss? How do you assess prospective adoptive parents' knowledge on these issues? Evaluate how you can have conversations with prospective and current adoptive parents about navigating the grief process with their child, creating a safe space, checking in, and using empathy, openness, and appropriate language.

The president of Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, Heidi Wiste, shared the importance of listening and learning from adoptees:

“At Children’s Home and LSS we value the perspectives of all voices. The lived experience of adoptees, birth families, and adoptive families form our practice. As an adult adoptee working in this field for over 20 years, [I know firsthand how] it is critically important that we are intentional and thoughtful in our approach and that we work with great respect for all of those impacted. Our approach is inclusive and sensitive to the various voices and stories that layer love with loss. We acknowledge that this work has generational impact.”<sup>5</sup>

**For the community:** Adopted individuals may often feel isolated or even unseen in their communities. Communities are ill-equipped in supporting adoptees when they are uneducated and unwilling to engage in adoption conversations. One important way you can hold space for adoptees is by simply taking time to consider and learn about the experience of adopted individuals so you can approach them in an informed manner.

Additionally, holding space for adoption means

giving adopted individuals the grace and freedom to own their perspective on adoption. It is common for people to expect adopted individuals to be grateful to be adopted and feel lucky to be chosen. Adopted individuals do not owe their adoptive parents gratitude for being adopted, nor should they be held to a different or higher standard of appreciation.

Amanda Woolston, a therapist, author, and adoptee who specializes in adoption and child welfare, emphasizes the importance of supporting and amplifying adoptee counter narratives. She highlights that it is crucial for adoptees’ social and mental well-being to have their unique experiences and feelings recognized and validated, including those that may challenge or contradict the dominant adoption narrative.<sup>6,7</sup>

“As an adoptee working in post adoption support, [I recognize] there will never be a universal adoption experience. It is critical that we make space for, listen to, and learn from the gradient of adoptee perspectives and experiences. Adoptees are the ones most affected in the adoption process and have unique perspectives on the disparities and inequities that drive the child welfare system. We experience the impact of mainstream adoption narratives and can, therefore, deconstruct common adoption myths. Only from confronting these uncomfortable topics and centering adoptee voices can we then transform the life-long adoption journey to help all adopted individuals and families thrive.” Ali Dunbar, Adoptions Program Manager, The Park Adoption Community Center.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, November 15, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Woolston, A. [@amandawoolstonadoption]. (2022, October 31). “Counter-narratives are unexpected yet accurate depictions of what life is like in a community that 1) serve a collective purpose” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkXTMuJMXyg/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>

<sup>7</sup> You can find more information on Amanda’s work at <https://www.amandawoolston.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, November 30, 2022.

**Personal Reflection:** I have found that one of the most affirming things adoptive parents can do for adopted individuals and children is acknowledge and talk about all the realities of adoption, not just the good parts. When we talk about adoption, we have to talk about loss. When we talk about the beauty of creating families through adoption, we have to talk about the loss of birth families. When we celebrate adoption, we have to grieve it as well. Adopted individuals need you to understand the magnitude of what they lost in order to be fully seen.

## 2. Acknowledge that grief can be lifelong.

Adopted individuals often experience grief related to the separation from their birth family, which can manifest in different ways—including feelings of loss and longing for birth family connections—and can continue throughout their lives. Adopted individuals, regardless of their age at adoption, will have a psychological connection to their birth family and a desire for connection.<sup>9</sup> While some adoptees find ways to process and move through these feelings, for others, the grief associated with the loss of their birth family may be ongoing.

**For prospective adoptive parents:** If you are considering adoption, it is important to consider how you will support your child through their grief and loss. This may include acknowledging that while you can provide love and support, you cannot replace their biological connections. Be open and willing to understand your child's feelings and experiences and be prepared to provide ongoing support throughout their

life. Additionally, prioritize incorporating opportunities for the child to connect with their birth culture, birth family, and/or adoptee support groups.

**For current adoptive parents:** It is critical for adoptive parents to recognize that this grief does not necessarily go away, and it is not your job to make it go away. As a parent, there may not be anything you can say or do to ease this hurt. Your role is to hold space by sitting in the hurt and acknowledging the reality of it. You can also support your child by creating a safe home environment that welcomes hard conversations and encouraging your child to seek counseling or mentorship.

Furthermore, initiate conversations about the challenges of adoption instead of waiting for your child to bring them up. Be critical and mindful of how you narrate their story and process their experiences with them, especially when they are young. Adoptee and clinical therapist Andi Coston, LCSWA, said it best: “Tell your children their stories in ways they don’t have to undo them and rebuild them later.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Connections with birth families after adoption. (2022). In the National Training and Development Curriculum. The full free curriculum can be found at [www.ntdportal.org](http://www.ntdportal.org) under Classroom Based Training Materials or at <https://learn.childwelfare.gov/lms/course/index.php?categoryid=24>.

<sup>10</sup> Coston, A. [@andie.ink]. (2022, September 27). “I am still, and probably always will be, reflecting on how we tell our children their stories. My thoughts have” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjBX-ZIOvL/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>

## Take time for self-reflection and consider ways in which your community can better meet the needs of adoptees.

Adoptive parents also need to honor the loss experienced by birth parents. When adoptive parents are reluctant or disengaged in conversations about their child's birth parents it drives disconnection. It is critical that adoptive parents consider the perspectives of birth parents and thoughtfully reflect on their experience in the adoption process. "Unsubscribing from an uncomfortable reality is a privilege adopted and fostered people don't have."<sup>11</sup> This is true for birth parents as well; adoptees and birth parents cannot avoid experiencing grief and loss. For this reason, it is vital that adoptive parents share this burden by acknowledging and honoring the loss experienced by birth parents.

**For adoption professionals:** Research shows the suicide rate for adoptees is four times greater than that of the general population.<sup>12</sup> Knowing the magnitude of grief and loss that adoptees experience, adoption professionals must prioritize adoptee mental health education for prospective and adoptive families. Additionally, encouraging adoptive parents to seek out counseling and mental health services for their child is incredibly important, even if they feel like their child does not need it. When making referrals or recommendations, ensure that mental health providers are adoption-competent

and informed.<sup>13,14</sup> Adoption competency involves having a deep understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by adoptive families and being able to provide appropriate resources and interventions to address these needs. When counselors and professionals working in this field are adoption-competent, they are better able to provide services to all members of the adoption triad.

**For the community:** Communities that aim to support adopted individuals must begin with acknowledging and validating the feelings of adoptees. They must also create inclusive environments where adoptees feel they can take up space. Take time for self-reflection and consider ways in which your community can better meet the needs of adoptees. Make connecting adoptees to other adopted individuals a priority, provide support and resources where you can, and make adoption education a community value. Most importantly, meet adoptees where they are in their adoption experience, not where you expect them to be.

For individuals adopted transracially, cultural bereavement can also be an isolating and limiting factor. Cultural bereavement is "the experience of the uprooted person—or group—resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity."<sup>15</sup> The loss of racial and cultural identity is lifelong. Regardless of whether these identities are explored post adoption, adopted individuals can never fully connect with their birth culture in the homes they are adopted into. Holding space for adoption

<sup>11</sup> Woolston, A. [@amandawoolstonadoption]. (2022, October 21). "16 people immediately unsubscribed in response to my last post. My last post contained a lot of me repeating truths" [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkAAQkrMVCv/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>

<sup>12</sup> Keyes, M. A., Malone, S. M., Sharma, A., Iacono, W. G., & McGue, M. (2013). Risk of suicide attempt in adopted and nonadopted offspring. *Pediatrics*, 132(4), 639–646. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-3251>

<sup>13</sup> Baden, A. L., Kitchen, A., Mazza, J. R., Harrington, E. S., & White, E. E. (2017). Addressing Adoption in Counseling: A Study of Adult Adoptees' Counseling Satisfaction. *Families in Society*, 98(3), 209–216. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2017.98.26>

<sup>14</sup> Brodzinsky, D. (2013). A need to know: Enhancing adoption competence among mental health professionals. New York, NY: Donaldson Adoption Institute.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenbruch, M. (1991). From post-traumatic stress disorder to cultural bereavement: Diagnosis of Southeast Asian refugees. *Social Science & Medicine*, 33(6), 673–680. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(91\)90021-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(91)90021-4)

means realizing that this is something lost that can never be fully restored. I recommend [Cam Lee Small's training course](#) for parents who want to learn more about connecting with and acknowledging the birth culture of adopted children.<sup>16, 17</sup>

**Personal Reflection:** I have personally found that grieving the loss associated with my adoption story is nuanced and multifaceted. There are seasons when I feel it deeply and others where it is not as present. Personal and professional milestones and holidays often resurface feelings of longing to be known, specifically by my birth mom. Deeply grieving the loss of someone you never knew and trying to find language for it is a sacred and vulnerable space. If you are invited to enter that space with an adopted individual, I encourage you to walk in with empathy and compassion.

### 3. Practice self-reflection and humility.

Caring for and supporting adopted individuals requires a lifelong commitment to humility and self-reflection. Self-reflection provides us the opportunity to thoughtfully process our own experiences and story while humility allows us to hold space for the experiences of others. The call to self-reflection is a profound one and a learned skill. When utilized, it provides you with the ability to work through and overcome hard things such as trauma, personal attachment styles, and bias, which is incredibly important when interacting with adoptees.

#### **For prospective adoptive and adoptive parents:**

As a parent, it is critical to reflect on your own trauma. Trauma is transgenerational, meaning when it is not dealt with it is passed down from generation to generation. Parents that choose to adopt should consider what potential trauma they have prior to adopting and work through that in counseling, as adopted individuals will enter the family with their own trauma. In his book *It Didn't Start With You* author Mark Wolynn describes how inherited family trauma manifests and how we can “carry the feelings, symptoms, behaviors, or hardships of an earlier member of your family system as if these were your own.”<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, a parent's attachment style can have a significant impact on their child. Research shows that adoptive parents' attachment styles directly influence their children's attachment security. Adoptive mothers with secure attachment styles were more likely to have a secure attachment with their adopted child.<sup>19</sup> Projecting trauma and insecure attachment on your adopted child can be damaging, and parents have the responsibility to reflect on their own experiences and intentionally work through attachment and trauma-related challenges before adopting and, if necessary, after.

For parents that choose to adopt transracially, biases impacting race and ethnicity can be destructive and create unsafe homes for adopted individuals. Whether acknowledged or not, all parents come with their own personal biases, and it can be hard to recognize and overcome them. Acknowledging and addressing biases is the only way to be responsive in adoptive parenting and I

<sup>16</sup> Small, C. (2021). *Helping Adoptees Explore Birth Family & Culture*. Therapy Redeemed. <https://therapyredeemed.wordpress.com/2021/02/23/helping-adoptees-explore-birth-culture-family/>.

<sup>17</sup> Gruneisen, R. (2022). *Acknowledging Birth Culture [From an Adoptee's Perspective]*. American Adoptions. <https://www.americanadoptions.com/adoption/acknowledging-birth-culture>

<sup>18</sup> Wolynn, M. (2022). *It didn't start with you: How inherited family trauma shapes who we are and how to end the cycle*. Penguin Books.

<sup>19</sup> Lionetti, F. (2014). What promotes secure attachment in early adoption? The protective roles of infants' temperament and adoptive parents' attachment. *Attachment & Human Development*, 16(6), 573-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2014.959028>



encourage you to navigate this with a licensed counselor if you have not already.

**For adoption professionals:** Consider what potential constructs, biases, or narratives inform your work in adoption. Reflect on how they may limit your ability to compassionately show up for those you serve. Ask yourself what value you place on self-reflection and whether that is a practice you are committed to.

*Self-reflection and humility are foundational in your ability to approach adoption work with empathy...*

Adoption professionals are responsible for vetting and educating adoptive parents, and therefore have a responsibility and significant influence on the attitudes and biases that adoptive parents will carry into their parenting. Take time to evaluate your parent assessment and training resources to ensure adoptive parents are assessed for factors such as trauma histories, parenting styles, and biases, and are being taught self-reflection skills. Self-reflection and humility are foundational in your ability to approach adoption work with empathy and to ensure that adoptive parents are doing the same.

**For the community:** Consider how you approach the topic of adoption, both in your thoughts and language. Make a commitment to learning adoption appropriate and empowering language and avoid potentially triggering phrases.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. See adopted individuals as experts of their experience.

As mentioned previously, the best way to learn about adoption is from adopted individuals. While every adopted individual will have a different story and feelings surrounding adoption, they provide unique insight that cannot be found elsewhere, rooted in lived experience.

In every way and in every space, conversations about adoption should uplift and elevate adopted individuals' voices. Empowering these individuals starts with providing platforms for which they have the opportunity to be authentic and uncensored in the owning of their story. Seeing adopted individuals as experts of their experience allows us to learn directly from the source. Victoria DiMartile, a PhD candidate and transracial adoptee who is deeply involved in adoption education, recommends using the 1:3 rule: "For every adoption professional or adoptive parent you speak to about adoption you should listen to three adoptees."<sup>21</sup>

**For prospective adoptive parents:** While considering adoption, reflect on your willingness to see adoptees as experts on their experience, and explore what that looks like for you. Reach out to adopted individuals in your community and seek mentorship from other adoptive families. As you learn from adoptees, allow yourself to be challenged by diverse and nondominant adoption narratives.

**For current adoptive parents:** Parents need to see their adopted children as experts on their adoption story, and create environments of safety and trust where their adopted child can own their story and their feelings. Creating safe environments will also nurture a deeper

<sup>20</sup> Myers, K. (2014). Rethinking "positive" adoption language and reclaiming stigmatized identities. [https://www.academia.edu/5655199/\\_Rethinking\\_Positive\\_Adoption\\_Language\\_and\\_Reclaiming\\_Stigmatized\\_Identities](https://www.academia.edu/5655199/_Rethinking_Positive_Adoption_Language_and_Reclaiming_Stigmatized_Identities)

<sup>21</sup> DiMartile, V. [@wreckageandwonder]. (2022, November 3). "Tag the adoptees that have expanded your perspective and provided you insight below!! Be sure to like, comment, and share" [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckgwu1muPut/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>

connection with your child. Ensure you are consistently communicating to your child that your door is always open, and if you do not know something or are curious, ask—do not assume.

You will make mistakes and there is grace in this space for you; more than anything else, adoptees need parents who are willing to learn and grow through this process. Honoring adopted individuals will always begin and end with creating intentional spaces where their words are their truth, and their voices are amplified.

**For adoption professionals:** Reflect on how you and your organization value the adoptee voice. Consider how the adoptee voice shapes your understanding of adoption beyond your formal education and training. Feedback and reflections from adoptees should be treated as a call to action and reform on ways adoption can be done better. Reflect on how the experience of adoptees informs and impacts your practice in the field of adoption.

**For the community:** Regardless of whether or not you have a direct connection to an adopted individual, the more you know about adoption the more empathetic you can be in your interactions with adoptees and educated in your understanding of the adoption process and experience. Being knowledgeable about adoption allows you to correct misconceptions and misinformation about adoption and share the responsibility of educating others.

While learning from adoptees is the first step in being adoption informed, be mindful of the best ways to do so. Let adoptees lead when it comes to sharing their story. Seek out education from adoptees who are actively sharing their stories through media, formal education, or in daily life. Be sensitive to the

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adoptees you meet, and prioritize friendship and support rather than utilizing your relationship as an educational resource.

## 5. Ally with adoptees.

Valuing the adoptee voice requires allying with adoptees, in all things, every day. This means partnering with adoptees in all areas of adoption education and advocacy, and sharing that responsibility.

**For prospective adoptive parents:** Before adopting, prospective adoptive parents should thoughtfully reflect on their capacity to ally with an adopted child. As a parent, being an ally requires putting your child's needs first. This may look like cutting out places and people that are not emotionally safe or triggering for your child, continuously listening and learning from adoptees, and finding ways to use your privilege to educate and inform others, especially those within your immediate circle.

If you adopt transracially, you need to be willing to engage race in every capacity, as adoptees are forced to navigate racial differences throughout their life.<sup>22</sup> You have a responsibility to engage these conversations thoughtfully and tactfully, as avoidance and

<sup>22</sup> Samuels, G. M. (2009). "Being raised by white people": Navigating racial difference among adopted multiracial adults. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 80–94. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00581.x>

ambivalence can be detrimental.<sup>23</sup> Taking time to reflect on how you will navigate race and racial differences as a parent is essential in your journey of being the best parent to your adopted child.<sup>24</sup> As previously suggested, consider counseling a starting point if you do not know where to begin in this personal work.

**For current adoptive parents:** As an adoptive parent, allyship looks like uplifting, advocating for, and empowering your child. It is your responsibility to partner with your child and uphold their boundaries. Adopted individuals, especially transracial adoptees, often feel a pressure and obligation to share their story and talk about their adoption simply because they do not look like their family. This can reinforce preexisting feelings of isolation and disconnection. Adopted individuals have the right to create boundaries regarding what they are comfortable sharing about their adoption, and parents and siblings have an obligation to uphold those boundaries as an ally.

Additionally, adoptive families have the responsibility to model and correct others that use inappropriate language surrounding adoption conversations. Education and correction must be a shared burden that parents hold as well; parents should not assume their child can hold this alone. You cannot opt out because you are uncomfortable—adopted individuals do not have that luxury.<sup>25</sup>

*As an adoptive parent, allyship looks like uplifting, advocating for, and empowering your child.*

**For adoption professionals:** I encourage adoption professionals to reflect on how you ally yourselves with adopted individuals outside of your work. Does your adoption education and advocacy end with your workday? How can you elevate and amplify the voices of adopted individuals? Adoption professionals should prioritize educating adoptive parents about the significance of allyship and adoption positive language with their adopted children and provide guidance on how to effectively practice it.

Adoptive parents who choose to adopt transracially must possess the necessary skills and knowledge to provide appropriate support to their adoptees. This education should be imparted by adoption professionals who can guide them in navigating the unique challenges of transracial adoption.

**For the community:** Communities that champion and ally with adoptees are communities willing to lean in when things get hard instead of opting out. This can look like learning and using adoption appropriate and affirming language, avoiding casual rhetoric containing microaggressions,<sup>26</sup> supporting social justice causes and adoption reform, advocating for family reunification when possible, and standing up to racism and xenophobia. You can also partner with adoptees in their advocacy and education work and be intentional in finding ways to elevate their voices within the community.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, D. F., Feldman, K., & Easley, H. (2017). "I'm learning not to tell you": Korean transracial adoptees' appraisals of parental racial socialization strategies and perceived effects. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 8(4), 308–322. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000091>

<sup>24</sup> Killian, C., & Khanna, N. (2019). Beyond color-blind and color-conscious: Approaches to racial socialization among parents of transracially adopted children. *Family Relations*, 68(2), 260–274. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12357>

<sup>25</sup> For more parenting tips on responding to intrusive questions about your child's adoption, please refer to the Preparing for and Managing Intrusive Adoption Questions video listed in the resources section.

<sup>26</sup> Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>

*...adoptive families have the responsibility to model and correct others that use inappropriate language surrounding adoption conversations.*

**Personal Reflection:** At times, I struggle with the responsibility of educating and correcting others on adoption appropriate language or how to navigate transracial adoption well, and I am still learning how to field and answer questions about my story. I understand now that this is all a part of adoption, a burden adopted individuals have to shoulder in a way others do not. When my friends, family, and community can partner with and hold space for me, it makes all the difference. Most days adoption education and advocacy work is lifegiving, but some days it feels heavy and triggering. I have learned to navigate this delicate space and find rest and healing along the way, while simultaneously acknowledging that not all my adoption wounds will heal.

I am grateful for the adoptive parents around me, mine included, who serve as constant reminders that there is so much restoration and goodness in adoption. Thank you for leaning in, holding the tension and your commitment to valuing and uplifting the voices of adoptees.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” I am grateful to be in this space, for organizations and communities that desire to do adoption well, and for the opportunity to use my voice because this is work worth doing. Let’s do it together.

## Additional Resources:

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[Podcast: Adoption and Mental Health Issues](#)

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[Finding an Adoption and Foster Competent Therapist - Creating a Family](#)

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[Training for Adoption Competency \(TAC\) - C.A.S.E.](#)

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[Resources for Talking to Kids about Race - C.A.S.E.](#)

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[In Demand Webinars - C.A.S.E.](#)

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[Preparing for and Managing Intrusive Adoption Questions - NTDC](#)

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[Webinars - National Council For Adoption](#)

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[Webinar - Knowing the Unknowable - Incorporating the Adoptee Voice into Practice and Policy](#)

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[Guide to Adoptee Empowered Work - Holt International](#)

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# The Value of Adoptee Voices

BY RAMYA GRUNEISEN

## About the Author

Ramya Gruneisen is a transracial adoptee living in St. Louis, Missouri. She has found a passion in adoption education and advocacy work for adoption agencies and adoptive and prospective families. Ramya's knowledge and insights have been recognized and featured by prominent organizations such as National Council For Adoption and American Adoptions, where she has contributed articles as a writer. In addition to publishing articles, she has shared her experiences and valuable perspectives at national conferences and local workshops.

Apart from her work in the adoption field, Ramya works for the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), where she is involved in the Refugee Medical Screening and Refugee Health Promotion programs. She has found it to be the most lifegiving and humbling work. When she's not working, Ramya loves spending time with her friends and family and climbing mountains. As a true St. Louisan, she also enjoys watching the St. Louis Cardinals and Blues play.

You can learn more about Ramya and her work at [ramyagruneisen.com](http://ramyagruneisen.com).



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